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Official report of debates

Opening of the sitting num 11

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Dear colleagues,

The sitting is open.

Dear colleagues, I am pleased to announce that the winning city of the Europe Prize 2024 is Terrassa in Spain.

We heartily congratulate the mayor and all residents of the city.

Since the creation of the Europe Prize in 1955, it is the 85th city to be awarded this prize for European cities. Congratulations to Terrassa in Spain.

Dear colleagues, the first item on the Agenda is the second round of an election of a judge to the European Court of Human Rights in respect of Liechtenstein.

I refer members to the list of candidates and biographical notices, which are to be found in Document 15924. The opinion of the Committee is presented in Document 15959 Addendum 2.

The voting will take place in the foyer in front of the hemicycle by secret ballot.

At 6 p.m. I shall announce the closing of the poll.

Each political group has appointed a teller according to the rules. The tellers are:

Ms Klotilda BUSHKA

Ms Andrea EDER-GITSCHTHALER

Mr Armen GEVORGYAN

Mr Claude KERN

Ms Sevilay CELENK ÖZEN

I would like to remind them that they will have to be in the room set aside for this purpose at 6 p.m. The result of the vote will be announced, if possible, before the close of today's sitting.

I now declare the ballot open.

We continue our work in the meantime.

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.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues, now it is a pleasure for me to welcome among us Ms Dominique HASLER, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Education and Sport of Liechtenstein and President of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.

Ms HASLER will present a communication about the ongoing activities of the Liechtenstein Presidency of the Committee of Ministers, which will be followed by an exchange of views with parliamentarians.

Madam President, I should like to thank you for the excellent co-operation between our two statutory bodies and the ongoing dialogue among us together with the Secretary General of the Council of Europe in the form of a trialogue.

The Liechtenstein Presidency will come to an end in about a month's time, coinciding with the celebrations of the 75th anniversary of the Council of Europe, which will be a time not only to celebrate our achievements but also to look at new avenues for the future, and the adventures maybe, for the future of our fundamental values such as the challenges of human rights in respect of the increasing developments of artificial intelligence.

We are looking forward to this important moment but for now Minister HASLER, Madam President, it is my pleasure to give you the floor.

Address: Communication from the Committee of Ministers

Ms Dominique HASLER (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Education, and Sport of Liechtenstein and President of the Committee of Ministers): Dear President of the Parliamentary Assembly,

Dear Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly,

Dear Secretary General of the Council of Europe,

Dear Members of the Parliamentary Assembly,

Excellencies,

Dear colleagues,

It is my honour to address you for the second and already the last time in my capacity as President of the Committee of Ministers.

Time has certainly passed fast. Of course, however, our Presidency is far from over. We still have an intensive month ahead of us, most importantly with the Ministerial Session of the Committee of Ministers taking place on 16 and 17 May.

The preparations for this important event are already in full swing.

On 5 April we had the pleasure to host the Ministers' Deputies in Liechtenstein for an ordinary meeting to this end. The Ministerial Session will focus on the follow-up to the decisions taken by our Heads of State and Government at the 4th Summit of the Council of Europe in Reykjavík last year.

A set of decisions to be endorsed by the Ministers is currently under preparation by the Ministers' Deputies.

In Reykjavík our leaders sent a strong and clear message expressing their unwavering support to Ukraine and firmly condemning the illegal war of aggression launched by the Russian Federation.

In the face of the many crimes committed and the countless difficulties imposed on them by Russia, Ukraine and its people continue to demonstrate a courage and determination that commands our respect. From the outset of the aggression, the Council of Europe wanted to provide as much assistance as possible. This began, of course, with the exclusion of the Russian Federation from our Organisation, and continued with a series of initiatives aiming to support Ukraine in its fight for freedom and justice and to hold the Russian Federation to account.

On 23 February, the Ministers' Deputies held an extraordinary meeting on the occasion of the second anniversary of the start of the full-scale invasion.

On this sad occasion, the Committee reiterated its full support to Ukraine and its people and its willingness to ensuring Russia's full accountability.

I am personally very thankful to all bodies of the Council of Europe that we were able to show that our support goes beyond words.

On 23 March, the Satellite Office of the Register of Damage for Ukraine was officially inaugurated. The Office will liaise with the Ukrainian authorities on various legal and technical issues related to the submission of applications and to raise awareness and reach out to potential applicants, including local and regional authorities, businesses, and the public in general.

The Satellite Office will also play an important role in co-ordinating the exchange of information with other international organisations, Ukrainian authorities and civil society organisations, including the exchange of evidence.

Together with the Secretary General, I travelled to Kyiv to take part in the inauguration ceremony.

We also used the visit to realise meetings with a number of high-level representatives of Ukraine.

In this context, let me extend my gratitude to the Ukrainian authorities for their hospitality. I am deeply thankful to all of the encounters we had the opportunity to have while we were in Ukraine. It is unimaginable what the people of Ukraine have had to and continue to endure.

I was deeply moved by their strength and determination.

On 2 April 2024, the Register of Damage officially opened the claims submission process, starting with claims relating to damage or destruction of residential property. This historic launch took place in The Hague, as part of the Ministerial Conference on “Restoring Justice for Ukraine”.

With the establishment of the Register of Damage, the Council of Europe has taken a critical first step towards ensuring accountability for the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

To date, 44 States and the European Union have joined the Register. Liechtenstein, will continue to actively advocate for broader membership in the Register. In this context, we continue to conduct outreach activities on all levels, with which we hope to encourage states outside the Council of Europe to join our important efforts to ensuring justice.

The establishment and operationalisation of the Register truly is a milestone.

Our Heads of State and Government sent an important signal and took a decisive first step towards ensuring accountability for Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine.

In this context, let me wholeheartedly thank everybody involved in this important process.

In this forum for human rights, it is impossible not to refer to Alexei Navalny and the nightmare that the Russian regime has put him through. The death of Mr Navalny on 16 February this year whilst in detention shocked and appalled all of us.

As I said in my statement at the time, I was saddened and deeply disturbed by the news.

The Committee of Ministers had been closely following Mr Navalny’s situation since his return to Russia in January 2021. It had repeatedly raised the alarm over his state of health and called for his release, as the Russian authorities imposed longer and ever harsher prison sentences on him.

The Committee last examined his case in March 2024. In an Interim Resolution, it strongly condemned the Russian authorities for his death in detention, which appears to be the alarming consequence of the pattern of victimisation and his political persecution revealed by the many violations found by the European Court, in retaliation for his anti-government protests and investigation activities.

The Committee also exhorted the authorities to conduct an effective investigation into his death by an ad hoc mechanism, such as an international independent and impartial commission of inquiry.

We will continue our work, including with other international bodies, to remind Russia of its unconditional legal obligation to implement judgments by the European Court of Human Rights.

Once again, I would like to express my deepest sympathy to his wife, family, and friends for the cruel situation they find themselves in, caused by the Russian authorities.

With the Reykjavík Principles for Democracy, our Heads of State and Government reaffirmed our commitment to ensuring the right to freedom of expression, to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas, underlining both online and offline dimensions of the right.

The Principles further underlined the critical role of journalists and other media workers in this context. Their work constitutes one of the cornerstones of every democratic society.

To promote discussions on this critical issue, the Liechtenstein Presidency held a thematic debate on 14 February on ensuring the reliability and quality of information and sustainable journalism in the digital era.

Dear Members of the Parliamentary Assembly,

The abolition of the death penalty worldwide remains another priority for the Committee of Ministers. Following the execution of Mr Kenneth Eugene Smith in the US State of Alabama, the Ministers' Deputies adopted a Declaration on 30 January deploring this event.

The Committee of Ministers reiterated its unequivocal opposition to the death penalty at all times and in all circumstances and called on states within the United States of America, an observer state to the Council of Europe, to establish a moratorium on the death penalty as a first step towards its abolition at all levels in the United States.

The Committee of Ministers remains ready to share its experience on the abolition of the death penalty with all its observer states.

In this context, the Ministers' Deputies also held its biannual exchange of views on the abolition of the death penalty on 10 April. The exchange also included a thematic discussion with a panel of experts, including a former death row inmate and a former General Rapporteur on the abolition of the death penalty of our Assembly.

On this occasion, we also welcomed the ratification of Protocol 13 by Armenia.

Promoting co-operation and good relations with our international organisation to increase co-ordination between our activities remains also important for the Committee of Ministers.

To this end, the Committee held an exchange of views with Mr Ian Borg, Chair-in-Office of the OSCE, Minister for Foreign and European Affairs and Trade of Malta, on 6 March.

In addition, the Ministers' Deputies held their annual exchange of views with experts from capitals on relations with the United Nations with a thematic focus on "Torture and ill-treatment" in early March.

Exchanges like these emphasise the importance of multilateral co-operation, both within and between international organisations. This year, we all know and a lot of us are wearing the 75th anniversary pin, we will celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Council of Europe and this will provide an important opportunity to demonstrate our common commitment to multilateralism, as well as to the principles of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.

As Member States, it is our obligation to do our utmost to safeguard these principles.

Let us together remember that the Council of Europe, as the guarantor for these values, proved its capabilities in securing stability and promoting progress in its member states time and time again, ever since it was founded.

Through a range of activities and events in Strasbourg and all across Europe, this 75th anniversary will showcase what the Council of Europe means in practical terms for the 700 million Europeans who live in our 46 member states.

In order to encourage youth participation in the work of the Council of Europe, the Liechtenstein Presidency is organising a Youth Event to enable interested youth from across Europe to add their voice to the work of this organisation.

We already heard from Mr President how important it is for the Council of Europe to hear the voices of the future. Also speaking as Minister for Education, this priority is close to my heart.

The event will take place back to back with the Ministerial Session and the celebrations of the 75th anniversary of the Council of Europe in May this year.

To further these efforts, we are also expecting the "Council of Europe reference framework for a Youth Perspective" to be endorsed at the Ministerial Session.

In this context, let me express my particular gratitude to the Joint Council on Youth for their contribution to this important document. The inclusion of youth remains critical to promote a future-oriented functioning of the Council of Europe.

We cannot talk about the future without also, coming to the end, mentioning Artificial Intelligence.

AI is, perhaps, the most important breakthrough technology of this century, and it offers, both, opportunities and challenges to our societies.

Safeguarding the protection of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law remains a priority of the Committee of Ministers, also in this context.

The Committee on Artificial Intelligence was set up and instructed to proceed speedily with the elaboration of a legally binding instrument of a transversal nature, based on the Council of Europe's standards on human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.

The Convention was set to be focussed on general common principles, conducive to innovation, and open to participation by non-member States, while taking into account other relevant existing international legal frameworks or those under development.

At the 4th Summit, our Heads of State and Government committed to ensuring a leading role for the Council of Europe in developing standards in the digital era to safeguard human rights, including by finalising, as a priority, the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on AI.

We are thus very very pleased that this work was completed very recently and that the Committee of Ministers was able to transmit the Draft Framework Convention to the Parliamentary Assembly for opinion.

Let me express my gratitude to the Assembly for considering the draft in this week's part-session.

Once the Assembly's opinion has been received, the Draft Framework Convention will be examined by the Ministers' Deputies and transmitted to the Committee of Ministers for adoption at its Ministerial Session on 17 May 2024.

The issue of artificial intelligence is included in the list of priorities of our Presidency, and we are proud that the work on a Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence has been finalised under our leadership of the Committee of Ministers.

The Council of Europe's work in this context, once again, has attracted the attention of many states far beyond the territory of the organisation, which increases the likelihood that the future instrument will become an efficient and effective global legal standard.

Dear Members of the Parliamentary Assembly,

The agenda of this week's session contains a number of other landmark decisions both for the Parliamentary Assembly and the Council of Europe as a whole.

Yesterday, this Assembly has also adopted the Opinion on the application for membership by Kosovo. The Opinion will now be transmitted to the Committee of Ministers. Of course, I cannot say anything on substance before the Committee has had the chance to discuss the Opinion

In accordance with the Statute of the Council of Europe and relevant rules and procedure, the Committee of Ministers will decide whether to adopt a resolution inviting Kosovo to become a member.

With respect to the decision taken by the Parliamentary Assembly in its last session not to ratify the credentials of the Delegation of Azerbaijan, I would like to inform you that the matter was also discussed on several occasions within the Committee of Ministers. The Committee stressed the importance of an open and inclusive dialogue in compliance with member States' commitments and the Statute of the Council of Europe.

At the same time, let me stress the need to ensure that the Council of Europe remains fully operational. In these turbulent times, this is of critical importance.

The election of the new Secretary General needs to be conducted in the most inclusive manner possible. I continue to be at the disposal of all parties with a view to encouraging the most acceptable solution, also in this context.

Speaking about these upcoming elections, let me express my full confidence in the Assembly's ability to choose the next Secretary General from among the three very good candidates submitted by the Committee of Ministers last month.

Of course, it is too early to bid farewell to our current Secretary General.

Just like the Liechtenstein Presidency, she still has some time left in her term.

It is, however, for me personally and in my capacity heading the Presidency, not too early to thank her personally, and the Parliamentary Assembly of course, too, for the excellent co-operation during our Presidency.

Thank you very much. *Merci beaucoup.*

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much, Ms Dominique HASLER, for your most interesting address to this Assembly.

I want to thank you for what you have done until now, your contribution, your efforts, which have always been acknowledged by all of us, and of course, for the future, for the plans you have presented us.

Especially, I would like to thank you about the preparations to celebrate the 75th year of this organisation.

As I mentioned earlier in our meeting, it is not that we are looking for personal visibility. It is not publicity we are seeking here in this Assembly. We are also looking for visibility of the actions of the Assembly, when problems of democracy, rule of law and human rights are coming up.

Now we are moving on.

We are going to hear questions from the speakers on behalf of the political groups, and then, the response from Ms Dominique HASLER to these questions.

I would like to ask the speakers to limit their interventions to 30 seconds.

Please, I would like to ask my colleagues to ask questions and not make speeches.

Having said that, the first on my list, on behalf of Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group, is Mr Andrea ORLANDO.

Mr Andrea ORLANDO (Italy, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Madam President,

Thank you for this report.

A compatriot of mine, Ilaria Salis, has been imprisoned in Hungarian jails for more than a year, for a crime that in our country carries a maximum sentence of a few months. Ilaria Salis was denied house arrest pending the verdict. She has been led twice to court with chains and a leash.

This case raises the issue of full compliance with the European Charter of Human Rights and raises the question of timeliness in the implementation of its principles, especially with regard to the issue of inhuman and degrading treatment and respect for the principle of due process, especially in those countries where the full autonomy of the judiciary is far from certain and clear.

We would like to know what steps are planned to be taken to strengthen the tools to counter these kinds of phenomena and give full, timely and punctual implementation of our Charter.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Madam Dominique HASLER, would you like to respond?

Ms Dominique HASLER (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Education, and Sport of Liechtenstein and President of the Committee of Ministers): Thank you very much.

First of all, let me just mention that I'm very much looking forward to receiving your questions, and I will give my best and try to answer your questions.

I will start with the question coming from Italy.

I just have to apologise that I am not aware of all the facts and details of this case. The issue has not been discussed by the Committee of Ministers.

I can only underline that all Council of Europe members should respect the European Convention on Human Rights and the CPT Convention.

There is a possibility for victims of human rights violations to address themselves to the European Court of Human Rights after having exhausted all legal remedies at the international level. We know that, and I think this is also just important to underline when it comes comes to this case.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): On behalf of the Group of the European People's Party, Ms Andrea EDER-GITSCHTHALER.

Ms Andrea EDER-GITSCHTHALER (Austria, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): *Thank you, Mister President,*

Dear Foreign Minister,

First of all, congratulations on your presentation and, of course, on your chairmanship to date. Liechtenstein is already a professional, the third time around. As a neighbor, we are, of course, particularly proud that you are doing such a good job. Liechtenstein wanted to use its chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers to promote and strengthen human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Europe. You have just mentioned a number of priorities and measures in this regard.

In your opinion, which measures and events were decisive in achieving these goals? What concrete steps do you want to take before the end of your Presidency? You've already said a lot, but perhaps the most important things again. Then there is the "Taking Human Rights Seriously" project in Liechtenstein, which is intended to help ensure that the fundamental values of the Council of Europe are even better implemented in Liechtenstein. Has this been successful? Can you tell us something about that?

Finally, a question specifically for our Ukrainian friends. Can you give us some information on the confiscated and frozen assets in Liechtenstein? What is the current status?

Thank you very much.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Dear Mister Andrea ORLANDO, you know that it is one question each.

Please, I would like to ask the next speakers to limit the time to 30 seconds.

Madam Dominique HASLER, would you like to reply?

Ms Dominique HASLER (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Education, and Sport of Liechtenstein and President of the Committee of Ministers): *Thank you very much*, Ms Andrea EDER-GITSCHTHALER

Thank you very much for your feedback and thank you also for your question and your interest in the priorities during our Liechtenstein Presidency.

I think I have already mentioned some priorities in my speech, which we will of course continue to work on until the end of our presidency – especially with regard to human rights. I also mentioned in my speech that the Register of Damage is an important first step when it comes to accountability. But accountability has been a top priority in my national responsibility – in our foreign policy in Liechtenstein – for many decades and I think it will also be important within the Council of Europe – precisely because we have just shown how we were able to take really concrete action with the Register of Damage to support Ukraine.

The next steps, such as the compensation mechanism, but also further discussions – you asked how to deal with frozen assets, I will come back to that later, but also issues such as the special tribunal and how the Council of Europe plays an active role, and our Presidency will of course continue to moderate this process, but will also subsequently be actively involved in this process again in terms of national responsibility - and especially with regard to human rights and accountability.

Thank you very much for emphasizing the specific project on "taking human rights seriously". During our presidency, it was very important to us to make the Council of Europe and the valuable work that the Council of Europe does more visible in Liechtenstein, both in the field of education and in the context of the population as a whole.

And in this context, we announced a major national competition where everyone could apply and submit projects on how they can make an active contribution as a society to ensuring that human rights are taken seriously. And it was very moving to see that human rights are not simply a matter of course, but that they require the active participation of us all.

And I would also like to emphasise what the President said earlier. I really also think that we should use the Council of Europe's 75th birthday to boost the visibility of the organisation in such a way that we really do show that we are capable today of finding the answers to the questions of tomorrow together in this multilateral organisation. This is not a matter of course, it is because all the bodies work well together and are committed to the future of Europe, for which I would like to thank you once again.

Ms Dominique HASLER (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Education, and Sport of Liechtenstein and President of the Committee of Ministers): Coming back to your third question about frozen assets, I would like to change to English. Thank you very much also for this question. As you know the seizure and transfer of frozen Russian State assets raises a very complex issue in international law.

It is a matter that is principally addressed by the G7 countries and the EU. As far as the Council of Europe is concerned, the Council of Europe heads of states and governments at their 4th Summit in Reykjavík created, as mentioned before, the Register of Damage for Ukraine as a first step towards an international compensation mechanism for victims of the Russian aggression. This important initiative is intended to ensure justice and accountability for Ukraine.

I know that in your recommendation of yesterday, the Assembly calls on the Committee of Ministers to take further steps in this regard, such as the establishment of a trust fund and international commission of claims. And I can assure you that the Committee of Ministers will consider these recommendations, and I mentioned it before, I think the Committee of Ministers is well aware that the Register of Damage was the first important step but there are further steps to be taken.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): On behalf of the European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance, Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO.

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

First of all I would like to thank you for your recent visit to Kyiv.

I would like, by the way, to ask you, Lithuania, which will soon preside our Secretary General. I think the great place for next Committee of Ministers meeting is Ukraine. Kyiv, Odessa or Kharkiv. That's where the fate of our values is decided.

My question to you is now more as a representative of Liechtenstein. Maybe, especially after yesterday's resolution of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe about not just freezing, but confiscating of Russian assets, both state and oligarchs', in favour of Ukraine. Maybe Liechtenstein will be the first state who will do this. I want to ask you to do this and to make an example to all other countries.

Thank you very much.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Dear Minister, you have the floor.

Ms Dominique HASLER (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Education, and Sport of Liechtenstein and President of the Committee of Ministers): Thank you very much and thank you very much also for the warm hospitality in Ukraine. I already mentioned that before. I think I can also speak for Madam Secretary General that we can really underline that it was the right moment to be in Ukraine and the people in Ukraine they recognised well that the Register of Damage was a very very important first step when it comes to accountability.

Regarding your question when it comes to my national capacity, I just want to underline that I am here to speak now in my capacity as having the Presidency, but coming back to my national capacity, you can be assured that Liechtenstein integrated and being located in the heart of Europe, will always go with its partners. And I think being a European Economic Area member, we are well integrated within the European Union and we are very, very much looking at what the EU is doing in this regard. So, you will always find a strong supporter standing in full solidarity with Ukraine and implementing all measures which are important also in the future when it comes to Liechtenstein.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): On behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, Ms Valentina GRIPPO.

Ms Valentina GRIPPO (Italy, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you.

Minister Dominique HASLER, the protection of journalists is one of the Council of Europe's main areas of activity, and one of the most important instruments for the protection of human rights.

However, the guidelines we produce often become ineffective in the face of events such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as you widely illustrated in your address speech.

Therefore, we have to remember the killing of journalists, opinion leaders and activists who are in prison or in exile, and the enormous damage this is doing not only to human rights, not only to the free flow of ideas in all of the countries of the Council of Europe, but is also weakening the role of the Council of Europe itself.

Therefore, we ask you what measures, specifically, are being taken and will be taken by the Committee of Ministers.

Also, as you mentioned at the important passage that we had yesterday here on Kosovo, we would like to know if you will support the raising of the issue of Kosovo during the next Committee of Ministers.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Madam HASLER, you have the floor.

Ms Dominique HASLER (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Education, and Sport of Liechtenstein and President of the Committee of Ministers): Thank you very much to Ms Valentina GRIPPO for these questions.

As mentioned in my speech, protecting journalists is a main priority within the Liechtenstein Presidency and I think we all know that European media have been the target of a growing number of threats and attacks in recent years. These attacks, including murders, are an unacceptable assault on our democratic societies and crimes committed against journalists must be investigated quickly and transparently to ensure that they do not go unpunished. And of course for this we do need concrete actions and this is what you asked.

The Council of Europe's platform to promote the protection of journalism and the safety of journalists is, in my opinion, a unique instrument for direct dialogue between civil society and the member states. And I really urge all member states to fully co-operate with it.

The Committee of Ministers holds regular exchanges of views with representatives of the platform on how to respond to the numerous challenges which you mentioned before. And the last exchange took place in February this year on the theme of ensuring the reliability and quality of information and sustainable journalism in the digital era.

A very important and much-awaited new Recommendation on Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation – in short SLAPPS – was adopted two weeks ago, and our Presidency will strive to enhance freedom of expression and the safety of journalists, which I mentioned before is among our priorities. Liechtenstein is also a member of the Strasbourg Group of Friends on the Safety of Journalists and we will continue to engage actively in this group and other initiatives with the aim of keeping the safety of journalists as a prerequisite for the freedom of expression high on the agenda.

And Liechtenstein also continues to contribute financially to the platform that I mentioned before.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): On behalf of the Group of the Unified European Left, Mr Paul GAVAN.

Mr Paul GAVAN (Ireland, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mr President.

Minister, as you know, the credentials of the Azerbaijan delegation to this Assembly were not accepted in January of this year.

However, Azerbaijan continues to hold a seat at the Committee of Ministers, just as the people in Nagorno-Karabakh continue to be exiled from their homeland following their ethnic cleansing by the Aliyev regime.

What steps are the Committee of Ministers taking to ensure the safe return and protection of the people of Nagorno-Karabach to their homeland?

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Madam Minister, you have the floor.

Ms Dominique HASLER (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Education, and Sport of Liechtenstein and President of the Committee of Ministers): Thank you very much for this question.

I just can once again repeat that the decision taken by your Assembly last January not to ratify the credentials of the Azerbaijani delegation has been discussed on several occasions by the Committee of Ministers.

The Committee of Ministers stresses the importance of an open and inclusive dialogue in compliance with members states' commitments and the statute of the Council of Europe.

Azerbaijan is a full-fledged member of the organisation, entitled to the same rights than any other member states while of course having also the same obligations in terms of meeting the Council of Europe standards, including with respect to civil and political rights. And you can be assured that of course the Committee of Ministers will moderate this dialogue to find a common solution continuously.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

I will now give the floor to other speakers.

We'll take them in groups of three.

Please limit your interventions to 30 seconds.

We'll start with Mr Peter FRICK.

Mr Peter FRICK (Liechtenstein, ALDE): Dear President,

Dear colleagues,

On behalf of the Liechtenstein delegation, I would like to thank Minister Dominique HASLER for her comments. You have already commented on Azerbaijan, Minister, but perhaps you could elaborate on my question.

The position of the Committee of Ministers on solving the problem of the non-participation of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe delegation from Azerbaijan, dear Foreign Minister, could you elaborate on this in more detail?

Thank you very much.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Next is Mr Armen GEVORGYAN.

Mr Armen GEVORGYAN (Armenia, EC/DA): Madam Minister, the discussion yesterday in this very hemicycle confirmed that a selective approach to the right of peoples to self-determination creates tensions and imbalances within the Council of Europe as well.

But in order to confirm the value and importance of this organisation for the protection of human rights and freedoms, please tell us what the Committee of Ministers is doing specifically to free the Armenian prisoners in Baku and ensure the Armenians of Karabach the right to return to their historical homeland.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): The third question of this round to Mr Alain MILON.

Mr Alain MILON (France, EPP/CD): Thank you, Mr Chairman.

Madam Minister,

Your successor, Lithuania, will be hosting a High-Level Conference on the European Social Charter on 4 July.

In light of your six months as Chair of the Committee of Ministers, can you commit to ratifying the revised European Social Charter?

It would be a fine symbol.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Madam Minister, would you like to respond to these first three questions?

Ms Dominique HASLER (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Education, and Sport of Liechtenstein and President of the Committee of Ministers): Thank you very much.

I will start with the question coming from the Principality of Liechtenstein. Thank you very much for that.

I was asked to go a little bit more into detail about what the Committee of Ministers will do to find a solution to Azerbaijan. And I just want to underline, once again, that I think our common aim is to foster unity in order to safeguard and promote common ideas. And especially for 75 years of the Council of Europe celebration, this will also symbolically underline that the Council of Europe has been offering a unique platform for multilateral co-operation between governments and parliaments of the 46 member states to sanction respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Europe.

Since becoming a member state in 2001, Azerbaijan has benefited from the Council of Europe's support in its democratic transition. Conversely, the Council of Europe has benefited from the contribution of Azerbaijan for promoting its values and increasing its outreach. It is a mutually beneficial co-operation which is an open-ended one and which is certainly unfinished work, and serious improvements and reforms are certainly necessary.

I think we need each other and I hope that the Azerbaijani delegation will soon return to its proper place in the Parliamentary Assembly so that the co-operation and dialogue can continue in the interest of the values that unite us.

Let me, at this point, also mention that as President of the Committee of Ministers, I have convened the discussion of this issue in a trialogue meeting and I am at the disposal of all parties with a view to encouraging the most acceptable solutions for all, so as to enable the Council of Europe to continue to tremendous work it has been doing for the last 75 years and I want to thank once again for this wonderful co-operation in this trialogue meeting between the Parliamentary Assembly, the Committee of Ministers and the Secretary General.

Second, I was asked about the concrete actions of the Council of Europe when it comes to Armenian captives. The Committee of Ministers has been following the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh closely, I also mentioned this before. It has regularly discussed the human rights situation also with the Secretary General and the Human Rights Commissioner, the parties' dispute, and the status of the persons referred to – for Armenia, they are prisoners of war, for Azerbaijan, they are ordinary criminals. So whatever they are, they remain human beings and are subject to the protection of all of the relevant Council of Europe conventions. The European Convention on Human Rights, the European Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, etc. I think there are a lot more of them. So they have to be treated accordingly.

I would like to note that in the observations following her visit, the Commissioner recalled that international humanitarian law protects persons deprived of liberty in connection to armed conflict and notably the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) must be permitted to visit prisoners of war and protected civilians wherever they may be.

I would finally like to underline that the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment – in short CPT – is co-operating with the ICRC and also follows the situation of persons detained in the region. These are issues that are followed closely as these are serious allegations of human rights violations.

And the third question was coming from Mr Alain MILON from France about giving the attention of a symbol when it comes to the ratification. Liechtenstein, yes, is graphically small and this translates to a lean administration. I have to underline this again and again and it also does have limited personnel resources to take on additional commitments. With the ratification of new conventions, the workload for our administration increases with some the time and the personnel resources required are larger than with others. Many conventions require experts to attend committees and the broader administration to engage in regular evolution rounds. All of which is important, of course, but difficult to do with limited resources.

Liechtenstein, for this reason, conducts visibility assessments and prioritisation of conventions. So far, we have prioritised other areas. In the context of the Council of Europe, we have already ratified 90 conventions and Liechtenstein does always have a slogan, "if we are ratifying conventions, we are going to implement them 100% properly". And as mentioned, it is also a question of resources, but after giving up the Presidency, perhaps we will have more resources, and of course, we will also check to ratify this convention.

Once again, thank you very much.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Dear colleagues, we have time for one more round of three questions, if we all keep the time limit.

So I give the floor now to Mr Zoltán BÓNA.

Mr Zoltán BÓNA (Hungary, EC/DA): Thank you very much, dear Madam Minister.

2024 marks the 75th anniversary of the Council of Europe, which is a great occasion to raise awareness of the organisation's positive impact on people's daily lives.

The past 75 years have shown that the Council of Europe is unique in its embrace of important fundamental rights: issues such as linguistic diversity and the protection of national minorities.

How does the President intend to participate in the commemoration of the 75 anniversary, and what issues will it focus on?

Thank you very much.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Mr Mr Yuriy KAMELCHUK is next.

Mr Yuriy KAMELCHUK (Ukraine, EPP/CD): Yes, thank you.

Liechtenstein is is known for appreciating and supporting the cultural values of Europe and the world.

Ukraine and Ukrainians are currently going through a difficult period. Millions of Ukrainian children in Europe face the fact that they have problems with preserving the Ukrainian identity.

I know that Sweden, Germany, and Great Britain support the activities of Ukrainian institutes abroad.

Tell me, can the principality of Liechtenstein connect to the aid for the sake of preserving Ukrainian culture and education among Ukrainians who are integrating into the European Community?

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Ms Ingjerd Schie SCHOU, you have the floor.

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

Dear Minister, a question from Norway.

At the Reykjavik summit, the heads of states and governments adopted the 10 Reykjavik principles for democracy.

They committed to promote, protect and strengthen democracy throughout the 46 member states, and to engage in regular, high-level dialogue with member states and partners on these 10 principles for democracy.

To what extent has the Committee of Ministers acted upon this commitment and promoted these principles to member states?

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Madam HASLER, would you like to respond?

Ms Dominique HASLER (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Education, and Sport of Liechtenstein and President of the Committee of Ministers): Thank you very much once again for the three questions.

I start with the question from Hungary, relating again to the 75th anniversary. I think it's always wonderful to talk about anniversaries.

Here, I once again want to thank the Secretariat of the Committee of Ministers, because they are organising the many many events around this anniversary.

You asked about more details.

The official ceremony will take place on 16 May back to back with the next ministerial session.

At this occasion, the Lichtenstein presidency is also planning – I mentioned that in my speech before – the youth event to also underline that the future of the Council of Europe, the upcoming 75 years, are very important for us.

Member states have also been invited to use this opportunity to organise events back home. As we also heard from Mr President, the General Assembly will do, which is very much appreciated.

And also in connection with our presidency, Lichtenstein is carrying out a diverse programme for its citizens back home in Lichtenstein. I already mentioned it before, so I think it's also a huge opportunity for all member states to celebrate this anniversary here in Strasbourg, but also back home in our countries.

Then, I want to answer the question coming from Ukraine, related to the children in Ukraine.

The Committee of Ministers is also, as you mentioned, gravely concerned about the killings, injuries and sexual abuse of children; the unlawful transfers of Ukrainian children by Russian forces, and their deportation to the Russian Federation and Belarus, or to the areas temporarily controlled or occupied by the Russian Federation; and their forceable placement under custody or adoption by Russia foster families and other serious violations of their dignity and rights.

All crimes committed against children must be independently investigated and their perpetrators must not go unpunished pursuant to the general principles of international law and international humanitarian law.

Given that all children of Ukraine are entitled to protection, and enjoy the full range of human rights enshrined in relevant international legal instruments, a declaration on the situation of children in Ukraine was adopted by the heads of state and government at the Reykjavík summit.

I can assure you that also, during our visit in in Kyiv, the Secretary General and I, we visited projects to underline the importance of protecting the children of Ukraine. And I think we gave a clear commitment that the Council of Europe will further work on that issue, and that we will do what ever we can to find solutions, especially also for the deported children.

Before I conclude, I forgot one question: the question from Ms Valentina GRIPPO, Italy.

You asked before a second question on Kosovo. I just want to answer the second question which I forgot. I apologise for that.

It was regarding, as I mentioned, Kosovo. Here I just want to conclude by asking for understanding that I cannot say more than I already said in my speech. Of course, the Committee of Ministers will discuss on that. The opinion will now be transmitted to the Committee of Ministers. And on substance, at this moment I just cannot say something, because as mentioned before, we did not have the chance to discuss the opinion.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Madam President of the Committee of Ministers?

Ms Dominique HASLER (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Education, and Sport of Liechtenstein and President of the Committee of Ministers): Not ending with another forgotten question.

Sorry, there was another last question coming from Norway, right?

Sorry, yes. And a very good one I think to conclude also because it was really a holistic question about the follow-up to the Reykjavik principle of democracy.

Thank you very much for referring to the Reykjavík principles for democracy adopted by the heads of state and government in Reykjavík last year.

I really believe that this principles were designed to contribute to the fight against democratic backsliding and authoritarian tendencies that emerge and develop in different forms and in different places, sadly, in Europe.

And I really believe that the 10 principles for democracy are like basic conditions for all modern and inclusive democratic systems.

So it's really an important framework, and I mentioned it in several areas today that to ensure that implementation is going properly, the Committee of Ministers recently set up an intergovernmental expert committee called the Steering Committee for Democracy. It is made up of experts from 46 members states and its principal mandate is to help member states to implement the Reykjavík principles and the relevant Council of Europe standards to promote and strengthen democracy.

This is the first time ever that the Committee of Ministers has created a group of experts who have been invited to focus exclusively on issues of democracy at all levels of government.

On the basis of the conclusions and recommendations of these experts, the Committee of Ministers will continue to bring the Reykjavík principles for democracy to live throughout our 46 members states.

And we all know that democracy suffers from shortcomings, but we also know, as the head of states reiterated in Reykjavík, that democracy is the only way to ensure that each and every one of us can live in a peaceful, prosperous, and free society.

So it is up to each and every one of us to do our part to defend and promote the Reykjavík principles for democracy, and I do believe that we did found to write framework to really assure that we are willing to implement those principles.

Thank you very much.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): You know, Madam Dominique HASLER, back in Athens, Greece, my country, I still am the long-lasted spokesperson. I served for nine years. Nine years in an elected chair in the opposition party and then in the government, and I never answered all the questions.

I want to thank you so much for breaking the rules that spokespersons have between them.

Thank you so much for addressing this Assembly and for answering the good questions to my colleagues.

Now, dear colleagues...

The ballot for the election of a judge to the European Court of Human Rights is still open.

Those who have not yet voted may still do so by going to the foyer in front of the hemicycle.

The vote closes at 6:00 p.m.

We now come to the joint debate on three reports from the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights.

The first is titled “Alexei Navalny's death and the need to counter Vladimir Putin's totalitarian regime and its war on democracy”, Document 15966, presented by Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS.

The second is titled “The arbitrary detention of Vladimir Kara-Murza and the systematic persecution of anti-war protesters in the Russian Federation and Belarus”, Document 15967, presented by Ms Thórhildur Sunna ÆVARSDÓTTIR.

The third report is titled “Sanctions against persons on the "Kara-Murza list"”, Document 15939, presented by Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS. This will be followed by a statement by Ms Evgenia KARA-MURZA.

In order to finish this item by 6:10 p.m., I will interrupt the list of speakers at about 5:40 p.m. to allow time for the replies and the votes.

We will begin with a short video of an interview with Alexei Navalny, and I will then open the debate.

Let the video play.

Joint Debate: Urgent procedure debate: "Alexei Navalny's death and the need to counter Vladimir Putin's totalitarian regime and its war on democracy" / Urgent procedure debate: "The arbitrary detention of Vladimir Kara-Murza and the systematic persecution of anti-war protesters in the Russian Federation and Belarus" / Sanctions against persons on the "Kara-Murza list"

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Dear colleagues, it was the last interview that Alexei Navalny gave to a member of this Assembly, Mr Jacques MAIRE, and it was taken back in December 2020.

I will now open the debate. I call Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS, rapporteur, to present the first report.

Dear Emanuelis, you have 7 minutes now, and 3 minutes at the end to reply to the debate.

You have the floor.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD, Rapporteur): Dear President, dear colleagues.

I have been in this chamber more like 30 years. It is a privilege to open this Assembly as a long-standing member and I never remembered that we have come to such stage of war, trying to cement ourselves against the creators of the war against our democratic civilisation, that is Russia and partly Belarus.

In the case of Navalny as just mentioned, the German government officially stated that he was poisoned last time and was safe in the hospital Charité – saved from the state-sponsored measures from Russia Federation. Connecting that to the unprecedented and free, not free, not fair, elections, just I have video from Leonid Volkov, one of the leaders of the Navalny movement, and Yulia Navalnaya's speech in Munich, not to recognise Vladomir Putin as a freely and fairly elected president. It was done by us, dear Chair and dear old friends, from our defence of the democracy against Lukashenko. It should be done by us against Putin. That is one of the points inside our resolution.

Second, sponsoring terrorism. Russia is sponsoring terrorism. They are hunting democrats – Russian democrats – the best Russian people, in every place of the world or those guys who make an incredible brave decision to be in Russia – like Vladimir Kara-Murza and Evgenia – it is a great honour to see you among us again. And instead of you, if you remember, we have always your husband who was our best friend, especially in our Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights, with Gunter and with all our friends in the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights, again and again making reports. We should make concrete steps that are a little bit above our possibilities. Above, dear President, our possibilities.

First, the decision to delete Russia's membership after the invasion of Ukraine. Now, just discussed a few minutes ago about Ukrainian children taken to Russia. Torture, torture, torture of Ukrainians, not only like war prisoners, but Ukrainians, like Ukrainians, civil populations in Russia or in occupied territories. And all those policies related to Russification and colonialisation of occupied regions and bringing the racist – pure racist – ideology of Russkiy Mir.

So in my report today – and thank you for your many amendments, dear friends, they were mostly accepted – we will like to say that Russia's current behaviours related to their non-acceptance of the dismantling of the Soviet Union, it was the same as Germany not accepting the Treaty of 1918, and then its reaction was the establishment of the Nazi regime after few decades, the same is in Russia. Twenty-four years of Putin's regime become a time when Putin used to undermine our democracy, inside Russia, cleaning Russia of the best Russians, of the best Russian democrats, and that is fantastically exposed by my neighbour Ms Thórhildur Sunna ÆVARSDÓTTIR's report. And of course, secondly, making wars against their neighbours, trying to make a reconquista of the former so-called Soviet Communist territory. I would like to remind you that the Bolshevik regime was never accepted as legal, and for example the Baltic countries were never accepted as occupied countries by all Western world. Now we are trying to make our measures.

So I would like to say, in order to address this barbaric and inhuman practices the draft resolution calls on member states to hold the Russian Federation to account for its blatant disregard of its obligation under United Nation's Torture Convention, including by lodging an application with the International Court of Justice. I believe that this could lead to a full exposure of Russia's torture apparatus before the world court. It would also be symbolic for our member states to come together on the 75th anniversary, dear chairman, of the Council of Europe to safeguard one of the most fundamental guarantees of the modern civilisation: the prohibition of torture.

I do not believe that Alexei's death was accidental. Before, if you remember, I did the report on Boris Nemtsov, and Alexei Navalny and especially Kara-Murza were friends of Boris. And Boris, if you remember, Boris Nemstov said in front of all the world, "Putin means war". "Putin means war!" And in this case you should be not modest in our expression of our resistance. And I believe that Alexei's death and Yulia Navalnaya's speeches, and of course, Evgenia Kara-Murza's speeches will be for us like guidelines on how to deal with that matter.

So, Putin is not any more a legitimate president of the Russian Federation. His so-called elections were not only far from being free and fair, they were carried out in breach of the Russian constitution and in manifest breach of international law with polling stations opened in the sovereign territories of Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, and in Georgian occupied territory too.

Vladimir Putin is a mafia boss who clings to power using a network of his caporegimes, ranging from Dmitry Medvedev to foot soldiers in Russia and beyond. We must focus on taking down his criminal empire brick by brick – brick by brick. For this reason, the resolution proposed to tighten the sanctions on the Russia. Actually I would like to tell you, dear friends, and especially you dear President, that the chairmanship of Lithuania, making just massive humiliation from our assumptions against Russia, we will try to establish a register for all those enriching themselves guys who are avoiding sanctions.

Anti-money laundering measures should be established and we should use our frame of the Council of Europe to create an umbrella for the European Union, for the whole democratic world, where we are the place. I am sorry to say that our organisation has become a unique instrument. Dear President, we have become the unique instrument in the world to counteract against Putin's regime and the allies like Belarus. In the case of allyship, we can mention other countries like China, Iran, North Korea and from time to time Cuba.

Dear Mister President, dear colleagues, the time is now to act. There can be no hesitation in applying all the measures available at our disposal to stop the regime and help Ukraine in his heroic defence. Russia has crossed all the red lines, already now, invading their neighbourhood. They failed to act properly then but now we are acting. Let us learn from the experience and honour Alexei Navalny's courage and sacrifice by coming together in solidarity and putting an end to Vladimir Putin's totalitarian regime once and for all.

And I would like to say about the general situation, about Ukraine, we are asking, finally, I am sorry that we are so based on the current political situation, asking finally, the American Congress to make decisions and make their proposed aid to Ukraine like it was proposed in advance seven months ago. It is a special line about that too.

So thank you very much and I hope our co-operation for this report will be incredibly important for all democratic society.

Just two minutes ago I received a video and [the speaker is interrupted by the Chair].

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): [overlapping speech]

Thank you so much, dear Emanuelis.

I now call Ms Thórhildur Sunna ÆVARSDÓTTIR, rapporteur, to present the second report.

You have seven minutes now and three minutes at the end to reply to the debate.

Ms Thórhildur Sunna ÆVARSDÓTTIR (Iceland, SOC, Rapporteur): Thank you, Mister President.

Dear colleagues,

In March 2022, the historian, politician, and winner of the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize in 2022, Vladimir Kara-Murza, gave a speech to the Arizona House of Representatives.

Upon his return to Russia, he was imprisioned for making that speech.

During his speech, he said the following, and I quote,

"I wish we had been wrong on this, but today the whole world sees what the Putin regime is doing in Ukraine. The cluster bombs on residential areas, the bombings of maternity wards, hospitals and schools, and the war crimes. These are war crimes that are being committed by the dictatorial regime in the Kremlin against the nation in the middle of Europe. This is, unfortunately, where all the years of Putin's rule have led us. But as much as it is difficult for any of us to be a little bit optimistic, and even a little bit hopeful about the future, I also want to speak about the other side of Russia to you.

Very often, people in the West only see the official side. They see Putin, the repression, the aggressive actions, and the war that is now happening. The other side is very often lost.

The other side, of course, is that there are millions of people in my country who fundamentally reject and fundamentally disagree with everything that the Putin regime stands for and represents: from the kleptocracy to the abuses, repressions, and crimes against humanity that are being committed."

Vladimir Kara-Murza was arrested in Russia just over one month afterwards. A few days after he made a similar statement before our Committee at its May 2022 meeting in Paris.

The charge was deliberately spreading false information about the Russian armed forces. After being charged with additional offences of co-operating with an undesirable foreign NGO and high treason on 17 April 2023, exactly one year ago today, Vladimir Kara-Murza was sentenced to 25 years of imprisonment.

Mr Kara-Murza had barely survived two previous poisoning attacks linked to the Russian authorities, and they have had a lasting negative effect on his health.

During his pre-trial detention, the polyneuropathy he had been dealing with ever since his poisoning, worsened and spread to both feet.

For the last six months, Vladimir Kara-Murza has been held in complete isolation of solitary confinement in a cell. First in a strict regime prison colony, and then in a Siberian special regime prison colony, the harshest grade in Russia's penitentiary system.

Since September 2023, he has not been receiving medical treatment, and his polyneuropathy slowly continues to deteriorate.

I am also deeply concerned about the latest development regarding Vladimir's case, as the Russian authorities have recently decided to transfer him to Moscow for his Supreme Court hearing.

Prison transfers in Russia are notoriously harsh and inhumane, and will most likely result in Mr Kara-Murza being *incommunicado* for weeks, if not more, putting an ever greater risk to his health and his life.

Despite all of this, despite the prosecution on trumped-up charges and the absurd prison sentence, despite the clear risk to his life, Vladimir Kara-Murza stays true to his beliefs.

After the killing of Alexei Navalny, after which all of us feared, and still feel, that Vladimir Kara-Murza would be killed too, Vladimir said he would not give up the fight to make Russia a normal, free, European and democratic country.

The strength I see in Vladimir Kara-Murza I also we see reflected in his wife, Ms Yevgenia KARA-MURZA. We are honoured to have you with us today. By picking up your husband's campaign for a new and better Russia, you have shown enormous determination and courage.

I think the way in which you carry out your advocacy shows your brilliance and your strength, and I admire that greatly about you.

You and your three children have been put in a situation that no one should be put in.

This Assembly might not be able to ensure the release of your husband, but we can ensure that your husband and others like him, are recognised for what they are. They are heroes of democracy. We should call on our governments to do everything they can to secure his release.

This report is about Vladimir Kara-Murza and his important fight for justice and democracy, but it is also about the other side of Russia that Vladimir described in his speech in March, April, and May of 2022. It's about the individuals who stand up against Putin's war of aggression and what we can do to better help them.

The repression of such individuals has been appalling. Almost 20 000 people in Russia have been detained for their anti-war views, leading to thousands of prosecutions and lengthy prison sentences for criticism of the war. There are now over 1 000 political prisoners in the country.

Civil society and media organisations have been forced to move underground or completely eviscerated notably through a significant growth in the application of "foreign agent" and "undesirable organisation" designations, that make the running of groups that have been given these undesirable labels almost impossible.

The crackdown on individuals and organisations has been facilitated by a series of amendments to Russia's already draconian legislation, which have effectively criminalised even the most trivial criticism of the war or the Russian military.

I have called this the unmasking of the Russian regime, because before we ousted them from this organisation, and rightly so, they used to at least try to make up some reasonable charges to push against their political prisoners. They pretended that they were guilty of things like drug possession, or money laundering, or what have you. But now they've just criminalised dissent. It is quite clear it is forbidden to have an opinion in opposition to the Putin regime in Russia today.

So, they have truly been unmasked. There is no democratic façade left in the country.

Dear colleagues, despite the repression, the anti-war movement has not been destroyed, it has instead gone underground. Russians who oppose the war have adapted their activities so that they can continue expressing anti-war dissent without making immediate arrest and indefinite imprisonment a certainty.

Now, Russia and Belarus are different countries, dear colleagues, with different histories, traditions, culture and governments. But sadly, the population of both have been subjected to severe repression for any opposition to the war of aggression against Ukraine.

In Belarus the authoritarian legislature made changes following the 2020 protest movement that already significantly expanded the capacity of the government to carry out politically motivated repression. This has been used to severely repress anti-war protests and speech.

In the draft resolution, the Assembly expresses its solidarity with the many Russians and Belarusians who speak out against the war of aggression, and I urge you all to support it.

Thank you very much.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madam ÆVARSDÓTTIR .

I now call Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS, rapporteur, to present the third report and, as you know, you have seven minutes now and three minutes at the end to reply to the debate.

Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS (Estonia, ALDE, Rapporteur): Thank you, President,

Dear colleagues, as you heard this afternoon we discussed three reports dealing with different aspects of the war on democracy waged by Vladimir Putin's criminal regime, and I am not using some weird metaphor, but this is actually language from one of the reports that we have on hand today.

My own contribution to this debate relates to the persecution of our colleague, our friend Vladimir Kara-Murza and the need to hold to account all participants of his persecution.

But first, since my report itself is very simple and straightforward, I allow myself a few general remarks.

If one thinks about the atmosphere, the mood in this very hall today and during this week and actually since March 2022, when we finally expelled Russia from this institution, and compares it to the mood just three, four, five years ago, we might think that we live now in a totally different world, but the sad truth is that we don't. It is just that this institution has finally and belatedly woken up to that reality, the reality that was sadly forming also under our watch, at least since 2006, and actually the signs of which were there since Putin took power in Russia in 1999.

When Vladimir Kara-Murza, now the holder of the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize and Putin's political prisoner number one, visited the Council of Europe last time, that was about three or four years ago, he had difficulty getting access to this building.

We had to formally name him an adviser to the Estonian delegation, so that the Secretariat would give him an access badge. That was because the Russian delegation, the so-called parliamentarians of Putin's Yedinaya Rossiya party, did not want Vladimir to be there.

And the institution that defends human rights tried to accommodate them and made it difficult for Vladimir to enter, and I remind you that was when Vladimir had already been poisoned twice by Putin's regime.

So, yes, we have come a very long way from that situation, and I am starting to be proud of this institution for finally standing up to its values.

And I am far from doing the blame and shame game, and I do not belong to the camp that says that the Satanic West and NATO, the European Union, the Council of Europe are to blame for what is going on in the world. We all know who is to be blamed and he is named in our reports through and through, you can read it.

But still, never forget to also look into the mirror. And I think we have all learned the lesson that is time to be honest and the only way to win this war that is waged against democracy is to name the names, be honest in our assessments, and only then we can formulate the right responses. Because we have to admit we failed at least until March 2020, we failed to make Russia, then a member of Council of Europe, to live up to its taken obligations, to honour any of the resolutions, our resolutions that we had all passed, we took Russia back into the Assembly despite that we had said that we don't before it returns Crimea to Ukraine.

We didn't do anything meaningful when Russia invaded Georgia, when Russia falsified elections, when Russia started to repress Putin's political enemies, when Russia killed free media, killed civil society, meddled in other countries elections, started to kill its opponents, killed Politkovskaya, killed Litvinenko, killed Boris Nemtsov.

That all happened before we re-admitted Russia. So, yes, we did fail.

And now we are where we are. Now we are discussing three reports that describe the situation in Russia frankly, and that is a good thing. But if you read them, it's terrifying reading.

For example, one of the chapters in Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS' report says "After more than 20 years of Vladimir Putin's iron grip over the Russian Federation, its transition to a totalitarian state appears complete".

One of the reports is titled "Alexei Navalny's death and the need to counter Vladimir Putin's totalitarian regime and its war on democracy" and this entails both, internal repression and external aggression.

Evgenia Kara-Murza told us that the Committee meeting, reminded us of an old truth that spread of growth of internal repression in Russia always develops into external aggression. So repression and aggression are two sides of the same coin. So in essence the process that brought us to today, to Bucha and massive missile attacks against Ukrainian civilians and bloodshed at the front lines, it started with repressions inside Russia, repressions that we, as Europeans, did not deter.

When you enter this building, you read the slogan "75 years of Council of Europe united around values, our values". Well, clearly we were not united enough.

And I'm not a big fan of military terminology in diplomatic language and political languages, it is mostly used by people who never saw a war and then they are shooting and using ranks and armies in their language, but I'm finding it harder and harder not to use it today.

We are talking about war on democracy.

And if the question is what should we do about it, then I can't find a better word than to say we should deter. Deterrence is a military word, but unfortunately it should be applied today also on this attack against human rights, democratic values to deter the aggressor against democracy.

In a war against democracy, I think where should we stand? I think there are three choices: we should be victims, some of us already are, some member states already are.

Or we could be bystanders and that would make us complicit with the crime.

Or then we should be warriors defending democracy.

I see no other choice for this house to be warriors to defend our soil and our values.

So, my report today about the list of persons involved in repressions against our friend Vladimir is, first, far too late. Vladimir has been in prison for two years. We have debated it almost for two years, but at least it's here. I hope we all vote for it. It didn't deter Vladimir's arrest, but it might help to deter future arrests. We named every single Russian official who has been involved, from judges to prison guards.

This is an open list, we will add names as they occur. And we should do more, we should now seriously start to do everything we can to exchange Vladimir Kara-Murza from Putin's prison.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister Eerik-Niiles KROSS.

Dear colleagues, last week on 11 April marked two years since Vladimir Kara-Murza has been detained.

He was furthermore sentenced last year to 25 years in a mockery of judgment on treason and other fictitious charges.

Showing incredible courage, Vladimir chose to stay in Russia, believing it was his duty to be there and to fight alongside the opponents who bravely defied the terrorist regime of Mr Putin. For this, the Russian leadership decided to silence him.

To make matters worse, he was moved in January to a high security prison in Siberia, in isolation, in a six-metre square cell, despite suffering from health problems that result from two poisoning attempts.

Dear Ms Yevgenia KARA-MURZA, from the day when your husband was jailed you have tirelessly travelled across the world to plead for his liberation, but your commitment does not only concern your husband. It is for all the political prisoners asking for their liberation.

You once declared the Russian regime targets the most courageous, the most principled, those Russians who risk not only their freedom, but very often their lives, to show to the world that a different Russia is possible.

Your husband, in his speech before the tribunal, said, "I also know that the day will come when the darkness over our country will dissipate; when black will be called "black", and white will be called "white"; when at the official level it will be recognised that two times two is still four; when a war will be called a "war"; a usurper, "usurper"; and when those who killed and unleashed this war, rather than those who tried to stop it, will be recognised as criminals."

Dear Yevgenia KARA-MURZA, while you were entering this room and sitting there in this front seat, I saw you alone, but I want to reassure you that having invited you many times here, we want this Assembly to prove that you are not alone.

Please, take the floor.

Ms Evgenia KARA-MURZA: Mister President, Secretary General,

The Parliamentary Assembly,

Your Excellencies, Members of the Assembly,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear friends,

I am deeply grateful for this opportunity to address all of you today.

For the last two years since my husband's imprisonment, my main goal has been to be the strongest voice possible for the people I am proud to call my compatriots.

I believe that the voices deserve to be heard.

The struggle deserves to be recognised and the stories deserve to be known, because these are stories of courage, resilience and refusal to give up against all odds.

By the most conservative estimates of Memorial, Russia's most respected human rights organisation and co-laureate of the Nobel Peace Prize, the number of political prisoners in the country approaches 700 people, while the total number of Russians who face criminal or administrative punishment since 2018 for exercising free speech, according to a recent media investigation, comes to an astonishing 116 000 people.

There have been more political trials under Vladimir Putin's fourth presidential term alone that under the Soviet leaders Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev combined.

We see people being persecuted for laying flowers to slain opposition leaders Boris Nemtsov and Alexei Navalny. And any kind of anti-war speech in a country whose government has, for two years, being carrying on a war of aggression against Ukraine, is harshly punished, very often with Stalin-era prison terms.

According to OVD-Info, among around 20 000 unlawfully detained during the first year of the full-scale invasion alone, there were at least 565 minors, and criminal proceedings were opened against many of them before they reached the age of 18.

17-year-old Yegor Balazeikin was sentenced to six years of imprisonment for a failed attempt to set a conscription centre on fire. Yegor is suffering from a chronic liver disease, and his condition in detention is rapidly deteriorating.

18-year-old Daria Kozyreva, who calls herself the "right kind of patriot", is facing years in prison for a poster with a quote from Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko.

Vladimir's and my daughter, our oldest daughter, also turned 18 recently. She was 9 when her father was poisoned for the first time, and 11 when he yet again was in a coma, suffering from a multiple organ failure following a second poisoning attack.

For the last seven months, Vladimir has been held in the solitary confinement of a disciplinary cell in a maximum security prison colony in Western Siberia, where he's serving a 25-year sentence for so-called high treason for five public speeches where he denounced the war of aggression against Ukraine and raised awareness about the ongoing crisis with human rights in Russia.

The last time our kids spoke to their dad was last December, that was a 15-minute phone call. We have three kids, which meant that each of them got five minutes on the phone with their dad, and I had to measure those minutes with a timer.

Maria Ponomarenko, Alexei Moskalyov, Natalia Filonova, Andrei Pivovarov, Yevgeniya Berkovich, Alexei Lipster, Vadim Kobzev, these are just a few names of loving parents who were deprived of the right to raise their children because they refused to stay silent in face of the many crimes committed by this regime, for teaching their kids through their own example that one has the obligation to act when faced with evil.

The regime has brought back the entire arsenal of Soviet-style repressive instruments to eradicate dissent and scare people into silence. Punitive psychiatry, first introduced by then KGB chairman Yuri Andropov in 1969 to silence dissent, has made its bone-chilling comeback. The use of intimidation and torture by Russian law enforcement forces, authorities, does not even surprise anyone anymore.

Political prisoners with pre-existing medical conditions are routinely deprived of medical care and are repeatedly sent to disciplinary cells on ridiculous grounds and in violation of the Russian law.

Alexei Gorinov, Alexandra Skochilenko, Yuri Dmitriyev, Igor Baryshnikov, Zarema Musayeva, and Yegor Balazeykin are among those whose lives are an imminent danger because their health is rapidly deteriorating in the absence of medical care.

Thousands of Ukrainian civilian hostages and kidnapped children are held captive in Russia, often in torturous conditions and in clear violation of the international law.

With independent media banned and blocked, civil society institutions destroyed or under extreme pressure, international observers and rapporteurs consistently denied entry to the country, we really have only a vague idea of the scale of repression in Russia.

Just like in the Soviet times, all those who publicly reject the official narrative are being portrayed by the Russian authorities as criminals, extremists, spies, traitors or insane people. This is why it is crucially important to maintain a continuous dialogue with oppressed civil society, and support the work of those human rights organisations, independent journalists, civil society groups and lawyers who do their best, both inside and outside of the country, to monitor and report on the situation against all odds.

In this context, the importance of the work carried out by PACE rapporteurs Ms Thórhildur Sunna ÆVARSDÓTTIR, Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS and Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS cannot be overestimated. And I'm very grateful for their reports on the systematic character of repression against anti-war protesters in Russia, on the use of targeted sanctions against human rights violators, and on the murder of Alexei Navalny and the very much needed response, strong response to that by the international community.

I'm often asked if there is an alternative to Vladimir Putin. Well, you're watching Vladimir Putin using the powerful Soviet-style repressive state machine to try and destroy that alternative right before your eyes.

The regime targets the most courageous, the most principled, those Russians who risk not only their freedom but very often their lives to show you that Russia can be different.

Chairman of the board of Memorial Oleg Orlov, historian with Memorial Yury Dmitriev, politicians Ilya Yashin, Ksenia Fadeyeva, Lilia Chanysheva, President of the Bar Association of the Udmurtia region Dmitry Talantov, poet Artyom Kamardin, playwright Svetlana Petriychuk, journalists Antonina Favorskaya and Olga Komleva.

Hundreds and hundreds of brave people ended up behind bars because their human integrity did not allow them to stay silent in the face of the atrocities committed by the regime. They are the alternative.

As are my incredibly committed and intrepid colleagues from the Free Russia Foundation, Memorial, OVD-Info, ethnic minority movements, Association Russie-Libertés, the feminist anti-war resistance, the Go by the Forest project, the anti-war committee, the anti-corruption foundation, and many other civil society groups and organisations working tirelessly to bring closer the date when the regime in the Kremlin collapses.

They are the alternative.

Those who are opposing Vladimir Putin's murders regime today represent that Russia that Boris Nemtsov and Alexei Navalny fought and died for.

You saw tens of thousands of these people standing for hours in lines across the country, not just in big metropolises, but also far away provincial centres like Novorossiysk or Gorno-Altaysk, to sign the petitions required for the nomination of Boris Nadezhdin, the only candidate who was preparing to run on an anti-war platform.

You saw thousands and thousands of them on 1 March lining the streets to pay tribute to yet another assassinated opposition leader, Alexei Navalny. Under surveillance cameras and in heavy police presence the crowds defiantly chanted "no to war" and "Russia will be free".

You saw thousands and thousands of them turning up at polling stations in Russia and capitals across the world to take part in the Noon Against Putin protest on 17 March.

For as long as Vladimir Putin stays in power, internal repression and external aggression will continue. And the only true guarantee for peace and stability on this continent is a democratic Russia that will respect the rights of its own citizens and live in peace with its neighbours.

If Putin is allowed to destroy that vision of Russia, the free world will be left with no other options but to deal with this decrepit vile dictator and him alone.

I call on you to stand with my compatriots who carried the vision of a free and democratic Russia.

I wholeheartedly support the PACE Resolution 2519 from 13 October last year that followed the report by PACE rapporteur Mr Pieter OMTZIGT who examined the legitimacy and legality of Vladimir Putin's term limit waiver.

And I call on you to send a clear and unequivocal signal to the Kremlin that Vladimir Putin is no longer considered a legitimate ruler of the Russian Federation and will be treated as he should: a usurper, a dictator, and a war criminal wanted by the ICC.

And I would like to finish with my husband's words "it is my hope that when people in the free world today think and speak about Russia, they will remember not only the war criminals, who are sitting in the Kremlin, but also those who are standing up to them, because we are Russians too".

Thank you very much.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

Dear Ms Evgenia KARA-MURZA for your most interesting and emotional address.

We will keep the words of your husband. He said, "even today, even in the darkness surrounding us, even sitting in this cage, I love my country and believe in our people".

I want you to believe in us and to believe in this applause, and in what this Assembly has already decided and is discussing continuously about Vladimir Putin's regime, and the help that we can provide.

We will be standing by you. We know that you have a heavy burden on your shoulders, you and your children. We will try to walk with you towards the freedom of your husband and the freedom of your country.

Thank you so much.

Dear colleagues, we are going on.

I will give now, the floor to the speakers on behalf of political groups.

From the group of the United European Left, Mr Paul GAVIN, you have the floor.

Mr Paul GAVAN (Ireland, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister President.

I want to very much thank the last speaker for the absolutely powerful oration.

On behalf of the Group of the Unified European Left, I want to commend the rapporteurs for these important reports. I want to speak first about the report on Alexei Navalny's death. I think the essence of the report is captured in paragraph four, which states that "the Assembly considers that the Russian state bears full responsibility for the killing of Alexei Navalny, who was subjected to torture, inhuman and degrading treatment in violation of the judgments and interim measures of the European Court of Human Rights". Many others have died at the hands of this regime and are mentioned in this report.

Restrictive legislation ensures that independent voices, such as human rights defenders and independent media outlets, are now heavily restricted. Changes to the law and so-called foreign agents or undesirable organisations, as they are termed, has imposed restrictions and forced the closure of many non-governmental organisations. Large numbers of activists, human rights defenders, and journalists are either in prison or have been forced into exile. But colleagues, this is not just in Russia, but also in member states of this institution.

Persecution of the media has become commonplace and systematic. Extrajudicial harassment, arrests and the use of administrative fines and trumped-up criminal charges have been employed to repress journalists. The example of Vladimir Kara-Murza, who has been detained since April 2022, is clear. He was sentenced to 25 years in prison last year. Amnesty International has described the charges against Kara-Murza as politically motivated because of his anti-war views. This Assembly must be resolute in calling for his freedom and calling for an end to the persecution of anti-war protesters.

I have to say I am struck by the similarities in relation to Mr Kara-Murza and Julian Assange. Both people were imprisoned unjustly, both were left in solitary confinement. The big difference, of course, being that Julian is imprisoned in a member state of this organisation. Because, colleagues, we cannot be in favour of journalistic freedom only in some countries.

Navalny is now dead, as are Jamal Khashoggi and Daphne Caruana Galizia. The process of keeping activists and journalists like Vladimir or Julian imprisoned is itself punishment. Coincidentally, Julian marked five years in jail on the same date of 11 April that Mr Kara-Murza was put into prison two years ago.

His health is deteriorating and experts on both sides of the case agree that his conditions will get worse if he is sent to US prisons. Essentially, even without the death penalty, Julian will be buried alive. Julian's case makes it clear that it is a crime here in the West to report on war crimes. It is really important that diplomatic assurances are not misused by member states as a fig leaf to extradite prisoners to countries where there is a credible risk of torture or death.

In conclusion, I call for freedom for Kara-Murza and freedom for Julian Assange.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr Paul GAVAN.

On behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group, Mr Antonio GUTIÉRREZ LIMONES.

Mr Antonio GUTIÉRREZ LIMONES (Spain, SOC, Spokesperson for the group)*: I'm going to speak Spanish.

Many thanks for the outstanding work done by Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS, Ms Thórhildur Sunna ÆVARSDÓTTIR and Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS, rapporteurs of the three reports before us, as well as Ms Evgenia KARA-MURZA for her testimony and her courage.

Dear colleagues, today, from the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group, we would like to call out and condemn the prosecution, detention and murder of Alexei Navalny, as well as the persecution and illegal detention of Vladimir Kara-Murza.

We also condemn the situation faced by all political prisoners.

Navalny and Kara-Murza are emblematic of the fight against totalitarianism and populism of all kinds. They know, all too well, that what does not end in misery will end in tragedy. They represent all of us, and that is why we cannot remain indifferent to their plight.

That is why I would like to talk to you about the danger of indifference.

Etymologically, indifference means no difference. Elie Wiesel, the Nobel Peace Prize winner and Holocaust survivor, said that indifference is a strange and artificial place between light and darkness, between dusk and dawn, between crime and punishment, between cruelty and compassion, between good and evil.

Indeed, indifference is attractive, it draws us in, it seduces us. It is so much easier to distance ourselves from the victim, to see them from afar, so as not to have them in our lives. Because that would mean engaging with their pain, their despair. And of course, that would disrupt our daily lives. It would disrupt our work, it would disrupt our dreams, and it would disrupt our ambitions.

Wiesel also said that indifference is not a beginning, but rather an end. It is always on the side of the enemy, it always supports the aggressor, it never supports the victim. And the victim's pain is only exacerbated when they feel forgotten.

Alexei Navalny, the homeless refugees from Ukraine, the starving children of Gaza, the young women of Afghanistan, Kara-Murza, and all other political prisoners in Russia, in Belarus or in the rest of the world, the last thing that they can allow themselves to think of in the solitude of their cell, is that their struggle and their suffering might be met with indifference by their fellow human beings.

Indeed, not sharing, not engaging with their plight, with their pain, with their anguish, is tantamount to denying them their last spark of hope.

And in so doing, we would be exiling them from our personal memory and from our collective memory. When we deny them their humanity, we all also betray our own humanity and thereby deny ourselves as human beings.

The Council of Europe was born to defend the values of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. That means combating all forms of injustice.

So dear colleagues, today, by adopting these three resolutions, we not only want to achieve justice, we also want to bring a ray of hope to all of those who suffer from social injustice around the world.

Thank you for your kind attention.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr Antonio GUTIÉRREZ LIMONES.

I now give the floor to Ms Marie-Christine DALLOZ on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party.

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

Madam rapporteur, rapporteurs,

Thank you for your work in presenting these reports.

We learned of Alexei Navalny's death with dismay and sadness. In the end, his exceptional courage and tenacious determination proved insufficient in the face of the growing relentlessness of a totalitarian regime that shies away from all forms of violence.

Alexei Navalny should never have been imprisoned. His nineteen-year prison sentence had no serious basis. The accusations levelled against Alexei Navalny were each more unfounded than the last. Despite numerous official reactions condemning the verdict and calling for his immediate release, from the United Nations to the European Court of Human Rights, Alexei Navalny remained imprisoned in inhumane conditions and was eventually transferred to one of Russia's harshest penal colonies, where he died. The Russian authorities must be held responsible for this tragedy.

Vladimir Putin's regime is increasingly violent and threatening. The Russian population is its first victim. Vladimir Putin's re-election, a sham election marred by fraud, does not reflect a democratic choice.

Political opponents are ruthlessly pursued and imprisoned. Vladimir Kara-Murza, a Russian-British citizen, is currently serving a 25-year prison sentence that is totally unjustified and incompatible with his state of health. His wife, whom I salute, is in favour of an exchange of political prisoners "when human lives are at stake". I endorse this courageous stance and request.

The Russian people, who showed a courageous and very moving humanity at Alexei Navalny's funeral, unfortunately, do not seem to be in a position to oppose political repression head-on. But we must not lose hope, because, as Ilya Yashin, another political opponent sentenced to eight and a half years in prison for denouncing the invasion of Ukraine, writes, "By killing Alexei Navalny, Vladimir Putin has made his dream of a free Russia open to the world immortal. We can believe in a democratic Russia. Alexei Navalny's work will live on."

All the members of the Council of Europe will always be present in this fight for freedom and peace, because Vladimir Putin's all-out offensive against democracy is a threat to the entire European continent.

The Group of the European People's Party will, of course, vote in favour of these resolutions.

Thank you for your support.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Ms Marie-Christine DALLOZ [in French].

On behalf of the European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance, I call now Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO.

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

We need to give an honest answer to the question. Who is the Russian opposition? The answer is Vladimir Kara-Murza. Yes, he is the Russian opposition because he fought, and he continues to fight even in prison. A Russian volunteer corps, which is now fighting together with Ukrainian armed forces against Putin and his army, they are the real opposition.

So, the place of Russian opposition now is not in the restaurants of Monaco, drinking wine there, but in the forests on the border between Ukraine and Russia, fighting against Putin and his barbarians. That is the place of the real Russian opposition – real opposition. We need to help them, not to give millions of dollars to some unknown accounts people saying something at some international conferences but to buy arms and weapons and bullets for those who are really fighting. That is our aim. That is what we should do.

Please do not mess it up. That is very important. At least, the place of Russian opposition now is near the US Congress, standing there and asking, finally, to make a decision, to give money to Ukraine's armed forces, to fight, to stop this evil. That is the real place and by the way, by this resolution, our Assembly is addressing the US Congress, asking "Please, stop these endless debates, useless debates, make a decision, step in, support to protect our freedom and common values". We are looking for you now, and we do not want to hear any excuses anymore. That is very important today.

I want to end by saying to you, we really need, and I call those in Russia who say that they are against, we need a "Russian von Stauffenberg", nobody else. A Russian von Stauffenberg, nobody else. A Russian von Stauffenberg who will do their job and stop this evil and destroy this empire and kill those in Russia who are killing all of us and want to kill all of us. That is the only way. We do not have any other, unfortunately.

Just to tell you, we are now saying some names, lists. We know many names. I want to tell you that today in Ukraine, in the city of Chernihiv, where again people have been killed and whose names you've never heard. You will never hear their names. Again, women and children were killed by Russian missiles while we are debating here.

I want to ask you to pay your respect to them with a minute of silence, to those who were killed today by a Russian missile attack in the city of Chernihiv in Ukraine.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO.

Mr Ryszard PETRU, on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, is next.

Mr Ryszard PETRU (Poland, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you.

First of all, let me thank Ms Yevgenia KARA-MURZA for being with us today and for your testimony.

Let me start by saying that the death of Alexei Navalny was one of the most important events in modern Russian history. A turning point.

The Russian Federation today is a state which bans the existence of any political opposition. Today there are more over 1 000 political prisoners in Russia and 1 500 in Belarus, without counting many others, which are not formally political prisoners.

The question is, what kind of lesson can we draw from this tragic event?

Firstly, it has to be said. The Russian state bears full responsibility for killing Alexei Navalny.

Secondly, most of those responsible for participating in the persecution of Navalny are well known. These are prison staff, police officers, prosecutors and judges. All of them, I'm saying all of them, should be on the list of human rights violators, sanctioned under European human rights sanctions regime.

And thirdly, we must not forget about those who are fighting for a democratic Russia in prisons and gulags. Let me name a few of them.

Let me start, of course, with the Vladimir Kara-Murza, who received a 25 years sentence. Oleg Orlov, three years sentence. Aleksei Gorinov, seven years. Sasha Skochilenko, seven years. Ilya Yashin, nine years.

I have just mentioned five names, but there are hundreds more. We should appeal for their release, with a full list of names of political prisoners in Russia.

One cannot forget Belarus, where the regime conducts similar policy towards the opposition. Let me name just two of those fighting for a free and democratic Belarus in prisons or penal colonies. Maryia Kalesnikava, she received 11 years sentence. Ales Bialiastski, 10 years sentence.

What's important, families of those two and of many others, have not seen them for more than a year. They don't know where they are. They even don't know whether they are still alive.

Let me come back to Russia and to Mr Kara-Murza.

As it was said, he was sentenced in 2023 for 25 years in prison for criticising the Russian war against Ukraine.

But there is a list of 51 individuals responsible for this persecution. All of them, and those who will be added to that list, because this is an open list, should be subject to targeted sanctions under the Magnitsky Act.

It's important to add that Mr Kara-Murza could be included in any exchange of Russian spies held by Western states against political prisoners.

Finally, one has to remember there is a strong link between Russia's oppression against political opposition and the war with Ukraine. That's why it's so important to call for a complete support to Ukraine defenders now.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr Ryszard PETRU.

Now we are going to the next list, the speakers list starts with Ms Petra BAYR.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC): Thank you, Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS.

I remember very well, it was directly after the expulsion of Russia from the Council of Europe when we started to debate and had concerns about how Russia would handle their ban on the death penalty. And that was indeed a very interesting theoretical debate but it was a very abstract debate because the factual debate is that the death penalty and extra-judicial convictions are existing in Russia. And it is not just the death of Alexei Navalny that proves that it is that Russia never deterred to impose state murder and it was not only after the expulsion of the Council of Europe. I remember Boris Nemtsov in 2015, Anna Politkovskaya in 2016, Alexander Litvinenko in 2006, Sergei Skripal in 2018, and many, many more. We can continue to this list quite long.

And it is due to this failure to respect human rights, democracy and the rule of law, that many relatives, many wives of political prisoners, become active. Just to mention Yulia Navalnaya, Evgenia Kara-Murza, and Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, because I also consider Belarus as a political appendix of the imperial Russian regime, and many, many more. These women are forced to get politically active and they start by fighting for the survival of their beloved ones, of their husbands. And, as we know, that political prisoners are not an individual problem but a structural one, they end up as human rights defenders, as advocates for democracy, as opposition leaders sometimes.

The Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination yesterday adopted unanimously a report where I write about women human rights defenders. It will be in the Plenary here in June and we can continue this debate of wives that are politically active.

But let me end by mentioning that I recently had the chance to meet Russian opposition activists in Austria and I received a list of trustful opposition activists who are important to support, and in public particular, I would like to mention exiled journalists who play a very important role to provide information beyond these fake news that Russian people are used to receiving, and I think it is really imperative to support them. So please also ask in your countries back home, your Russian diaspora activists, how you could support them, what your contribution could be, because I think it is so important that they work on the foundation for a democratic Russia after Putin.

Thank you very much.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Ms Petra BAYR.

Next speaker is Mr Yuriy KAMELCHUK.

Mr Yuriy KAMELCHUK (Ukraine, EPP/CD): Dear President, dear colleagues, dear Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS,

Putin is a champion of human rights violations, the destruction of political competitors and the destruction of the foundations of democracy in the world. The Kremlin terrorist came to power and keeps it only by means of intimidation, bribery and terror The Moscow empire distorts history, steals cultural achievements and considers itself a great power that cannot be ignored. The Kremlin's terrorist regime has focused on its main goal: to intimidate the whole world and make everyone turn a blind eye to their crimes.

Putin steals Ukrainian children, a nuclear power plant, destroys hospitals and schools and fires dozens of cities every day. Today, the city of Chernihiv received a blow to the city centre, with 13 dead, more than 60 wounded, three children between them, six people are considered missing, but Ukraine does not give up. We do not accept white flags and territory surrenders. We fight even if there is not enough ammunition, even if there is no light. We are fighting for free and captive Ukrainians. We are fighting to return children, families, cities and villages, in order to restore justice and pledge the artificially created Moscow empire to stop and forget forever its aggressive ambitions. We must clearly understand that the so-called Russian church is another tool of the FSB, KGB for propaganda and selling of Moscow spies, and anyone who helps Russians avoid sanctions is helping Putin's army carry out the acts of terror and violence that rock the world with the Bucha.

We can win this war when all the countries all over the world show real courage and stop trade with Moscow, freeze all Russian assets and direct them to the defence of Ukraine, through the restoration of energy and air defence equipment. We demand that Russia release all prisoners, return the children and return control over the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power station. We call for the provision of air defence equipment, ammunition and aircraft to Ukraine. And only when we win, showing the power of world democracy, the power of a free Europe, we can start talking about the decolonised future of Russia and Belarus, about the independence of Ichkeria, about that decolonisation of Moldova and Georgia, about the end of the era of free people enslaved by Russia who will choose their own way of free life.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr Yuriy KAMELCHUK.

Mr Marco DREOSTO is next.

Mr Marco DREOSTO (Italy, EC/DA): Thank you President,

Colleagues,

In democracy, where the opposition is the base facts such as what happened to Alexei Navalny and the shameful treatment of all the other opponents of Vladimir Putin leave one appalled and shows how we are facing an authoritarian regime and system that absolutely must be opposed.

In the days following Alexei Navalny's death, a demonstration was organised in Italy to show the unity of politics at that dramatic moment and to denounce the faults of the Russian regime.

Proudly, my party, the League, also participated with a large delegation to emphasise our geopolitical positioning anchored in the values of the West, anchored in the values of freedom.

The changed international scenario must make us reflect with intellectual honesty.

In Ukraine with Russia's unjustifiable war of aggression, in the Middle East with Iran and its proxies such as Hamas, Hezbollah and Houti, the conflict in Israel and the Indo-Pacific, China's sights on the Taiwan Strait. This is how autocratic powers are aligning themselves by challenging the West and its freedoms.

This is precisely why it is necessary, in order to counter these regimes, to remain united and strengthen our partnerships, but above all, and my invitation is without controversy, it is necessary to avoid doing what they are doing.

I am referring, of course, to what happened yesterday in Brussels where, at an event organised by right-wing movements, the halls were barred after some left-wing mayors of various Brussels municipalities had put political pressure on them to prevent an event where journalists, intellectuals, right-wing politicians, including ministers and former heads of government wanted to gather to discuss. Do you know the reason? They did not agree with their ideas. So, to the cry of "stop the extreme right," where extreme was only the positioning of these mayors, they tried to boycott those who thought differently.

This should not happen in the European capital of Brussels. This happens in Tehran with the Ayatollahs, it happens in Moscow, and we have said it and are discussing it right now, where the police arrest and do not allow the opposition the opportunity to assemble. It happens in Beijing where you have to wave your little red book to avoid being jailed.

And it is precisely to counter these regimes that we absolutely cannot behave like them. We have to behave first of all like true democracies, debating and giving everyone a chance to be able to speak, to discuss, avoiding cordons sanitaires from the opposing political forces, which evidently sometimes think differently from us.

Only in this way can we demonstrate with facts our greatest strength.

Long live freedom, long live free speech.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Mr Claude KERN is next.

Mr Claude KERN (France, ALDE): Thank you, Mr Chairman.

Dear colleagues,

I would like to thank our three colleagues for these reports, which strongly denounce the unacceptable human rights abuses committed by the regime in power in Russia. President Vladimir Putin is not only waging a war of aggression against Ukraine, he is also waging a war against democracy. And this war is equally directed against his own people and against all democratic nations.

After the assassinations of Sergei Magnitsky and Boris Nemtsov, it was Alexei Navalny's turn to succumb to the blows of the Moscow regime last February. I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the work of our former colleague Jacques MAIRE, whose interview with Alexei Navalny you broadcast.

Despite the dangers, part of the Russian people continues to fight against oppression. Several thousand people attended Alexei Navalny's funeral, despite police surveillance and the risk of arbitrary arrest.

Vladimir Kara-Mourza is one of those arbitrarily detained in particularly harsh conditions. I welcome the presence today of his wife, who has come to bear witness to his fate. Arrested after testifying before our Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights, he was sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment for "treason" and "spreading false information about the Russian army", at the end of a sham trial behind closed doors.

In fact, his arrest is directly linked to his fight for human rights. Even though the Russian Federation is no longer a member of the Council of Europe, our Organisation has a duty to support Kara-Mourza. The adoption of the draft resolutions before us today will demonstrate our solidarity with Vladimir Kara-Mourza, which is an important message, even if it will obviously not be enough.

That's why I'm calling for the mobilisation of our Organisation's member states to secure his release. I also hope that "Magnitsky"-type sanctions can be implemented against the prison officials, prosecutors and judges who took part in the prosecution of him.

Finally, I'd like to spare a thought for the many other political prisoners in Russia, whose numbers are unfortunately growing all the time. According to the Russian NGO OVD-Info, almost 20 000 people were subjected to administrative detention for their anti-war stance between 24 February 2022 and 17 December 2023.

Let's not forget them.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr Claude KERN.

Mr Jeremy CORBYN is next.

You have the floor.

Mr Jeremy CORBYN (United Kingdom, SOC): Thank you, Mr President.

I thank those that have drafted the very important reports that we've had before us today as we mourn the deaths that have happened in Russia and we mourn those that have been placed in prison and the very powerful message that we heard this afternoon from Ms Yevgenia KARA-MURZA.

This is a poignant debate because when a war takes place, as there is a terrible war going on at the moment in Ukraine, three things happen. Truth is hidden, thousands lose their lives, and the liberties of people in all countries are put at risk as a result of this.

I wanted to raise the issues of the numbers of people in Russia who are in prison, who are anti-war activists. I count myself as part of a big anti-war movement in my own country and in all around the world.

We have to stand up for the right of people in all societies to dissent from what their governments are doing however difficult it might be for them.

I want to draw attention to one particular prisoner in Russia at the moment, Boris Kagarlitsky. Boris Kagarlitsky is almost unique in the sense that he's been arrested and imprisoned on three separate occasions.

Once during the period of the Soviet Union when he was arrested and imprisoned for being an anti-Soviet activist. Secondly, when he was arrested and imprisoned when Boris Yeltsin was prime minister, because he opposed the economic chaos that happened at the time of the end of the Soviet Union. And thirdly, he was

arrested and imprisoned very recently, in 2023, because of his opposition to the war in Ukraine. He's now been placed in a penal colony for five years, and banned for two years after that from taking part in any kind of social media activities.

He and hundreds of others who stood up against the war in Ukraine, as have other people in other parts of the world, deserve our recognition and deserve our support.

Amnesty International said of his verdict: "This verdict is a blatant abuse of vague anti-terrorist legislation weaponised to suppress dissent and punish a government critic." They are absolutely right on that.

As others have said, we should be a bit more careful and sometimes a bit more self-critical.

In my own country, Julian Assange has now had five years in a maximum security prison, who's convicted of nothing in Britain that would merit that kind of prison sentence. His crime is telling the truth to the rest of the world.

And also, very recently, last weekend, two people who themselves are critical of the war in Gaza were prevented from speaking in Germany. That's Yanis Varoufakis and Dr Abu-Sittah.

We have to stand up equally and powerfully for human rights and the freedom of speech wherever it takes us, however uncomfortable those arguments sometimes are.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr Jeremy CORBYN.

Ms Natalia DAVIDOVICI is next.

Ms Natalia DAVIDOVICI (Republic of Moldova, EPP/CD): Dear colleagues,

Persecution based on political criteria in Russia is becoming really widespread. The youngest political prisoner is 14 years old. The oldest is 88. We see that people are persecuted for putting flowers in memory of Alexei Navalny, and any speech against the war in Ukraine is severely punished.

Vladimir Kara-Murza is serving 25 years in a strict regime prison for criticising Russia's war against Ukraine. This is the longest prison term ever imposed on someone who had criticised Putin. Before this, the Russian regime tried to kill him twice. The repressive system uses all means to make the detention of political prisoners unbearable, both physically and mentally.

A Moscow municipal deputy Alexei Gorinov became the first person to be convicted for anti-war statements under the charges of so-called fakes about the Russian army. The court sentenced him to seven years in prison. Gorinov is missing part of a lung and he does not receive the necessary care in detention.

The 64-year-old engineer Igor Baryshnikov was sentenced to seven and a half years in a penal colony for his post about the killing of civilians in Bucha. even though he has cancer. He was denied tumour surgery and his condition became critical. Baryshnikov was not even allowed to attend his mother's funeral.

Artist Sasha Skochilenko was sent to prison for changing price tags in the store to pieces of paper with information about the Russian army's crimes in Ukraine. Her chronic health problems worsened in prison.

Journalist Maria Ponomarenko was sentenced to six years in a penal colony for a post about Russia's bomb attack on the drama theatre in Mariupol where hundreds of people were killed. The journalist reports regular mistreatment in the colony, sudden searches and forced undressing, before seeing organised bullying as a convict.

Ten days ago Russian volunteer Alexander Demidenko, who helped Ukrainian refugees return to their homeland, died in a pre-trial detention centre. His son said that his father complained about being tortured. According to him, he was tied to a battery and shot under his feet.

The egregious cases I have listed are only the tip of the iceberg of the Russian repressive machine. Against this background, it is alarming that in Europe the voices of those who say these are not our problems and this is not our war are becoming louder and louder.

We must realise that Putin is not just at war with Ukraine or with his opposition. Putin is trying to destroy what we call European values, which are the foundation on which this organisation was built. and if he is not stopped now, one day he will destroy both our values and our world.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Natalia.

Ms Nadejda IORDANOVA is next.

Ms Nadejda IORDANOVA (Bulgaria, NR): Thank you, Mister President.

Dear colleagues,

Today we are discussing three resolutions that are dealing with different aspects of one monstrosity threatening our home of freedom, democracy and rule of law: Putin's totalitarian regime and its war on democracy.

I would like to thank the rapporteurs for their excellent work. Thank you.

I will support all three resolutions.

The murder of Alexei Navalny on behalf of Putin's regime is yet another shocking proof of its criminal character. The dictator in the Kremlin could not forgive his brightest political challenger for revealing precisely how corrupt Russia's ruling elite is.

The last months of Navalny's life coincided with the run-up to a farcical presidential campaign and the illegitimate election win for Putin. Navalny was deliberately sent to a colony, infamous for the torture exerted upon detainees, where he died.

It is our democratic duty to persistently insist that all circumstances behind Navalny's murder should be thoroughly investigated and the guilty should be brought to justice .

Our democratic countries should do the utmost of their abilities to prevent another political murder executed by Putin's regime. Data provided by human rights organisations estimates that between 600 and 1 000 political prisoners are currently detained in Russia. Amongst them, the opposition politician and Vaclav Havel Prize winner Vladimir Kara-Murza serves the longest sentence given to a Kremlin opponent since the disbandment of the Soviet Union.

We demand his immediate release on humanitarian grounds in light of his deteriorating health.

We should however admit that our voices against Putin's regime, as strong as they may be, are not enough. We should widen and further strengthen the sanctions against Russia and all those responsible for persecuting all and any opposition.

I urge all to reinforce the tools available to our governments in order to fulfil their responsibility to effectively implement and monitor sanctions, including by introducing strict penalties for their evasion.

We should also support the dialogue with the Russian and Belarusian political anti-war movement and other democratic forces.

The scenes of huge crowds chanting Navalny's name at his funeral, together with the slogans "Putin murderer", are yet another sign that Russia's civil society has not been fully destroyed, and we should support it.

And the courageous words of Mrs KARA-MURZA today give us another hope.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Ms Nadejda IORDANOVA.

Ms Olena KHOMENKO is next.

Ms Olena KHOMENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA): Fellow colleagues,

First and foremost I wish to commend the commitment and the approach taken by the rapporteurs. Their priority set a clear path forward focusing on the tangible steps needed to address and counteract the Russian totalitarian regime.

I also want to express the words of support to Ms Yevgenia KARA-MURZA for bravely continuing to advocate for this cause her husband is committed to.

However, it is critical to speak directly about the role of the Russian anti-war movement. While we recognise the challenges faced by those within Russia opposing the war, it is paramount that their movement reflects the gravity of the situation in Ukraine. The stark reality is that the movement has not yet met the expectations in terms of tangible opposition to the regime.

When a regime launches such an atrocious war, the proportional response should not only be vocal dissent, but active advocacy for the defence of those under attack.

This brings us to a fundamental point. The real change in Russia may happen when we help Ukraine, when you help Ukraine to prevail. Supporting Ukraine is not merely an act of solidarity, it is a strategic necessity that underpins the possibility of a substantial change within Russia itself.

The Ukrainian people have every right to be doubtful of a movement that lacks decisive actions. Therefore we commend the calls on the United States of America to ensure that the Senate Foreign Aid Bill, which includes vital military aid for Ukraine, is put to a vote without any further delay.

This action is crucial. We urge not only the United States, but all our international partners to authorise and expedite the delivery of the necessary military aid to Ukraine as soon as possible.

Moreover, we must strengthen our approach to undermining the Russian war machine through more robust sanctions.

The anti-war movement within Russia needs to be vocal and unequivocal about this necessity. It is essential that this movement aligns its voice with international efforts to bring this war to an end by significantly reducing the Russian state's capacity to sustain its military aggression.

In conclusion, our expectations are clear. We need a Russian anti-war movement that is vocal, effective and aligned with the international community's efforts to support Ukraine.

Support for Ukraine shall be unwavering, and our resolve to see justice and peace restored shall remain firm.

Thank you, and *Slava Ukraini*!

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Olena.

Mr Lukas SAVICKAS is next.

Mr Lukas SAVICKAS (Lithuania, SOC): Thank you, dear President, dear colleagues.

I want to thank all three rapporteurs for the excellent work done and reports prepared, and especially Evgenia KARA-MURZA for her address to this Assembly.

The recent demise of Alexei Navalny has sparked global outrage and renewed the discussions about the state of democracy in Russia and Vladimir Putin's regime. And while Navalny is dead, what I believe to be result of poisoning orchestrated by the Kremlin, once again, serves as a stark reminder of the dangerous threats posed by those who dare to challenge authoritarian regimes.

In the wake of this strategy, there is an urgent need to address the growing threats posed by Putin's regime to democracy both within Russia and abroad.

On 16 February, Alexei Navalny died in a Siberian maximum security prison camp, where he was serving an illegal and unjustified prison sentence. And for the past two decades, people who opposed Vladimir Putin in Russia were killed and usually with the involvement of the Russian secret service.

Alexei Navalny's death is another sign of the systemic repression in Russia. And under Putin, Russia has become a de facto dictatorship. It has not only suppressed the democratic opposition in Russia but it also did not respect the democratic choices of neighbouring countries and the right of their people's self-determination.

And urgent and co-ordinated measures are actually needed to counter this regime of Putin and his war on democracies and their values. Ukraine must be helped immediately to obtain weapons and ammunition. It needs to effectively defend itself, to repel the aggressor.

There should be also an independent investigation into the death of Alexei Navalny by an International Commission of Inquiry. All states should ensure that Russia is held accountable for the systemic torture suffered not just by Navalny but thousands of other prisoners in Russia.

And the death of Navalny serves as a tragic reminder of the high stakes involved in challenging authoritarian rules. And as we mourn his loss, we must also renew our commitment to defending democracy and human rights in a phase of this totalitarian regime. A regime that is recognised as illegitimate and whose aim is to wage war against democracies and redraw global order. And by standing together in the face of those challenges, we can work together to the future that democracy prevails over tyranny.

I will support all three reports and I urge you to do the same.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Lukas.

Ms Yelyzaveta YASKO is next.

Ms Yelyzaveta YASKO (Ukraine, EPP/CD): Dear colleagues,

Well, thinking what I want to say during this debate, I decided to look at my phone and to look through my messages, emails history with Vladimir Kara-Murza. We used to have some communication by emails, exchanging the views of what was happening in the end of 2021.

In October 2021, when Mikheil Saakashvili was politically arrested in Georgia. And later when there was a lot of tensions on upcoming Russian aggression against Ukraine.

And Vladimir Kara-Murza writes to me. He says that he really hopes that the April session in the Council of Europe would be fruitful, he shares with me some motions for future resolutions, and he says that he really wishes that the situation in Georgia would be resolved soon. And he wishes strength, and says that everything is going to be alright.

Vladimir Kara-Murza is the person that we can all call idealist, human rights defender, someone who is not afraid.

And I feel very, very bad when, from one session to another, we continued talking and talking. We have different debates, and that's great, but the time goes on and the situation with pro-Russian influence in many countries and those who stand up against Russia unfortunately is not getting any better.

Since that time, we have people more imprisoned, more in jail, those who stand up against the Kremlin regime. And the regime is never about democracy. That regime is about violence and keeping any will of freedom dead. This is what Russia is currently implementing.

And Russia is waiting that we will be weak and that we will be talking. And I want to quote our President Zelenskyy who once said "don't ask when the war in Ukraine will be over. Please, ask why we didn't do enough to stop this full-scale invasion and aggression against Ukraine".

Dear colleagues, we may complain that we don't have enough tools, but we have some. And it's great that in the report we are talking about sanctions, about sanctions not only as Kara-Murza personal list sanctions, but also sanctions that can really limit the military production inside Russia. We're talking about also different other tools. But I want to address this Assembly, please, let's call every everyone, every state to try to facilitate humanitarian transfers of such political prisoners as Vladimir Kara-Murza, as Mikheil Saakashvili, who is actually in Georgia, not in Russia, but somehow it's not happening, the Georgian government is not releasing him, because of Russian influence.

Let's do everything possible that this freedom of idealists is protected.

This is our role and that's why we should remember and do everything possible that these tools will work.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Ms Yelyzaveta YASKO.

Mr Christophe CHAILLOU is next.

Mr Christophe CHAILLOU (France, SOC): Mr Chairman,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me first of all to congratulate the rapporteurs on the quality of their work, and of course to extend a special greeting to you, dear Ms KARA-MURZA, for your particularly moving testimony, which I believe deeply affected us all.

As has already been said, the situation of your husband, Vladimir Kara-Murza, is particularly critical. Arrested in Moscow in April 2022 and sentenced to 25 years in prison for treason, he is now imprisoned in Siberia in solitary confinement. His health is extremely fragile.

You are here with us today to bear witness to the terrible repression in your country, Russia. Once again, I would like to thank you for your commitment and salute your courage, in such a particular context where your husband is risking his life to defend an ideal – our shared ideal – of human rights, freedom of expression and democracy.

In the wake of Alexei Navalny's death, for which the Russian state bears full responsibility, persecution and torture of anti-war activists and human rights defenders are on the increase.

As the Russian Federation no longer belongs to our organisation, we can only hope that an independent and transparent international inquiry will be carried out to establish the whole truth about Alexei Navalny's death.

The Council of Europe must also continue to actively support human rights defenders in Russia. It must not abandon the Russian people, who are today facing a total challenge to human rights and the fundamental principles of the rule of law.

The Russian population is the first victim of the actions of Vladimir Putin's regime, but as we know, our democracies are also prime targets. The Russian Federation is currently conducting a vast disinformation campaign to justify its war of aggression against Ukraine. It seizes every opportunity: the way in which the Islamic State attack in Moscow was handled, for example, is a flagrant example.

Russian propaganda is constantly disseminating false information not only in Russia, but throughout Europe. Russia Today is a veritable Russian propaganda office, which remains accessible on the internet despite the fact that several countries, including my own, France, have banned it from broadcasting on national channels. In the face of this, it seems essential to support independent Russian media outlets, just as it is necessary to implement the resolution we adopted last January calling for support for Belarusian democratic forces in exile.

I shall therefore vote unreservedly in favor of the three draft resolutions before us, commending the work of the rapporteurs and hoping that the Council of Europe can continue to promote initiatives to support civil society in Russia and Belarus, for all those who, like all of us, are deeply attached to the principles and values that we promote within our institutions and within the Council of Europe.

Thank you for your support.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr Christophe CHAILLOU.

Mr Levan BEZHASHVILI is next.

Mr Levan BEZHASHVILI (Georgia, EPP/CD): Thank you, President,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Navalny's death is a wake-up call for the international community. It underscores the urgent need to confront authoritarian regimes and their attacks on democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

Unfortunately, we spoke about Navalny's case in the past. What do we do now to prevent the same from happening to Kara-Murza, Saakachvili and other political prisoners?

Democracy is under threat within our borders. We must not turn a blind eye to alarming democracy backsliding in Georgia. The third President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, a symbol of Western democratic reforms, is in prison for daring to challenge the oligarchy regime. His political imprisonment highlights that the authoritarian regimes will not stop silencing opponents to stay in power. The fact that judges and the former prosecutor general involved in Saakashvili's case have been sanctioned by the United States shows the erosion of judicial independence and the rule of law in Georgia.

No one holds the European flag as proudly as Mr Kara-Murza does in Putin's jail. No one holds the European flag as proudly as young Georgians do today in the streets of Tbilisi while defending Georgia's European future and fighting against Russian law and foreign agents. No one holds the European flag as proudly as Mikheil Saakashvili does in the prison of the Russian oligarch. No one holds the European flag as proudly as Ukrainians when heroically defending democracy and sacrificing their lives on the battlefield.

Let us embrace the European flag with equal courage – symbolising democracy, justice and resistance against oppressive regimes. We need more decisive actions in addition to the resolution. Together we must work towards a world free from political prisoners and do everything in our power to end the political imprisonment of Mr Kara-Murza and third President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Levan.

Mr Stéphane BERGERON is next.

Mr Stéphane BERGERON (Canada): Thank you, Mister Chairman.

Dear colleagues,

Dear Ms KARA-MOURZA,

A few years ago, before his courageous return to Russia, Alexei Navalny told us that if the Russian state killed him, it would show that the movement he represented was extremely strong.

At a time when Vladimir Putin's autocratic regime is steadily hardening and stifling all forms of opposition in the country, I confess I sometimes find it hard to be convinced by this optimistic interpretation.

On 16 February 2024, Mr. Alexei Navalny died in prison in suspicious circumstances, for daring to speak out in favor of Russian democracy.

Now we're faced with the very real prospect of Vladimir Kara-Mourza suffering the same fate. His crime? Denouncing Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

In Belarus, the situation is essentially the same. Last 25 February 2024, parliamentary elections - which had no legitimacy whatsoever - were held there. And we still can't confirm whether Siarhei Tsikhanouski, the husband of Belarus's legitimate president, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, is still alive.

There is no remedy for the rise of totalitarianism in Russia and Belarus. So what should we do?

The resolution on the democratic future of Belarus, which this Assembly unanimously adopted in January, contains some important measures.

I hope that all Council of Europe member states, as well as observer states like Canada, will fully implement them.

In the case of Mr Kara-Mourza and all those like him who are imprisoned in Russia and Belarus, we have to fall back on one of the only real tools at our disposal: sanctions.

Rapporteur Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS has provided us with a list of 45 people responsible for the arrest, prosecution and imprisonment of Mr Kara-Mourza.

I understand that imposing sanctions takes time and resources, but it is distressing to note that in many cases, sanctions are simply wishful thinking.

With this in mind, it's disappointing to see, for example, that more than two dozen names on the rapporteur's list are still missing from Canadian lists of sanctioned individuals. Why is this?

Perhaps there are good reasons why these people are still not sanctioned. However, it is my duty as a parliamentarian to ask questions, and the government, for its part, must provide answers.

Human lives are at stake here.

Thank you very much.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Stéphane.

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

I now first call Mr KROSS to reply. You have 3 minutes.

Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS (Estonia, ALDE, Rapporteur): Thank you, Chair, President,

Since all of the colleagues seemed to wholeheartedly agree with my report and there were also no amendments to it, I just want to thank the Secretariat and every everyone for the support.

Thank you, Evgenia, for being with us in this process and we try to be of support to you. And I hope that we pass this resolution unanimously.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister KROSS.

Now I call Ms Thórhildur Sunna ÆVARSDÓTTIR to reply.

You have 3 minutes.

Ms Thórhildur Sunna ÆVARSDÓTTIR (Iceland, SOC, Rapporteur): Thank you, Mister Chair.

Let me begin by thanking Evgenia for her exceptional and truly moving address.

Thank you for reminding us that the resistance against Putin's regime and the anti-war movement in Russia is far from dead, and let us not buy onto the Kremlin's propaganda of unilateral support for this criminal dictator and his work crimes.

As you stated, Evgenia, the people fighting against Putin's regime are the alternative, and let us lift them up and raise their voices.

Colleagues, I know that my friends in Belarus don't like to be equated with Russia, and I fully understand why.

These are different countries with different struggles, and I would have preferred to make a separate report on Belarus, on the violent repression there against anti-war protesters. Because there are more than 1 600 people who have been detained due to their anti-war stance in Belarus. They face horrendous conditions, they are held in incommunicado detention, they are tortured, and they even die in prison due to maltreatment and lack of medical care.

There have been harsh and violent crackdowns on anti-war assemblies, and prosecutions under terrorism charges against individuals sharing information about military equipment or sabotaging it. In the draft resolution, the Assembly expresses its solidarity with the many Russians and Belarusians who speak out against the war of aggression.

And the draft resolution also calls on the Russian Federation and Belarus to abide by its international legal obligations and bring their repression on anti-war protesters to an end.

And finally, the draft resolution calls on member states and observer states to do more to support the Russian and Belarusian anti-war movements by providing more recognition and practical assistance to the anti-war movement, by pursuing the release of prisoners who have been detained for their anti-war views.

We call for the intensifying of efforts to hold the Russian Federation and Belarus to account at the United Nations, and ask that member states facilitate the entry and stay of Russians and Belarusians with an anti-war stance who are trying to flee their oppressive regimes, as well as calling for them, our member states, to introduce and strengthen the restrictive measures against individuals involved in the brutal repression in both countries.

In conclusion, I would like to thank all of my colleagues for their proactive and good cooperation throughout the making of this report, especially the Secretariat, for their excellent work and support, as well as the numerous anti-war movements that I met with and courageous opposition organisations that I've met with during the preparation of this report. This report is in their name, it is to honour them and of course in particular to honour our good friend Vladimir Kara-Murza.

May he be free as soon as possible.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Ms Thórhildur Sunna ÆVARSDÓTTIR.

I now give the floor to Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS, to reply.

You have 3 minutes.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD, Rapporteur): Thank you, Chairman.

I would like to start going outside of my report and to turn to Ms Evgenia KARA-MURZA, simply using the Russian shape of your grace and your great name.

So I would like to say that we started the session, President, if you remember, you asked me to start the session as the longest serving member.

All my five minutes I used to warn you and to find a way how to liberate Kara-Murza. That was my first statement in January when you were not here. But all our audience was listening to the terrible shape, the terrible Joseph Stalin dictatorship your husband is there now suffering.

We asked our British colleagues to try to say, try to investigate what's possible to do a swap. To bring the intelligent man who dedicated all his life to the world of books and ideas, a fragile man, intellectual man, from this hell of Joseph Stalin-like prison. Of course, the others should be in line, but at least Kara-Murza, he spent with us years and years shaping all possible human rights cases. Not only his case, but other cases. That is not only the Russian cases, but other cases in the world.

And I want to say to dear friends who just mentioned that we are focusing only on Russian, let's say, or Belarusian prisoners, I have the list of all our reports and statements in the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights about Assange.

You put the button I see on the website: Assange, Galizia, Snowden, Kavala, imprisonments. Everything done by us in the most solid and scrupulous way.

But now we are reacting to the country who is occupying territories and is equipping those territories with Joseph Stalin-like repression. They are not occupying only Ukraine, but dictatorship is installing, Russian dictatorship, is installing their concentration camps, imprisonment, detentions. That is the expansion of the Russian Empire, the expansion of Joseph Stalin-like prison.

I would like to say that we don't need peace, the slogan of peace that is so nice. It was used massively by Joseph Stalin, by the KGB headquarters in Switzerland and other places, миру мир. Whoever knows the Russian language was a Joseph Stalin-type slogan. It was actually a poster in front of my apartment in Kaunas, миру мир. Peace for the world.

We don't need this false propaganda, we need resilience, resilience of our democratic world from this terrible attack of non-democratic world led by Putin.

In this case, I think we need today simply to stand up, if you allow me. After we stood up for Ukrainians who was very proper way, if you allow me just to stand up for the memory of Alexei Navalny, I would like to say and remember his brave life, when he came back knowing that he probably will be killed.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): I do not want to deny your proposal.

I just want to remind the Assembly that we did this for Aelxei Navalny in Paris during our political... [The Chair is interrupted by Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS]

Of course, I will accept this since it is a very important proposal. Thank you so much.

Thank you, dear colleagues.

I now would like to call Lord Richard KEEN, the Chairperson of the Committee, to take the floor.

Lord KEEN.

Lord Richard KEEN (United Kingdom, EC/DA, Chairperson of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights): Mister President, dear colleagues,

We have just jointly debated three reports presented by the Committee that I have the honour to chair. And I would like to express my thanks, first of all, to each of the rapporteurs for the work they have done and to the Secretariat.

To debate these three reports together makes eminent sense because they are linked together, as they all relate to the nature of the Putin regime, its aggression and the need to resist its further expansion and attacks on democracy.

The brutal death of Alexei Navalny reinforces the ruthless disregard that Putin and the present Russian regime is prepared to exhibit to the rule of law, to human rights, to democracy and to peace in Europe. And we in Europe will pay a very heavy price in the future if today we fail to take up the demanding but less ominous burden of ensuring that Russia cannot claim victory in its assault on human rights, on democracy and in its war of aggression in Ukraine.

And we must be prepared to commit to the task of ensuring that we can convincingly meet not only Russia's aggression but the conventional forces of Russia if aligned to pursue that aggression. I do fear that there are still major powers in Europe that appear more interested in defending their domestic economy rather than defending Ukraine, and ultimately, peace in Europe.

We tolerate a sanctions regime on Russia that is self-evidently weak and relatively ineffective. We watch while Russia moves its economy onto a war footing. We promise a great deal to Ukraine in the form of aid and of munitions but deliver less.

Colleagues, if Vladimir Putin finds himself with victory in Ukraine and the largest conventional forces on the continent of Europe, do we really believe that, like Lucius Cincinnatus, he will give up his weapons and return to the plough? I think that is highly unlikely. We must wake up to the present reality before we sleepwalk into a nightmare and the brutal death of Alexei Navalny is further evidence of what may lie ahead if we do not do so.

I commend each of these three resolutions to the Assembly. They address to some extent what we can do but recognise that there is more that we must do. And as we proceed further we should bear in mind the burden that lies on others, Mr Navalny's family, the people of Ukraine, if we allow this aggression to continue without interruption and without challenge.

Thank you.

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

Mr Alain CADEC (France, EPP/CD): *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in French.*

Ms Olimpia Tamara GIRÓN HERNÁNDEZ (Mexico): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

The death of Alexei Navalny during his stay in a maximum-security prison in a remote part of the Russian Federation leaves many questions about the conditions under which the unfortunate event occurred.

Navalny was in the prime of his life. His fight against corruption in his country made him a symbol of resistance and therefore an opponent of the regime.

Despite his poisoning in 2020 and his admirable recovery, he continued his anti-corruption fight with greater commitment and his figure became a symbol of resistance.

The European Court of Human Rights declared that his arrests in 2012 and 2014 were politically motivated and violated his human rights, a ruling that did not please Moscow as questionable.

Today the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe is committed to approving a resolution on the case, however, it must be considered that it is still working on presumptions because although there are some issues on which there are already pronouncements, these are not firm enough to proceed. how it's required.

An extremely effective position should be the independent and transparent investigation in the international framework to resolve the case of the death of the opposition leader, under the auspices of the UN.

We also hope that the political persecution to which Navalny's relatives, his associates and followers are subject, both in Russia and abroad, will stop.

We are sure that the Council of Europe will adopt the best decision it considers keeping the memory of Alexei Navalny alive and continue with the relevant investigations, the adoption of stricter sanctions and reach a definitive conclusion.

Ms Ingjerd Schie SCHOU (Norway, EPP/CD): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

President,

I take the floor with a heavy heart. Alexei Navalny has been on our agenda numerous times since the poisoning in 2020.

Vladimir Kara-Murza will return on our agenda.

Until he is released.

I cannot bear to think about him suffering the same fate as Mr Navalny.

The news of Mr Navalny’s death pained me.

That people lose their lives because they are opposed to the political leadership in my neighboring country is heart wrenching.

It takes great courage to stand up to Putin’s regime. Courage that Alexei Navalny had.

Courage that Vladimir Kara-Murza has.

President,

Alexei Navalny will be remembered for his diligence and resilience, and his courage.

In the days after his death people courageously took to the streets in mourning.

This gave me a glimmer of hope.

Hope that there are people of courage who dare to stand up against the regime.

Hope that there are people willing to take risks in a society characterized by more and more control, less and less freedom.

President,

Alexei Navalny and Vladimir Kara-Murza are familiar names.

They are important symbols of the fight against repression, tyranny and authoritarianism.

But they are not alone.

There are so many names that are unknown to us. Victims of arbitrary arrest, arrests on fabricated charges.

Some have voiced their dissenting opinions. Others were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The number of people in Russia being arrested for their political views is increasing.

Amnesty International recently published the report “Russia: You will be arrested anyway”.

The arrests of numerous journalists, independent media representatives and monitors of assemblies are described.

The injustice they suffer is deplorable.

President,

Russia is no longer a member of our organization.

But Russia is a part of Europe.

We cannot give up.

We must do what we can to support political opposition and independent media in Russia.

We must continue to debate the developments in our hemicycle.

I can only hope that the Russian regime is paying attention, being receptive to our message.

Even if they are not, we must continue to speak up.

To send a strong message of recognition of the courage of the many imprisoned, of those who dare speak up.

Hopefully they can be encouraged to keep working, to keep fighting – to survive.

Vladimir Kara-Murza and his compatriots must be released.

Before it is too late.

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

Dear colleagues,

There is no doubt – assassination of Alexei Navalny is at the hands of putin and his dictatorship. It is another stark reminder that putin does not care who will live and who will die. He is capable of everything to pursue his revanchist aspirations.

Ukraine knows this clearly. We know this because Russia is on our land, killing and torturing thousands of Ukrainians, just as it tortures thousands of political prisoners who disagree with Putin's totalitarian regime in Russia.

That is why the whole world must finally understand this, so that you – in Brussels, Paris or Berlin – do not have to experience it.

The overthrow of Putin's regime directly depends on Ukraine's victory in this terrible war.

Everyone can and MUST help make this happen.

Every Ukrainian delegate here is using every opportunity to appeal – protect Ukrainian skies. 25 Petriots systems and Russia will no longer have control over our skies. Our children in Kharkiv, Odesa, Kyiv and other cities will sleep peacefully.

Another thing is the political isolation of russia in the international arena – non-recognition of Putin as a legitimate president, downgrading of diplomatic relations. The aggressor must be isolated from civilization. Russia should become a rogue state.

The practice of the Council of Europe and several other organizations should set an example for others. Russia's representation in international organizations and their governing bodies must be suspended until Russia respects the UN Charter.

Sanctions are another crucial factor. Putin and his accomplices have to feel the price of their aggression. The sanction pressure has to continue with new strength.

And here I would like to specifically thank Mr Kross for your report on Sanctions against persons on the "Kara-Murza list". I ask all of you who have not yet done so to pass a law on targeted sanctions like the Magnitsky Act. Those who go unpunished in their countries - in particular for the ill-treatment of Kara Murza and the death of Mr. Navalny – must be held accountable. This is a matter of our future European justice system.

I urge everyone to work to deprive Putin of the tools of his aggression. This creature does not value any life. Only united can we stop him. I urge you to support today's resolutions as another manifestation of our position. The position of the democratic world.

Thank you.

Ms Derya TÜRK-NACHBAUR (Germany, SOC): *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in German.*

Mr David WELLS (Canada): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Colleagues,

Last June, the Canadian Senate and House of Commons unanimously supported motions to bestow the title of “honorary Canadian citizen” on Vladimir Kara-Murza, and call for his immediate release.

Mr. Kara-Murza was a familiar face in Canada, including as a witness at the Senate Foreign Affairs committee. He was forthcoming, clear and great value to our study.

He urged Canada to adopt the Magnitsky Act.

Then he pushed us to use it.

It was a privilege to be here October 2022, when his wife, Evgenia, accepted the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize on his behalf.

Despite the prospect of decades in prison on absurd charges of treason, Vladimir defiantly looked forward to the day

when a peaceful, democratic, and Putin-free Russia returns to this Assembly and this Council, and when we can finally start building that whole, free and peaceful Europe we all want to see.

That day has become harder to imagine.

Putin has won another farcical election.

And tragically, we’ve lost Alexei Navalny – another leading voice for Russian democracy.

Given that Mr. Navalny died in custody – like Sergei Magnitsky before him – Rapporteur Kross is right: we must act urgently to punish those responsible for Mr. Kara-Murza’s imprisonment.

Fortunately, as Rapporteur Kross highlights in his report, the perpetrators are well known.

Using a list of 45 individuals provided by Bill Browder, the Head of the Global Magnitsky Justice Campaign, Rapporteur Kross and the secretariat did their due diligence.

He “cross-referenced the information provided in the ‘Kara-Murza list’ with information available in the public domain, via open sources, in particular some court decisions, which are still publicly available.”

Rapporteur Kross found a “strong case” to sanction all on the list and strong evidence that 41 of 45 “were directly involved in the unlawful arrest, prosecution and conviction of [Mr.] Kara-Murza.”

I thank him and the secretariat for their work.

In Canada, we impose autonomous sanctions through regulations under two laws: the Justice for Victims of Corrupt Foreign Officials Act – that is, our Magnitsky Act – and the Special Economic Measures Act.

Not only must our officials ensure they’re targeting the correct individual, but they also must ensure that that individual meets the criteria in our legislation.

Nonetheless, I was still surprised to find only 19 of the 45 names on the “Kara-Murza list” in our sanctions regulations.

And I assure you, I will look into this further. Thank you.

Mr Gusty GRAAS (Luxembourg, ALDE): *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in French.*

Vote: Urgent procedure debate: "Alexei Navalny's death and the need to counter Vladimir Putin's totalitarian regime and its war on democracy" / Urgent procedure debate: "The arbitrary detention of Vladimir Kara-Murza and the systematic persecution of anti-war protesters in the Russian Federation and Belarus" / Sanctions against persons on the "Kara-Murza list"

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Lord Richard KEEN.

The Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights has presented a draft Resolution on “Alexei Navalny's death and the need to counter Vladimir Putin's totalitarian regime and its war on democracy”, (Document 15966) to which 13 amendments have been tabled.

They will be taken in the order in which they appear in the Compendium. I remind you that speeches on amendments are limited to 30 seconds.

I understand that the Chairperson of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights wishes to propose to the Assembly that Amendments 3, 9, 4, 11, 12, 2, 7, 5 and 8 to the draft Resolution, which were unanimously approved by the Committee, should be declared as agreed by the Assembly.

Is that so Lord KEEN?

Lord Richard KEEN (United Kingdom, EC/DA, Chairperson of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights): That is the case, Mister President.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Lord KEEN.

Does anyone object?

As there is no objection, I declare that amendment 3, 9, 4, 11, 12, 2, 7, 5 and 8 to the draft Resolution have been agreed.

I call Mr Sergiy VLASENKO to support Amendment 1 now. You have 30 seconds.

Mr Sergiy VLASENKO (Ukraine, EPP/CD): Thank you, Mister President, I would like to say that this Amendment was also supported unanimously by the Committee, the only discussion was whether it should stay before the first paragraph or after the first paragraph, but the Amendment as amended was supported by the Committee unanimously.

The Committee decided that the Amendment should stand after paragraph 1, as a mover of the Amendment I agree with that, so I will kindly ask the the Assembly to support it, as it was done in the Committee meeting.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Sergiy.

I have been informed that Lord Richard KEEN on behalf of the Committee that he wishes to propose an oral sub-amendment to Amendment 1, as follows:

Replace the words “before paragraph 1” with the following words: “after paragraph 1”.

In my opinion, the oral sub-amendment is in order under our rules.

However, do 10 or more members object to the oral sub-amendment being debated?

Fewer or maybe none than 10 members object to the oral sub-amendment being debated therefore I call Lord KEEN to support his oral sub-amendment in 30 seconds.

Lord Richard KEEN (United Kingdom, EC/DA, Chairperson of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights): Thank you, Mister President.

And the oral amendment has been set out and was agreed. There is only one further additional matter. As it happens, the Committee decided unanimously that we should spell "Transnistria" correctly.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Does anyone wish to speak against the oral sub-amendment?

OK. So, I will put now the oral sub-amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

It is adopted unanimously.

We will now consider the main Amendment [as sub-amended].

Does anyone wish to speak against the Amendment [as sub-amended]?

So, I shall now put Amendment 1 [as sub-amended] to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

It is accepted unanimously.

I call Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO to support Amendment 10. You have 30 seconds.

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

This Amendment is the exact text from the previous resolution which we already discussed and it is about those who are helping people such as Alexei Navalny and others who are against Putin's regime – those lawyers – and we decided that it is necessary to include it also here.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): I have been informed that Lord Richard KEEN on behalf of the Committee wishes to propose an oral sub amendment to Amendment 10, as follows:

At the end of the first sentence, replace the words "were arrested in absentia" with the following words "were subject to an arrest warrant" and delete the final sentence.

In my opinion, the oral sub amendment is in order under our rules. However, do ten or more members object to the oral sub amendment being debated?

Since no one is objecting to the oral sub amendment being debated, therefore, I call now Lord Richard KEEN to support his oral sub amendment within 30 seconds.

Lord Richard KEEN (United Kingdom, EC/DA, Chairperson of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights): Thank you, Mr President.

The oral sub-amendment was approved unanimously by the Committee, and I accordingly move.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Does anyone wish to speak against?

No.

I shall put now the oral sub-amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

It is accepted unanimously.

We will now consider the main amendment as sub-amended.

Does anyone wish to speak against the amendment as sub-amended?

No.

I shall now put Amendment 10 as sub-amended to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

It is accepted unanimously.

I understand that Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA wishes to withdraw Amendment 6 in favour of an oral amendment from the Committee.

Is that so, Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA?

Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA (Ukraine, EPP/CD): Yes, dear President, this is the case. And I want to thank the Committee Members and the Chairman for a consideration of a joint position for this important amendment, thank you.

I do withdraw my initial amendment.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA.

I have received an oral amendment from Lord Richard KEEN on behalf of the Committee, which reads as follows:

"As the Russian Federation is a federation only formally, the regime of Mr Putin has also declared war on its own people, in particular indigenous people. National and ethnic minorities in Russia are forcibly Russified and subjected to repression and discrimination in violation of Russia's obligations under the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination. In particular, the Assembly notes the disproportionally high losses suffered by military units composed of soldiers conscripted from national ethnic and indigenous populations. The assembly considers this to be a deliberate campaign aimed at eliminating national and ethnic diversity within the Russian Federation."

The President may accept an oral amendment on the grounds of promoting clarity, accuracy or conciliation, and if there is no opposition from ten or more members it will be debated.

In my opinion, the oral amendment meets the criteria of Rule 34.7 paragraph A.

Are there any oppositions to the amendment being debated?

No.

So, I call now Lord Richard KEEN to support the oral amendment.

You have 30 seconds.

Lord Richard KEEN (United Kingdom, EC/DA, Chairperson of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights): Thank you, Mister President, the oral sub-amendment was unanimously approved by the Committee and I also moved that it would be adopted.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Sorry, I put the oral amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

It is adopted unanimously.

I now call Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN to support Amendment 13. Kimmo, you have 30 seconds.

Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN (Finland, SOC): Mister President, the Amendment condemns the Russian practice to include political opponents of the regime to the list of terrorists and extremists. And the Financial Stability Board (FSB) to take decisive measures against enemies of the country code, and that one. We know the methods of FSB; and that is the content of the Amendment. Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr Kimmo KILJUNEN.

I have been informed that Lord Richard KEEN on behalf of the Committee wishes to propose an oral sub-Amendment to Amendment 13, as follows:

After the words "civil activities" insert the following words "leading to further misuse of the Interpol system".

In my opinion the oral sub-Amendment is in order under our rules. However, do ten or more members object to the oral sub-Amendment being debated?

No.

So I now call Lord Richard KEEN to support his sub-Amendment. You have 30 seconds.

Lord Richard KEEN (United Kingdom, EC/DA, Chairperson of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights): Thank you, Mr President.

The oral sub-amendment was unanimously approved by the Committee, and I move that it be adopted.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Lord Richard KEEN.

I will now put the oral sub-amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

It is accepted unanimously.

We will now consider the main amendment as sub-amended.

Does anyone wish to speak against the main amendment as sub-amended?

No.

I have to ask Lord Richard KEEN what is the Committee's opinion on this?

Lord Richard KEEN (United Kingdom, EC/DA, Chairperson of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights): The Committee's opinion will be expressed once my microphone comes on.. thank you.

Mister President, the Committee is unanimously in favour of the sub-Amendment.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Lord Richard KEEN

I shall put Amendment 13 as sub-amended to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

It is accepted unanimously.

We will now proceed to vote on the draft Resolution contained in Document 15966 as amended.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The draft Resolution in Document 15966 as amended is accepted unanimously.

The Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights has presented a draft Resolution on “The arbitrary detention of Vladimir Kara-Murza and the systematic persecution of anti-war protesters in the Russian Federation and Belarus” (Document 15967) to which no amendments have been tabled.

We will now proceed to vote on the draft Resolution contained in Document 15967.

The vote is open.

Yes, Ms Olena KHOMENKO.

Ms Olena KHOMENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA): I would like to submit an oral amendment to the paragraph 6.1.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Ms Olena KHOMENKO, sorry I have to interrupt. It is not possible according to the rules. The vote is already finished. We cannot accept any amendments at that point.

So the vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The draft Resolution in Document 15967 is adopted unanimously.

The Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights has presented the draft Resolution on "Sanctions against persons on the "Kara-Murza list", Document 15939 to which no amendments have been tabled.

We will now proceed to vote on the draft Resolution contained in Document 15939.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The draft Resolution in Document 15939 is adopted unanimously.

Dear colleagues, the next item of business this afternoon is the debate on the report titled "Freedom of expression and assembly of LGBTI people in Europe", Document 15953 presented by Mr Christophe LACROIX on behalf of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination.

In order to finish by 7:25 p.m., I will interrupt the list of speakers at about 7:15 p.m. to allow time for the reply and the vote.

I will give you a couple of minutes to take your seats because it is almost 6 p.m. and the rapporteur was involved in the vote of the judges, as far as I know.

Debate: Freedom of expression and assembly of LGBTI people in Europe

Ms Agnieszka POMASKA (Poland, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Good afternoon.

It's my turn now.

It's 6 p.m.

So the ballot for electing a judge to the European Court of Human Rights is now closed.

The counting of votes will take place under the supervision of the tellers, Ms Klotilda BUSHKA, Ms Andrea EDER-GITSCHTHALER, Mr Armen GEVORGYAN, Mr Claude KERN and Ms Sevilay ÇELENK ÖZEN.

I invite them to go at once to meet in the room set aside for this purpose.

The results of the election will be announced, if possible, before the close of today's sitting.

Now, I call Mr Christophe LACROIX, rapporteur.

Mr Christophe LACROIX, you have 7 minutes now, and then 3 minutes at the end to reply to the debate.

Mr Christophe LACROIX (Belgium, SOC, Rapporteur): Thank you very much, Madam President.

Before I begin my presentation, I'd like to thank the Cecretariat, in particular Ms Sarah BURTON who was a member of the Secretariat, but who has now left to work in other departments, but also Ms Élodie FISCHER who is behind me and who has really masterfully taken over Sarah's role.

I'd like to remind all the members of parliament, all the senators, all the members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe that, while the political impetus is obviously provided by the members of parliament, senators or members in general, without the other staff, we're pretty much nothing. And "staff" is a poor word to describe the quality of the services provided by the Council of Europe and its Parliamentary Assembly.

LGBTI people's right to freedom of expression and association. In Paris, I was asked: "But Mr. LACROIX, do you think that the rights of LGBTI people are regressing today?", trying to get me to say that no, everything was fine and that countries had legislated in such a way that, over the last twenty years, progress has been made towards recognizing the rights of LGBTI people and their essential right to live with dignity in complete freedom.

Well, yes, these rights are under threat. They are threatened by conservative movements; they are threatened by the fascist movements that are returning to power in some countries; they are threatened by conspiracy movements, ultra-religious movements. Yes, they are under threat, and freedom of expression and freedom of association for LGBTI people in Europe and in the member countries of the Council of Europe is seriously threatened.

My project, my report, was intended to provide an overview of situations in a number of Council of Europe member countries, and not just those that are described as the usual suspects. We wanted to give the report credibility by going to the places where the rights of LGBTQIA+ people are in jeopardy or even seriously threatened. So we went to see, we took information with civil society, with actors on the ground, in countries that are islands of democracy, theoretically quite perfect.

But no. In these same countries, when the extreme right or conservative movements come to power, particularly in the regions, there is a determination to suppress freedom of expression and association. This is done in a pernicious way, in the sense that they don't prohibit, but put themselves up as an administrative obstacle; they consider that they are not capable of protecting a Pride march, or that they should change the route. In short, we put obstacles in the way of LGBTQIA+ people.

What's worse, in some countries, it's forbidden to broadcast LGBTQI programmes on public television except after 10 p.m., as in the case of the oldest among us – I don't know if you've experienced this in your countries, but in Belgium, and I think in France too, when there were television programs where the sexual side was discussed, there was a white square. Well, LGBTQI is becoming a taboo subject that can't be talked about outside the hours of darkness "when all the cats are grey", as the French proverb goes.

Even more serious are the violations of physical integrity during demonstrations, when LGBTQI activists and supporters, including families, take responsibility, and of course there are sometimes movements that pose as counter-demonstrators and are very violent.

So, in the light of all these considerations, this report hopes that all the European Court's rulings on the rights of LGBTI people will be ensured and will continue to be ensured in the member states. I would like to remind you that articles 11, 13 and 14 of the European Court of Human Rights are intangible articles that prevail over all others.

We also want to propose that member states refrain from adopting constitutional amendments that are contrary to the rights of LGBTI people, and repeal any such provisions that already exist.

We also want to ensure that anti-hate and anti-discrimination laws are implemented more effectively.

We also want to repeal "LGBTI anti-propaganda laws", if they have been passed and implemented, and ensure everyone can access information about different forms of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression or sexual characteristics.

You'll see that in the report we've devoted an important paragraph to Russia, even though it is no longer a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Council of Europe, having decided to declare the LGBTI movement a terrorist movement.

We obviously want to support the visibility of LGBTI people in the public space; organise and support the organisation of Pride marches and other demonstrations in favor of the effective exercise of LGBTI people's human rights; investigate and prosecute and, where appropriate, punish the perpetrators of prejudice-motivated violence against LGBTI people; create public mobilisation strategies to combat SLAPP prosecutions; and already implement all the previous recommendations that have been voted by this Assembly.

With regard to the prevention of violence, prejudice and discrimination against LGBTI people, we wish to ban conversion practices, for member states to take a decisive stance to ban conversion practices if this is not already the case; to invest in gender equality education and to train teaching staff on these issues; to support identity-inclusive sexual and emotional education programs in schools, adapted of course to the age of pupils; to train law enforcement agencies to protect specific groups; to run awareness-raising campaigns on the rights of LGBTI people and diversity; to guarantee legal recognition of gender identity; and to recognise, if this is not yet the case, the right of same-sex couples to marry.

This is a brief summary of the proposal before you.

For the moment, Madam President, I'll leave it at that.

Ms Agnieszka POMASKA (Poland, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister Christophe LACROIX

And now in the debate I call first, speakers on behalf of political groups and we will start with Mr Max LUCKS from the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group.

Mr Max LUCKS (Germany, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Madam President,

Dear colleagues,

Dear Mister Rapporteur,

Dear Mister Christophe LACROIX, thank you for this report, which once again expresses that the question of whether lesbians, gays, bisexuals and trans people can express their opinions is about democracy as a whole, because it is about the protection of the minority by the majority.

This democracy as a whole is under attack, though. It is under attack in Russia, by a Putin who declares LGBTI people to be terrorists. It is also under attack here in this Assembly by people where there is evidence of direct routes to funds from Russia from Putin: the AfD MP, Mr Petr BYSTRON.

There is enough evidence that this member of our Assembly has received money from Russia. He is the only German MEP who has not made his declaration about funding, travel, and more.

The far-right MEP Maximilian Krah has such overwhelming evidence of funding from Russia that he was even detained and interrogated by the FBI in the USA. These people are singling out LGBTI people to damage our democracy as a whole.

We must finally wake up, dear colleagues. Putin is directly influencing our democracy. He is trying to damage it, and he is trying to use the weakest to do so. That is why it is so important that Mr Christophe LACROIX has presented a report that defends the weakest, a report that will ensure that conditions improve, because concrete change can come from these recommendations in the Council of Europe.

Last Friday, we in Germany passed a self-determination law for trans people that puts an end to restrictive procedures and paternalism. This law is the result of the recommendation made by this Assembly in 2015. We will see the day come in Europe when LGBT people can freely express their opinions, when conversion therapies are a thing of the past. That day, when the right will lose, will come. Mr Christophe LACROIX's report makes an incredibly valuable contribution to this, for which our group is very grateful.

Thank you for your attention

Ms Agnieszka POMASKA (Poland, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister Max LUCKS

And now I call Mr Georgios STAMATIS from the European People's Party.

Mr Georgios STAMATIS (Greece, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Madam President.

Dear colleagues,

The right to freedom of speech, expression and assembly are fundamental freedoms that every individual possesses by virtue of his existence, without discrimination based on any ground including sexual orientation, gender identity and gender characteristics.

The social coherence and collective well-being do not depend only on the standard of living of the people but mainly on the respect for the rights of minorities. Respect for these rights reinforces our democracy, the rule of law and the European legal culture.

Freedom of assembly, which is guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights, belongs to everyone also to LGBTI people. Despite the undeniable progress that has been made in recognising the rights of LGTBI people over the last decades, there are still certain countries denying these rights to them.

This restriction includes crackdowns by law enforcement and authorities, inadequate protection against harassment, intimidation, physical and on-line attacks, banning of LGTBI Pride marches or any other public demonstration or events. These actions contribute to the marginalisation, stigmatisation and invisibilisation of LGBTI persons and make them more vulnerable to social exclusion.

By adopting this report, we make a significant step to ensure that LGTBI people are more inclusive in our societies and that their voices will be heard. Our main goal is to adopt a holistic approach to remove the barriers and combat the discrimination LGTBI persons face.

This report calls on the member states to implement in the European Court of Human Rights a reference to the discrimination in the constitution amendments, enforce laws against hate and discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender characteristics, and support the visibility of LGBTI persons in the public space, pride demonstrations and festive celebrations of diversity and enhance the visibility of LGBTI people.

Additionally, the national authorities are called to repeal anti-LGBTI propaganda and to investigate and prosecute bias-motivated violence. In order to stop violence and discrimination against LGBTI people, the report calls on the member states to ban conversion practices that suppress a person's sexual orientation or gender identity and which is condemned by the LGBTI community as well as health experts.

The report also asked for member states to legalise same-sex marriage and to guarantee legal recognition of gender identity.

To counter stereotypes and prosecute against LGBTI persons, the report recommends that the member states invest in gender equality education and train teachers on this issue.

Finally, the report urges member states to recognise fears of persecution on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity, as grounds for granting asylum. This is necessary humanitarian action because, in some countries in the world, citizens are punished due to their sexual orientation or their gender identity.

Mr Christophe LACROIX, thank you for this report. Thank you Maria for your Presidency in the Committee about the job and also thank you Penelope for our support.

People, the Group of the European People's Party call to vote on this draft Resolution for more inclusion in society and finally, closing my speech allow me to invite all of you to Thessaloniki in Greece this summer to celebrate visibility in Pride 2024.

Thank you.

Ms Agnieszka POMASKA (Poland, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister Georgios STAMATIS.

And now, Ms Béatrice FRESKO-ROLFO for the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.

Ms Béatrice FRESKO-ROLFO (Monaco, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Madam President.

The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe would like to thank the rapporteur, Mr Christophe LACROIX, for highlighting the difficulties encountered by persons who are, as I would remind you, full members of our societies.

This report concerns two fundamental principles of democracy.

Firstly, the right to express oneself without reprisals or censorship, which is of course a right, even if this right has its limits, such as incitement to violence.

Secondly, the freedom of assembly, which is the right to meet for social, political or cultural purposes, in order to exchange, share and even express demands.

In recent years, however, LGBTI people in Europe have seen their rights reduced to the point of being flouted in some countries. They face repression, violence and discrimination. LGBTI people's freedom of expression and assembly is under threat.

As you pointed out, Mr Rapporteur, there has been an upsurge in acts against LGBTI people by LGBTI-phobic people, particularly during Pride marches, with the support of backward-looking politicians. I find this unacceptable.

As for the postulate that so-called propaganda of LGBTI identities can take place through rallies, I believe it is simply put forward by people afraid of their own inclinations.

My vision of a modern world and an advanced society is inclusive for everyone: a world where everyone has their rights respected and protected, where everyone can be who they are.

As parliamentarians, we should be proactive in ensuring adequate protection for members of the rainbow community. Firstly, anti-discrimination legislation to put an end to discrimination in access to employment, housing or education; secondly, legal recognition of same-sex relationships, including marriage and adoption, which is a key element in guaranteeing equal rights for LGBTI people; thirdly, and this is a human right, equal access to healthcare that respects identity and sexual orientation.

Dear colleagues,

It is our duty to ensure the safety of LGBTI people against violence and hate crimes. All these actions are part of the recommendations of the Council of Europe's bodies, and as such, I can only call on states to implement the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights concerning the rights of LGBTI people. It is also essential to raise public awareness of the issues facing LGBTI people, in order to promote inclusion and respect.

With our work in this Assembly, we can contribute to this.

I invite you to follow the activities of the Parliamentary Platform for LGBTI Rights in Europe, which met yesterday, to see what measures can be taken to prevent and combat discrimination and violence against transgender people.

It is through strong legislative measures and actions to change social attitudes that we will be able to uphold the rights of LGBTI people and prevent them from suffering prejudice and stigmatisation.

Thank you for your support.

Ms Agnieszka POMASKA (Poland, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madam FRESKO-ROLFO.

And now I call Mr Emmanuel FERNANDES from he Group of the Unified European Left.

Mr Emmanuel FERNANDES (France, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Madam Chairman.

Rapporteur,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The subject that brings us together today is at the heart of the raison d'être of our Assembly and the commitment of the vast majority of us: quite simply, it's about guaranteeing freedom of expression and assembly for LGBTQI people in Europe and in our member states.

Quite simply, it is about upholding two fundamental articles of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms: Article 10 on freedom of expression, and Article 11 on freedom of assembly and association.

Yet, as we know only too well, these freedoms are regularly violated in several member states, and even more frequently when it comes to LGBTQI people. The report before us clearly demonstrates this, and my Group of the United Left strongly supports it. We would like to thank the rapporteur, Mr Christophe LACROIX, for his essential and extremely insightful work.

Yes, the rights of minorities are more regularly trampled underfoot, the freedoms of LGBTQI people are more harshly attacked than those of the rest of the population; yet rights are the same for everyone, and they cannot be prevented on the spurious pretext of public safety, as is all too often the case.

The case law of the ECHR is very clear in this respect: no imperative to defend public order can justify the prohibition of peaceful LGBTI public events, nor the imposition of disproportionate restrictions on their holding; and if there are threats to assemblies where LGBTQIA+ people gather, then these threats must be quelled by the deployment of security forces to protect the participants in these meetings or demonstrations.

Dear colleagues,

The values of our societies are measured by our respect for the freedoms and rights of the most oppressed. Every day, people are harassed, beaten, assaulted and murdered because of their gender or sexual orientation - or both; every day, extreme right-wing movements - for it is they who in the majority of cases attack LGBTQIA+ people - grow in our countries and, once in power, undermine the rights of minorities.

In its 2023 report, the NGO ILGA-Europe, a federation of over 600 organizations in 54 countries in Europe and Central Asia, states that 2022 was the most violent year for LGBTQIA+ people as a result of increasingly widespread hate speech.

So, in the face of this, we must be outraged, we must stand up and we must act.

In the face of this, our Assembly must guarantee respect for human rights, and specifically for LGBT people: it's our duty, it's our raison d'être.

So, training law enforcement officers, organising awareness campaigns, supporting the fight against all forms of discrimination, funding associations working for the rights of sexual and gender minorities: these are the commitments we must pursue.

Freedom of expression and assembly are fundamental for everyone, without exception, without prejudice, without concessions.

Thank you for your support.

Ms Agnieszka POMASKA (Poland, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister Emmanuel FERNANDES.

And now, we have finished with political group speeches.

I ask all future speakers to stick with the time limit because in that case everyone will be able to speak.

And we start with Mr Randolph DE BATTISTA from Malta.

Mr Randolph DE BATTISTA (Malta, SOC): Thank you, Madam President.

Today I felt a special feeling. The fact that I could walk the streets of Valletta holding the hands of the person I love with no sign of fear. I felt free.

These are not my words. These are the words of an intersex friend of mine who joined us in Malta for Europride last September 2023, but then, sadly had to return to their oppressive society.

I will forever remember those words, so that I will not take my countries achievements for granted.

Dear Mr Christophe LACROIX, thank you for this very important and timely report.

As we reflect on this great piece of work, I ask you, dear colleagues, how can we allow hate to win over our message of love and hope?

As we speak, there is a bill before the Parliament of Georgia which bans gender affirmation for trans people, bans adoption for same-sex couples, and bans LGBTI people from gathering in the streets.

We have seen public attacks and posters against individuals from civil society, including faces of the brave organisers of the Tbilisi Pride.

As we speak, someone like me in Russia is considered an extremist and a terrorist.

Yes, I am a fighter against bigotry, and this is my weapon. I wear this because I am privileged. I wear it for those who cannot wear it.

I want to highlight a crucial point in this report. That is consultation with LGBTI organisations in drafting legislation.

This, dear colleagues, was one of the secrets behind Malta's success on LGBTI rights, the establishment of a consultative council tasked to propose legislative amendments.

You know what was the second secret? Leadership.

It's this leadership that we need here in Europe and around the world, because the time for half measures and empty promises is over.

It's time to roll up our sleeves and get to work. We must dismantle the barriers that stand in the way of equality brick by brick. We must challenge the status quo and confront the bigotry that poisons our society.

We must do it now, before any more lives are lost to hatred and ignorance. Because a society that embraces diversity is a more healthy and much better society.

Because, dear colleagues, it is not gay people who should fight for gay rights, it's not Palestinians who should fight for freedom, it's not Ukrainians who should defend their territory. It's for all of us to defend what is right and condemn what is wrong. It's for all of us to defend human rights.

Thank you.

Ms Agnieszka POMASKA (Poland, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister DE BATTISTA.

And now Ms Anna EFTHYMIOU from Greece.

Ms Anna EFTHYMIOU (Greece, EPP/CD)*: Thank you, Mr. President,

Dear colleagues,

Today we are discussing an issue that concerns the core of democratic values and human rights: the freedom of expression and assembly of the LGBTI community in Europe. Freedom of expression and assembly are not just privileges; they are the cornerstones of a democratic society, where people can authentically express themselves and peacefully gather to defend their rights. For LGBTI people, these freedoms are particularly significant as they seek acceptance of their identity while facing existing discrimination.

The report under discussion, which is coming up for a vote by the Assembly, proposes measures to protect and promote the freedom of LGBTI individuals. It underlines the importance of implementing European Court of Human Rights decisions on LGBTI rights. Additionally, it urges countries to strengthen their national legislation against hate and to abolish corresponding legislation discriminating

against LGBTI individuals. Moreover, it highlights the significance of pride parades and encourages countries to implement educational programs and awareness campaigns on LGBTI issues. Each member state must address these challenges and ensure the full and respectful protection of the rights of LGBTI people.

Greece has made significant progress in recognizing and protecting the rights of LGBTI people, through the implementation of legislative reforms and initiatives against discrimination. In 2021, Prime Minister Mitsotakis established a committee to develop the first National Strategy for LGBTI Equality.

Based on this Strategy, legislative measures were adopted to enhance the rights of LGBTI individuals in the country. Through Law 5089/2024, marriage equality was achieved, making Greece the 36th country in the world to allow marriage without discrimination based on the gender of the spouses. Additionally, the possibility of adoption by

same-sex couples was extended, and parental relationship was fully recognized in cases of children conceived through Medically Assisted Reproduction. Furthermore, initiatives have been taken in other areas, such as health, education, and security, to ensure equality and protection of the rights of LGBTI people in Greece.

By voting for this report, we reaffirm our commitment to a Europe of equal opportunities and inclusion. Through continuous action and commitment, we can create a fairer and more inclusive environment for everyone.

In conclusion, I would like to invite you to my city, Thessaloniki, which will host EuroPride 2024, from June 21 to 29.

Thank you!

Ms Agnieszka POMASKA (Poland, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madam EFTHYMIOU.

And now Ms Nicole HÖCHST from Germany.

She's not here, so now Ms Tamara VONTA from Slovenia.

Okay, so we go to Mr Jeremy CORBYN from the United Kingdom.

Mr Jeremy CORBYN (United Kingdom, SOC): I just want to put on record my support for what's being said today.

The bravery with which many gay people have spoken out over many years to try and gain recognition and support within their society. And, as one who grew up at a time when any kind of homosexuality was a criminal offence in Britain, when well known and famous people were even put in prison, and one of our greatest scientists was chemically castrated and eventually died as a result of it.

We have come a long way with some very many, very brave people, over a very long time. And I think we should all glory in that.

However, these rights that have been gained are under threat all the time by populist right-wing politicians, by the populist right, and by much of our media.

So we have to stand strong and stand firm, and that's why a message from the Council of Europe in support of the plurality of our society, in support of sexual freedoms, in support of recognition of LGBTI people, and an end to the horrors of transgender discrimination is something that's very important, and that is why we exist.

After all we're here to defend the European Convention on Human Rights. We elect judges to the European Court of Human Rights. If we set that example then we're doing a good job and I'm delighted to support this debate and the proposals before us today.

Ms Agnieszka POMASKA (Poland, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister CORBYN.

And now Mr László TOROCZKAI from Hungary.

Push the button.

Mr László TOROCZKAI (Hungary, NR): Thank you, Madam President.

So I hate hypocrisy and here in the Parliament in Strasbourg, I usually – almost always – see hypocrisy. This kind of hypocrisy.

Let us be honest. We are talking about the rights of minorities while the German-speaking session natives have been oppressed in this city for decades. Now you want to bring Kosovo into the Council of Europe while it is obvious that Serbian minorities are being oppressed in Kosovo. You have never been concerned about the fact that in two European Union member states – in Romania and Slovakia – the collective rights are not granted to the native Hungarian minority. There is no autonomy in either of these countries and Hungarians are even punished for using their own national symbols in these two EU member states. Of course, you are not interested in the brutal oppression of Hungarians in Transcarpathia by Ukraine either. The Ukrainian government, which you support, refuses to enforce the decision of the 1991 legal referendum of Ukraine, which decided that Transcarpathia should be an autonomous province. The Hungarian minority in Ukraine is oppressed and threatened but you do not care.

It seems that you are only interested in the rights of one minority, the so-called LGBTQ minority, despite the fact their rights are 100% guaranteed in the member states of the Council of Europe. It is not punished by law in any of the member countries to belong to the LGBTQ community. There is no discrimination against them. The algorithm of the international social media platforms promotes LGBTQ ideology in all countries. They have parades in almost every country. However, as biology and nature dictate same-sex couples cannot have children. This is not a question of human or minority rights, and it cannot be part of core values to force children to be exposed to sexual propaganda. These so-called values cannot be defended by the Council of Europe either. Keep your hands off the children. This is what the regulations that this report is now concerned about are all about.

So do not be hypocrites.

Thank you very much.

Ms Agnieszka POMASKA (Poland, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

I just remind you that the debate and the report is about freedom of expression and assembly of LGBTI people in Europe, and it is clear that the report was needed at the moment.

So, now we go to Ms Heike ENGELHARDT from Germany.

Ms Heike ENGELHARDT (Germany, SOC): *Thank you, Madam President,*

Chères collègues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

The human rights of queer people are still being violated on a daily basis and worldwide, including within our ranks. I would like to thank my colleague, Mr Christophe LACROIX, for his comprehensive report on the situation of the queer community.

Two years ago in Germany, 25-year-old trans man Malte C. was brutally beaten to death at a CSD parade. He had stood in front of other CSD participants to protect them and paid for it with his life. Malte's tragic story is representative of the rise in anti-queer violence, not only in Germany but across Europe.

It is unacceptable that people put their lives at risk by participating in a Pride event. It is unacceptable for states to restrict the opinions and freedom of assembly of LGBTQI+ people in order to make these groups invisible, stigmatise them and push them to the margins of society.

Nevertheless, we see that Pride marches or similar peaceful events are banned in Europe, made more difficult by strict official duties or ended with police violence. That queer people are excluded from sex education by law on the grounds of morality, that the media are censored with regard to queer content.

I call on our member states to follow the case law of the European Court of Human Rights and put a stop to this anti-queer practice. Legal loopholes to protect this group must be closed immediately. I would like to cite a very recent example from the Bundestag. Last Friday, after decades of struggle, we finally passed the Self-Determination Act. Trans, intersex and non-binary people can now change the gender entry in their identity document in a self-determined way at the registry office. Right-wing and conservative forces speak of a supposed ideological infiltration. We, on the other hand, must be louder and say that with this law we have abolished state discrimination against this group of people and made our society more democratic and, therefore, better for everyone.

Because, as Mr. Christophe LACROIX concludes in his report, a state cannot call itself democratic if it does not respect the rights of queer people.

Thank you very much.

Ms Agnieszka POMASKA (Poland, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madam ENGELHARDT.

And now we go to Ms Valentina GRIPPO from Italy.

I'm afraid she's not here. No no, I'm sorry, okay, I see you.

Ms Valentina GRIPPO (Italy, ALDE): Switching on the microphone.

Thank you, Madam President.

I would like to join in thanking the rapporteur Mr Christophe LACROIX

As general rapporteur for the safety of journalists, I would like to underline that this report is very important not only for the LGBT community, but also for the value that the protection of freedom of expression and assembly in this field is an important thermometer for understanding the state of health of the overall picture of democracy and the protection of human rights in the member states of the Council of Europe.

Indeed today we are meeting to discuss a crucial issue that touches the very essence of human dignity. These rights, including freedom of expression and assembly, are fundamental to any democratic society, and, as said before by my colleague, are protected under international frameworks like the European Convention of Human Rights.

However, LGBT people in Europe and beyond still face significant barriers and experience discrimination that limits their rights and contributes to their marginalisation.

And it has been mentioned for example the cancellation of LGBT events or the enhancement of laws aimed at preventing the dissemination of information on LGBTI right, to stay strict to the information aspect that is more in my role. Have been very warring in the last periods, not only in those countries that we know that are against these rights, also in those countries that we would assume are having in their legislation a democratic framework that recognises such rights.

The freedom of the LGBT community to be themselves, to express themselves, and to come together in solidarity is essential to the fabric of a free and democratic society. It is up to all of us – lawmakers, activists, citizens – to stand up for these freedoms, to break down the barriers of prejudice and oppression and to protect and celebrate diversity.

Moreover, the issues of freedom for the LGBT community is not just about the ability to hold a parade, it ascends to the daily experience of the individual, and as we discuss this issue today, let's remember that behind every statistic, every piece of legislation, every march, there are individuals, people seeking to live their truths, their lives without discrimination.

And it is true.

I just want to add another note to the rapporteur to explain that it's true that it is essential to make sure that every constitution in Europe, every system recognises the principle of the Council of Europe in its own legislative system. However, it will not be enough. We cannot be content with changing the legal system, because we know very well that these principles often remain on paper.

We must demand that these rights be alive, that they be disseminated, that we work in schools with the word of information to ensure that future generations can consider these principles that are natural rights as a democratic cornerstone that is taken for granted and not in question anymore.

Ms Agnieszka POMASKA (Poland, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Ms Valentina GRIPPO.

And now Mr Simon MOUTQUIN from Belgium.

Mr Simon MOUTQUIN (Belgium, SOC): Thank you, Madam Chairman.

First of all, I'd like to sincerely thank the rapporteur for his excellent work, which takes stock of the situation on our continent.

I would like to express my regret that, apparently, some of my colleagues have not read the report and the various elements contained therein: for example, bans on Pride marches and the repression of gay-friendly events.

I'd like to remind you that just a few years ago there was an attack that hit Oslo. I'd like to remind you that in Spain, people have been beaten up on beaches because of their sexual orientation. I would also like to remind you that a country close to the Council of Europe has described LGBT movements as "terrorism" - and we're not far from these remarks in the Assembly today. I would like to remind you that online harassment affects all LGBT people, including sometimes their mental health - a report has shown this.

But today, I'd also like to spare a thought for people who are ultimately outside the scope of this report: homosexuals in Uganda, who are suffering repression; people in Iran, particularly those homosexual women who have had the courage to come out in Iran. I would also like to think of those people in Egypt and elsewhere who are harassed, repressed and killed for their gender or sexual orientation.

I would also like to think today of those people on a migratory journey who, because of their sexuality, are not sufficiently taken into account in asylum procedures. There are real difficulties in our countries: we also need to question ourselves about these people, who are sometimes subjected to second vulnerabilities because of their sexual orientation or gender.

So yes, dear colleagues, I am a homosexual man. But my sexuality, in the end, does not guide my ideology, it does not guide my political choices: it only guides the people I want to love.

So to you, populist movements and conservative movements, to you Mr Viktor Orban, to you Ms Giorgia Meloni, I have a message for you, you who talk about sexual propaganda: you will never choose, you will never choose who I want to kiss in the street, you will never choose who I want to marry, you will never choose the family I want to create, you will never choose who I want to love.

And today, the message I want to pass on to all those LGBTQIA+ people listening to us is: be proud. Be proud of who you are, be proud of who you love. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe is with you, and many of us are with you. Thank you for your pride. Be proud.

Ms Agnieszka POMASKA (Poland, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr Simon MOUTQUIN.

And now Ms Gabriela BENAVIDES COBOS from Mexico.

Ms Gabriela BENAVIDES COBOS (Mexico)*: It is a great honour for me to be here today as we celebrate the second 2024 part session of the Council of Europe. I represent my country, Mexico, here as a standing observer in this Assembly.

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate our rapporteur Mr Christophe LACROIX and his team for this report.

We agree that respect of all values and human rights without any discrimination is something that national legislation as well as international instruments must guarantee.

In Mexico, the right of freedom of expression and assembly are recognised by our magna carta by Articles 6 and 9 and this is the basis for our democracy. Guaranteeing the rights of the LGBTI+ community in Mexico has not been simple because of the discrimination that they face, not just in Europe but elsewhere in the world given the movements that are mentioned in this report.

As an observer country in this Assembly, we are committed to ensure that we apply rules to guarantee the respect of the rights of members of our community.

I am pleased to inform you that between September and December 2022, the Senate of the Republic of Mexico adopted the prohibition and criminalisation of sexual conversion therapy, known in our country as efforts to correct sexual orientation and gender identity. We also banned any other type of conversion therapy.

The major step forward in our community has been a historic resolution that declares that laws prohibiting same-sex marriage in all the states are unconstitutional. As a result, state laws have been reformed so as to promote marriage for all.

We have seen growing recognition of sexual and gender diversity and this has improved the situation of members of the community. There is a change in attitude in our country, creating an attitude that is more favourable to ensure that people from the community can take part in political life and can occupy political posts without fear of discriminatory exclusion.

The electoral reform, adopted in 2021, provides for affirmative action on the basis of intersectionality for the electoral process so to ensure that people are not discriminated against because of their gender, disability or ethnic origin. This strengthens the inclusion of young people and helps do away with multiple discrimination. Representation of young people via horizontal parity, affirmative actions for groups such as the indigenous population, disabled people and those with sexual diversity promotes greater equality in politics and the electoral system.

We must not accept any more discrimination of the LGBTIQ+ community.

Thank you.

Ms Agnieszka POMASKA (Poland, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Ms Gabriela BENAVIDES COBOS.

And now I ask to take the floor Ms Nerea AHEDO.

Ms Nerea AHEDO (Spain, ALDE)*: Thank you.

I will speak in Spanish.

I would like to start by thanking Mr Christophe LACROIX for the work of his report.

Members of the LGBTI community often suffer discrimination. This discrimination often takes the form of persecution, outside Europe but also within Europe.

I think it's interesting to note, and you refer in your report to asylum, in some cases LGBTI people are stigmatised and indeed criminalised. What we have to remember is that within the LGBTI community, and I will include plus in that, there are different categories.

So for example, lesbians are more invisible than gay men, transgender people are more vulnerable than other groups, and I don't think that we should have a one size fits all approach.

The title of this refers to freedom of expression and assembly for LGBTI+ people in Europe. We're talking about fundamental rights. The fact is we're talking about Europe here. If you come from a country, such as I, that has had for over 12 years now a law against discrimination and recognition of rights of people from the trans community. I come from the city of Bilbao, which is being described, officially described, as gay friendly for some time now. For 19 years, homosexual marriage has been legal.

Firstly, it appears that this report is not very ambitious. Because depending where we are we might have the impression that there is no real risk. And that is not true. That is why this report is so important.

The fact is there are many differences depending where do people come from in the world.

Even in the places where legislation exists, there are verbal and physical attacks against people from the community. Life is made difficult for them.

There are other countries that don't even have any legislation and they don't intend to adopt any.

I think what's particularly worrying for us now is the increase in hate speech.

There have also been attempts to try to make this community invisible, or there are even people in the community who feel they need to make themselves invisible.

When progressive parties reach power, they adopt reforms that improve the situation, but when our opponents take power, they adopt legislation that takes a step backwards and infringes rights.

We all have a duty to legislate, to promote education, awareness and critical thinking.

It obviously goes without saying that we have to defend freedom of expression and assembly.

Above all, what we've got to defend is all rights for all people. We have to promote diversity and the wealth it brings with it.

I'd like to refer now to a song. But don't worry, I'm not going to sing. A Spanish singer, Joan Manual Serrat said "Everybody is what they are. Each person is their own person. And they can go down the stairs however they want."

Ms Agnieszka POMASKA (Poland, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madam AHEDO.

And now Ms Wanda NOWICKA from Poland.

Ms Wanda NOWICKA (Poland, SOC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm speaking with regards to the report "Freedom of expression and assembly LGBTI people in Europe" written by Mr Christophe LACROIX.

I would like to address the situation of LGBTI communities in Poland, as Mr Christophe LACROIX covered it extensively, fairly, and accurately in his report.

Thank you, Christophe, for that.

The report informs the Parliamentary Assembly about serious violations of human rights of LGBTI persons, including freedom of expression and assembly, which have been taking place for the last eight years and also under the former leadership of Poland.

Some of the violations included shameful LGBTI-free zones, actions, and disgraceful anti-LGBTI resolutions adopted by over 100 municipalities.

The report addressed also a case of pressing legal charges in court for so-called offending religious beliefs against feminist activists presenting the Virgin Mary picture with the rainbow halo. None of these shameful actions function anymore, and feminist activists finally won in court. So I'm happy to report the recent good news from Poland in this regard.

The situation in Poland has been improving mainly because, but not exclusively, due to the recent change of leadership in Poland and the fact that the new government and the legislature is committed to combatting the discrimination of LGBTI communities, women, and other disadvantaged groups, including national and ethnic minorities.

But before moving towards the government plans, I would like to mention about the increasing support in the society at large, including young people proving that the Polish societies is much more progressive than the conservative politicians who quite often carry on the campaigns using hate speech as a political tool to gain support among populist supporters.

Young people are becoming more and more open, progressive, and engaged in promoting human rights, social diversity, and equality.

One of the initiatives I would like to mention about is a project called LGBTI-Friendly Schools Contest promoting positive attitudes of peoples and students in schools. In last ranking carried out for the fifth time 20 000 students and 2 000 schools participated

On the governmental level, I am glad to report that for the first time in Polish history there is a constitutional minister for equality in government. The Minister for equality has been meeting with LGBTI organisations and initiatives in the recent weeks to consult the draft law on civil partnerships, that we would want to make sure that civic society is included in this process.

The ministry of equality also supports event related to LGBTI issues, including gay pride parades, especially in small cities that require more support.

And finally, the Ministry of Justice leads the efforts to amend the criminal code to include additional safeguards for legal protection concerning sexual orientation and gender identity in relation to hate crimes.

Dear colleagues, I hope that undertaken action and legal initiatives soon will significantly improve the status of LGBTI communities in Poland.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms Agnieszka POMASKA (Poland, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madam Ms Wanda NOWICKA

And now Ms Anna-Kristiina MIKKONEN from Finland.

Ms Anna-Kristiina MIKKONEN (Finland, SOC): Thank you, Madam Chairman.

Dear colleagues,

The rights to freedom of expression and assembly are fundamental rights for everyone. Respect for these rights lies at the heart of any functioning democracy. Clear political support for the fight against all forms of discrimination, training for law enforcement officers, awareness-raising campaigns on the rights of LGBTI people and the fight against prejudice, from the earliest age, can help build a diverse and inclusive society where everyone's right to freedom of expression and assembly is protected.

Equality before the law, particularly for LGBTI people, has not yet been fully achieved throughout Europe. Investments should be made in gender equality education and awareness-raising campaigns on the rights of LGBTI people and diversity.

For LGBTI people the rights to freedom of expression and assembly are of particular importance, as all too often they still feel obliged to hide for fear of being rejected by those around them, or even attacked verbally or physically in the public space or online. They internalise a sense of shame due to the more or less strongly heteronormative context of our societies. Many LGBTI people continue to remain silent because of the shame imposed on them by society. This forced silence can have tragic consequences.

Political parties should engage in the fight against hatred, whatever its basis, oppose anti-LGBTI hate speech and misinformation, and abide by the principles and rules for a non-racist and inclusive society. We politicians must express our support for LGBTI rights defenders and civil society organisations. Valuing and respecting diversity will enable our societies to move forward.

Protecting the rights of LGBTI people means protecting the dignity of every person, the right to live without hiding, the right to love and marry, and the right to exist. Accepting everyone and protecting diversity will take us forward.

Thank you for your support.

Ms Agnieszka POMASKA (Poland, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madam Anna-Kristiina MIKKONEN.

And now Mr Bertrand BOUYX from France.

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

Madam Chairman of the Committee,

Dear Rapporteur,

Our continent is founded on democracy and the rule of law, as we reiterate at every session. It is also based on freedom: the freedom of all people to lead their own lives and to enjoy all the rights guaranteed to them, whatever life they lead.

The situation of LGBTI people is therefore at the heart of our concerns. It is the pride of our continent to continue to guarantee freedom of expression and assembly to LGBTI people, just as to any other person in our country and our countries, because no, to live happily, there is no need to live hidden. To live in hiding is to live in fear, in self-limitation, and this must be combated.

I'm very grateful to the rapporteur for taking up this issue. Indeed, while we are always concerned about the situation of LGBTI people when we travel around the world as Members of the European Parliament, there is still progress to be made in our own States, not to mention the regressions that lurk in these troubled geopolitical times.

Simone de Beauvoir, the great French feminist philosopher, said: "Never forget that all it takes is a political, economic or religious crisis for women's rights to be called into question. These rights can never be taken for granted. You must remain vigilant throughout your lives". Obviously, this also applies to the rights of LGBTI people. So yes: we need to be more than vigilant.

The report mentions numerous bans on demonstrations in various European countries in the name of public order. Freedom must be the rule, and bans the exception. First and foremost, public authorities must do everything in their power to allow freedom to flourish, and not take the easy way out by prohibiting LGBTI people from organizing a Pride march because of the public order disturbances that might be generated by other people who don't like it. The case law of the European Court of Human Rights is clear on this point. It must be applied everywhere and without weakness.

Even more worryingly, the report describes cases of repression in a context of hardening, even reactionary tensions. Direct police repression or harassment of associations representing LGBTI interests, administrative, judicial or any other kind of harassment. We must be uncompromising against such actions in countries that are members of our institution.

The draft resolution makes a number of proposals to abolish the last remaining outdated errors in our constitutions and legislation, but also, and I would say above all, to focus on the education and ongoing training of the various institutional players. This is a step in the right direction.

I will be voting enthusiastically in favor of this resolution.

Thank you, Madam President.

Ms Agnieszka POMASKA (Poland, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr Bertrand BOUYX.

Now, Ms Olena MOSHENETS, from Ukraine.

Ms Olena MOSHENETS (Ukraine, ALDE): I want to thank Mr Christophe LACROIX for raising this issue in the Assembly.

I also thank you, Madam President, for reminding us that today's debate is dedicated to the issue of LGBTI rights.

Despite the war, Ukraine is trying to support every group of the population, so we believe that it is inappropriate to manipulate the issues of LGBTI people and national minorities.

The movement for the rights and equality of the LGBTI community in Ukraine has a long and complex history, however, this movement has always been closely associated with brave and open-minded individuals who fought for their rights and the rights of others.

The first attempt to organise an LGBTI community in Ukraine took place in the first half of the 1990s, but the process was extremely difficult due to social, cultural, and political changes.

Over time, activists began to stand up for their rights more firmly, and in 1997 the first LGBTI organisation was established in Ukraine.

Yes, indeed as noted in the report, the LGBTI movement in Ukraine has faced and continuous to face rejection by society, as in many other European countries. At the same time, Ukraine is moving towards insurance and guaranteeing the rights of the population to express themselves.

In Ukraine, a draft law on legalising civil partnership registration for the different sex and the same sex couples was supposed to be developed by the government in 2017 as a step towards Ukrainian integration. This was also envisaged in the national human rights strategy for the period up to 2020.

However, the draft law was never adopted and the obligation to consider it was transferred to the new national human rights strategy approved in March 2021. In order to implement the strategy, the action plan for 2021-2023 was approved, which set out a commitment to introduce the institution of registered civil partnership by December 2023.

A year ago, the National Democratic Institute conducted a nation wide survey which asked, among other things, whether the respondents agreed with the statement that LGBT+ people should have the right to civil partnership. This statement was supported by 56% of respondents. And another 8% was neutral.

In March 2023, a draft law was registered to establish the institution of registered partnership which is pending consideration by the Parliament.

After state registration, the partners will acquire the status of close relatives, namely a family member. This issue of state recognition of civil partnership among the LGBTI community is now more important than ever for Ukrainians in the context on the ongoing war, as the representatives of the community are now fighting in the Armed Forces of Ukraine and engaging in the military volunteers.

The LGBTI military organisation, which advocates for the rights of the LGBTI community in Ukraine in particular published photos of gay and lesbian soldier estimated the number of LGBTI people is about 50 000. Thank you for your attention.

Ms Agnieszka POMASKA (Poland, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Ms Olena MOSHENETS.

And the last speaker is Ms Elvia Marcela MORA ARELLANO from Mexico.

Ms Elvia Marcela MORA ARELLANO (Mexico)*: Good afternoon,

Honourable members, I would like to commend the 75th anniversary of the creation of the Council of Europe. Twenty-five years ago, Mexico joined as an observer.

Mr Christophe LACROIX, I would like to thank you and congratulate you for this excellent report. I would also like to thank member state of the Council of Europe for the solidarity which they have shown to my country in condemning the flagrant violation of international law committed by the government of Ecuador against the diplomatic corps in the Mexican embassy in Quito. The violation of the the Venice Commission – Articles 22 and 29 – by Ecuador against Mexico have led to international condemnation and Europe joined that, thank you.

I would also like thank the European legislators and the parliamentary groups who have worked together on this international case.

Ladies and gentlemen, our right as legislators is to defend the rights of people whatever their sexual orientation might be. In Mexico, great progress has been made fighting the discrimination of homosexuals, not just in speech but also in behaviour. We are convinced that love is love.

Since 2022, the American Congress has been sent an initiative from the Senate calling for legislation banning conversion therapy. The objective of these therapies is inhuman in the sense that they are designed to do away with the sexual and gender identity of people. This is an inhumane practice, which can actually include things such as electroshocks.

That is why, after two years, in 2024, we added a ninth chapter called "crimes against sexual and gender identity of people" to the Federal Legal Code and a chapter in the general health legislation, which sets out that all people who carry out or support or encourage conversion therapy or services limiting sexual or gender identity of people would be subject to 3 – 6 years in prison plus a fine. That is the situation now in Mexico.

This means that together with France, Germany, Canada, Greece, Iceland and Spain, we are moving towards full protection of all people in the LGBTIQ+ community. As well as protecting democracy based on the understanding that all rights apply to all people whatever their identity and background might be.

Thank you for your attention.

Ms Agnieszka POMASKA (Poland, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madam Elvia Marcela MORA ARELLANO.

Thank you for keeping within time. That's the end of the list of the speakers. Now I give the floor to Mr Christophe LACROIX to reply to the debate.

You have 3 minutes.

Mr Christophe LACROIX (Belgium, SOC, Rapporteur): Thank you very much, Madam Chairman.

I'd like to thank all the colleagues who did me the honour of reading the report. I'd like to thank everyone except one person who didn't read the report, and who shared with us his nationalist fantasy, marked by virility and a very patriarchal, conjugal, white and heteronormative vision of gender relations. But what can you expect from someone who was vice-president of the former far-right Jobbik party in Hungary?

"Even animals will be able to get married tomorrow." That's what we hear when we've passed laws for marriage for all in certain countries, or when we pass laws favouring or, at any rate, enabling the recognition of transgender people. "They're a social danger, especially transgender people." That's the kind of hate speech we're still up against today.

As Mr Randolph DE BATTISTA said, "It's never a given".

Mr BOUYX, you also said so, recalling the great Simone de Beauvoir.

Ms EFTHYMIOU, you reminded us that these are not privileges, but only the exercise of fundamental rights.

Ms GRIPPO, you spoke of the protection of freedom of expression.

Mr MOUTQUIN, you reminded us that we should be proud of who we are.

Ms NOWICKA, you told us that young people are more open-minded. I'd just like to agree with you and say that we're hearing more and more about young people and social networks, where it's clear that through social networks, which are often masculinist and marked by heteronormative, sexist and homophobic biases, we can unfortunately see that, among some young people, there's a rise in homophobia - despite the large proportion of young people who are far more tolerant than their forebears, parents or grandparents.

I'd like to pay tribute to all those who have lost their lives for the homosexual cause, but also to all those who have been victims of violence. In my country, there's a young man, Ihsane Jarfi, who, a few years ago, was harassed, arrested and kidnapped by four people who beat him to death and left him in the middle of nowhere, dying, so I'd like to pay tribute to him today.

So, am I an ideology? Am I the LGBTQI ideology? My name is Christophe, I'm the son of Edmond and Nelly, the grandson of Maria and Armand, the grandson of Théophile and Berta: three couples to whom I pay homage, heterosexuals. I'm the fruit of biology. I'm the fruit of nature, like many men and women since man and woman have been on Earth. Even if Prehistory doesn't send us any testimonies, it's still true that since the written word and the invention of art, homosexuality and LGBTQI have been around. We have to accept them. They are who they are. They won't change and they simply want to fight for their rights without taking away anyone else's rights.

Thank you for your attention.

Ms Agnieszka POMASKA (Poland, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister LACROIX.

Would the Chair of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA, like to take the floor?

Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA (Ukraine, EPP/CD, Chairperson of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination): Yes, yes, Madam President, thank you very much.

Thank you for your courageous chairwomanship of this important debate.

It doesn't mean if we are not all present here it's not important.

I'm sure many LGBTI people across Europe and beyond, in Canada, in Mexico, in other observer states to the Council of Europe will watch it and cherish what we have produced.

I would like to thank Mr Christophe LACROIX for his tremendous work, for putting his personal case bravely in front of many people who are suffering today inhuman treatment at work places, among friends, from family members even, and in society in general.

Dear colleagues, quite recently our Committee in high numbers addressed and attended the New York session of the Commission on the Status of Women, where we had a great chance to participate as the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly in many meetings. You know, UN findings are not very positive for us. If we continue with the same speed of the changes, not in terms of producing the reports, but actually implementing what we write in them, it will take us another, and I would like you to pay attention, another 300 years to approach equality between women and men.

I would also paraphrase it. It will take us another 300 years to start respecting each other and to start respecting our choices and the European Convention on Human Rights, which is also the basic document to this Assembly, to this whole Organisation, which celebrates 75 years of activities today.

Hearing the debate today, I cannot help asking how long it will take us before the LGBTI people will be having the same rights, because they are persons at the same time. We definitely don't want anything to drag us back in our progress, which we've made already.

I also want to say that it's hard to admit that there is a shrinking space in some countries for LGBTI people.

I am proudly a co-author of the file in Ukrainian Parliament for same-sex marriages, supported by the Ministry of Defence and other stakeholders.

I hope it will pass on. As my colleague said, these people defend freedom, democracy, and our common values on the battlefield again a common enemy: Russia.

Of course, colleagues, we want to say thank you to the tremendous efforts of the Secretariat and all the members of the Committee who took up the arms, which are words today, to address this issue in the Plenary. I want to ask you for your presence, if you can text your colleagues, your delegations, to come to the Assembly to support this file in numerous votes.

Thank you, Mister Christophe LACROIX.

Vote: Freedom of expression and assembly of LGBTI people in Europe

Ms Agnieszka POMASKA (Poland, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much, Madam Mariia MEZENTSEVA.

The Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination has presented a draft resolution (Document 15953) to which no amendments have been tabled.

We will now proceed to vote on the draft resolution contained in Document 15953.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the results to be displayed.

61 votes in favour – the draft resolution is adopted unanimously.

Thank you.

Debate: The honouring of obligations and commitments by Albania

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): I ask you all to take your seats.

Colleagues, please take your seats: we are about to start.

The next item is the presentation and discussion of the report by Mr Ionuț-Marian STROE, on behalf of the Monitoring Committee, on "Honouring of obligations and commitments by Albania" (Doc. 15950).

I would remind you that we should be finished with the examination of this text, including the vote, at around 8:30 pm. We shall therefore interrupt the list of speakers at around 8.20 p.m. to allow time for the Committee's reply and the necessary votes.

Mr Rapporteur, you have 7 minutes to present your report, followed by 3 minutes to reply to speakers at the end of the general discussion.

Mr Rapporteur, you have the floor.

Mr Ionuț-Marian STROE (Romania, EPP/CD, Rapporteur): Thank you, Mr Chair.

Dear President,

Dear colleagues,

It is my pleasure to present this report.

The last time the Assembly debated this subject was in 2014. From the very start, I want you to know that clear and great progress has been made by Albania since that time.

I will begin my presentation by highlighting the positive developments.

While the political environment remains polarised, we can fortunately say that the systemic political crisis that has dominated politics in Albania for far too long has been largely resolved, even though several of its root causes still remain to be addressed.

Finally, we can say that we started to see real democratic dialogue in Albania.

Another good thing is that a large scale territorial administrative reform has been implemented which merged 374 municipalities into 61. This has considerably strengthened local government and has made it more effective and efficient.

This reform has been welcomed by the Congress of Local Regional Authorities, even though because there are some concerns about the minority rights caused by this reform the authorities have informed the Assembly that they intend to carry out a comprehensive evaluation with the purpose of addressing and resolving the shortcomings that have appeared.

Another positive aspect is the progress that has been achieved with the regard to strengthening the independence, integrity and efficiency of the judiciary.

A constitutional reform package was adopted with support of both the political opposition and the ruling majority, that reformed the High Court, the Constitutional Court and other judicial institutions in line, of course, with European standards.

In addition, this reform establishes a high council of the judiciary and the high prosecutorial council of whom the majority of the members are elected by the peers, of course, to ensure the independence of the judiciary.

A key component of the judicial reform has been the vetting of all judge and prosecution positions.

The effects of the vetting procedure, which has been supervised by the international community, have been dramatic, and demonstrate the necessity of this process.

To date, over 62% of all the persons vetted were dismissed, mostly because they fail to justify the assets or resigned themselves to avoid the vetting process altogether. This vetting process has had a considerable impact on the efficiency of the administration of justice over the last years.

A significantly reduced number of judges and prosecutors remain in the system. However, measures and reforms have been adopted to alleviate these negative effects, including through the adoption of a new judicial map of this country.

Similarly, tangible progress has been made with regard to the fight against corruption and organised crime in Albania.

The constitutional reform established a new three-level institutional structure. The specialised structure for anti-corruption and organised crimes pack, consisting of a bureau of investigation, a special prosecutor and a specialised court. This is now fully operational, and has concrete results and high level convictions.

Its progress in fighting corruption and organised crime is also reflected in the decision of the Financial Action Task Force to remove Albania from its so-called grey list of countries under intensive monitoring.

On another subject, human rights are in general well respected in Albania, which is a historically multi-ethnic and multicultural society that has a long-standing tradition of interreligious dialogue and tolerance. However, minority rights, from my point of view, need of course to be strengthened.

Dear colleagues, on the basis of this smart and considerable progress achieved by this country, the Committee therefore proposed to the Assembly to close the monitoring procedure and to open, of course, the post-monitoring dialogue with Albania.

At the same time, the Committee is fully aware that a number of concerns remain to be addressed.

The authorities and all political forces in the parliament have assured us about their political will to address these remaining issues in the framework of the post-monitoring dialogue, and indeed, we have already seen a number of developments that back up this promise.

The extreme polarisation of the political environment and the often zero-sum political strategies remain, of course, a point of concern.

Compounded by the highly fragmented opposition in the country, this polarisation is undermining parliamentary oversight and the proper functioning of the system of checks and balances in the country.

It is up to both the ruling majority and of course the opposition to address this problem. In this respect, we very much welcome the renewed dialogue between the ruling party and the main opposition faction in the parliament, that was initiated a few weeks ago. Several inquiry commissions have been established and ad hoc committees on important reforms started their work, which will of course strengthen the oversight role of the parliament.

It is only the first step, but from my point of view, it is a very important one.

While the progress in the fight against corruption is considerable, it is now important that the first tangible results become a non-reversible trend.

Moreover GRECO's latest compliance report shows that most of its recommendations still need to be addressed, especially those with regard to preventing corruption and promoting integrity in central government institutions. I mean the top executive functions. This should be, without hesitation or delay, implemented.

It is a great concern that three essential by-laws needed to implement, the 2017 law on minorities, have still not been adopted, which practically blocks the implementation of the entire law. This should be addressed as a matter of urgency from our point of view.

In addition, the legal 20% threshold for the enjoyment of minority rights in a municipality should be revised.

The authorities have expressed their willingness to address these issues.

Lastly, the media environment is the only area where we feel no real progress has been made since our last report.

While Albania's media environment is diverse and overall pluralistic, although split along the political party lines, threats and harsh rhetoric against journalists by political actors are unfortunately increasing. While the so-called anti-defamation legal package was withdrawn by the authorities following international criticism, defamation remains criminalised. The use of defamation lawsuits and SLAPPs to silence media outlets of course is increasing.

The authorities should decriminalise defamation and limit, of course, the clearly disproportionate fines and amounts that can be awarded as compensation. In addition, they should adopt effective anti-SLAPP legislation.

In conclusion, Mr President, dear members, there is no doubt in my mind that this issue can be addressed in the framework of the post-monitoring dialogue, and the authorities have made it clear that they have both the political will, and of course the intention to do so.

I therefore ask you to support the draft resolution presented by us.

Lastly, I would like to thank the authorities for their cooperation and willingness to dialogue with us.

As rapporteurs, I wish to thank of course all the past co-rapporteurs for Albania, their contribution to the report is very well reflected in the report. I can say that it was a group effort.

And last but not least, I wish to thank the Secretariat of the Committee for all their hard work and the support. It was a tremendous help for us writing this report.

Thank you very much, and I'm waiting for your questions.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, rapporteur.

We'll now move on to the general discussion. I would remind you that speaking time is limited to 3 minutes per speaker.

For the Group of the European People's Party, we have Mr Birgir THÓRARINSSON from Iceland.

You have the floor.

Mr Birgir THÓRARINSSON (Iceland, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Mister President,

On behalf of my group, I would like to thank the Monitoring Committee and their rapporteur Mr Ionuț-Marian STROE. The report outlines the excellent progress made by Albania over the last years in honouring its obligations and commitments to the Council of Europe and this Assembly.

The draft resolution therefore proposes to end the monitoring procedure and to open a post-monitoring dialogue with Albania. We support this conclusion and want to congratulate all political stakeholders in Albania on this achievement.

At the same time in commendable transparency, the report also noted a number of remaining concerns that it expects Albania to address as a matter of priority. Allow me to highlight some areas to which my group attach particular importance.

First of all, the political environment, the resolution notes that the root causes for the political crisis that has plagued the country for many years still remain to be addressed. The key root cause is the extreme polarisation of the political environment, both the ruling majority and the opposition have failed to recognise their proper role in the governance of the country. While the opposition should indeed recognise that they are the opposition, the ruling majority should follow an inclusive governing style that favours dialogue and co-operation with the opposition.

Secondly, the minority rights – more needs and can be done for the protection of minority rights in Albania. My group in this context also highlights the challenges faced by the Greek minority in Albania and the questions raised about the respect for minority rights by the developments around the election of the Mayor of Himarë. They need to be addressed and it is indeed essential that the by-laws that are needed to implement the 2017 law on the protection of minority rights are adopted in close consultation with the Council of Europe without any further delay.

This is a crucial issue for my group. If no progress has been made, it is respected by the time of the first report in the post-monitoring dialogue, the Monitoring Committee should indeed consider the suggestions outlined in the paragraph 22 of the draft resolution.

Thirdly, we welcome and congratulate the country on the progress made in the fight against corruption and organised crime but we wish to underscore that corruption is still a widespread problem and that there is no place for self-approval. The real result that we are seeing and welcoming should be that corruption has no place in Albania's society.

Mister President, regardless of the importance of the remaining concerns, we recognise that they are by far outweighed by the progress made and results achieved, and we, therefore, fully support the draft resolution as well as the amendment that was made to it.

Thank you.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much for your contribution.

We now turn to the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe with Ms Sabina ĆUDIĆ.

You have the floor, Madam.

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

As one of my favourite writers, Albanian writers, Ismail Kadare would say, the writer is always in some form or in some extent of exile, and there is always a distance. One can say the same for our authors of today's report, who so elegantly managed to take a distance, be objective, I would say measured, in their assessment of Albania's progress. I would like to use this opportunity to congratulate them on that.

When we look at the situation and the fact that Albania has been under permanent monitoring procedures since 1995, this is in some way a historic day for Albania, considering recommendations of the authors to move away from the permanent monitoring and to enter the post-monitoring dialogue.

At the same time, the report not only recognises the progress, and we are particularly satisfied with the level of detail that they outline in recognising the steps that Albanian needs to take in the dialogue to avoid the potential situation in which they would return to full monitoring procedure. Namely, the issues that we are concerned with are the issues of media freedoms, minority rights, as recognised by the report, but also recognising the new legal framework for elections, and the fact that local communities have received the much needed strengthening of self-government, reform of judiciary, that I do have to say coming from the region is inspirational for the entire region, considering the percentage of vetted judges, and the way that the whole judicial system has been depoliticised.

Of course, as we all know, the previous reports have always recognised the level of political crisis in Albania and the enormous level of political divisions within the country. We salute the easing of the political crisis, but the division, as the report recognises and as those of us who are familiar with the situation on the ground, they have remained and they need additional work.

I would also like to highlight an issue that's important for the group that I stand here to represent, ALDE, which is the property rights, the Casa Iorga situation with the Romanian property in Albania, the incredible number of court cases applications for the European Court of Human Rights, these are the issues that need strengthening. As we recognise yesterday in discussing opening the doors to Kosovo, what is important is to highlight and recognise that this kind of report is not the end of monitoring but the beginning of a long road of dialogue and close monitoring of the promised and promising, I would say, improvements in Albania.

Again, congratulations. We have an amendment. We salute the work of the Committee for recognising the Amendment, and we will be happy to support your report.

Thank you.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much, Madame.

On behalf of the Socialist Group, I now give the floor to Mr Stefan SCHENNACH.

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

I would like to begin by warmly congratulating the rapporteur. We are making history these days. Yesterday we made history with Kosovo. Today we are making history with a motion to move from the strict monitoring procedure to a post-monitoring procedure.

I can remember when I was still Chairman of the Monitoring Committee, we were the first country - Monaco - to be released from the monitoring procedure. But the report says that where there is a lot of light, there is also shadow. And that is what is remarkable. That's why I really compliment this report, which shows - and I know the country very well - if I can remember, in the past this persistent political system crisis, which hardly allowed any dialog; that is slowly ebbing away. And it was only through this that a new legal framework could be found with a broad consensus. This made it possible to decide on new electoral districts and to reduce the number of municipalities. And also in the area of the judiciary; the fact that judges and public prosecutors are being placed under international observation - that really is a great thing for which we can only congratulate Albania.

However, despite all the joy of entering the post-monitoring process, this report also says that there is still a great deal of work to be done. For example - unfortunately an old mistake, where people have gone back to blocking - you need a new ombudsman and you need a new commissioner for the protection of discrimination. And if we still have Mr Christophe LACROIX's earlier report in our ears, then it must also be said that Albania still has a long way to go in the LGBTI area. Discrimination in the world of work has improved, but there are still no registered partnerships. Now we come to something that is really very, very worrying; that is that organised crime and systematic and systemic corruption continue to prevail in the country.

And as a rapporteur for SLAPPs, I have to say, ladies and gentlemen from Albania, it is unacceptable that journalists are charged with SLAPPs, that they are covered up to this extent in order to silence them. There is a lot to be done. Although there is media diversity, the media environment has deteriorated dramatically. So there is a lot of work ahead of them in the post-monitoring process, and particular attention must be paid to minority rights, especially with the reduction in the size of municipalities, but the rapporteur has already underlined that.

In any case, my group will wholeheartedly support this step into the post-monitoring procedure.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr Stefan SCHENNACH.

We've finished with the list of group spokesmen.

We shall continue with the list of speakers, and I now call on Mrs Christiana EROTOKRITOU from Cyprus.

You have the floor.

Ms Christiana EROTOKRITOU (Cyprus, SOC): Thank you, Mister President,

Dear colleagues, I would like to thank the rapporteur for this excellent report. I must say it is very well-balanced outlining, on the one hand, the efforts that have been made in the past few years for the country to move forward along European and Council of Europe values, and of the democratic backsliding, on the other hand, of our values, the details of which are also regrettably very accurately and fairly pointed out.

We, dear colleagues, believe in human rights, democracy and the rule of law. All member states of the Council of Europe are expected to fully adhere to these. At the same time, it is true we have to strike a balance between not turning a blind eye to our values but at the same time not being so rigid. We have to strike a balance between our values and how we quantify our benchmark for a country to continue to be or exit the monitoring procedure.

So how much democracy, rule of law and how many human rights are member states expected to protect and uphold? The answer is all of them because any other answer would undermine the credibility of our organisation.

I strongly believe that a country that does not fully, unequivocally accept and implement our basic values, such as freedom of the press and fair, unimpeded and transparent elections, should remain under the monitoring procedure not in the form of punishment but as an expression of absolute commitment of this Assembly to provide all and any assistance for the member state in question to fully adhere to the values that all of us do.

I am particularly alarmed by the references in the report on the freedom of the press. Democracy and freedom of the press go hand in hand. You cannot have a little freedom or adequate freedom or even a lot of freedom of the press. Freedom of the press must be an absolute value in our organisation.

I am particularly alarmed by a recent reference from Reporters Without Borders on Albania. They state: "not a week goes by without an attempt on press freedom and write information in Albania".

The draft resolution rightly points out that the media environment, instead of improving, has continued to deteriorate. Journalists are self-censoring, SLAPPS are widely used while journalists are victims of organised crime and at times police violence, spurred on by the government's failure to protect them. And while on the topic of the police, as the report points out, police are allowed to receive funding from private sources and can perform paid services providing security at private events.

Furthermore, according to the report, minority rights have de facto been reduced and I cannot but mention the case of Mr Fredi Beleri, an ethnic Greek who was elected Mayor of Himare in May 2023 but is not allowed to take the oath and take up the office on fabricated criminal charges, which he has stated he will pursue up to the European Court of Human Rights, the objective, of course, has been fulfilled. The objective is to enable the incumbent to continue to act as mayor despite losing the elections and enable him to continue to make decisions including ones that have a financial dimension.

Dear colleagues, clearly this is a politically motivated case pursued not in accordance with the rule of law but rather as a result of Prime Minister Edi Rama's political interference at all levels of governance in order to eliminate and/or silence political opponents. This is in breach of the democratic process and Albania must address these unresolved issues as a matter of urgency, as well as corruption that continues to be widespread in a systemic nature and connected to organised crime. It is therefore imperative for the Council of Europe to continue to assist and support the prevalence of our values in Albania via the monitoring process.

Thank you.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madame.

We now move on to Ms Denitsa SACHEVA from Bulgaria.

She doesn't seem to be here.

And now, Mrs Boglárka ILLÉS from Hungary.

Moving on, Ms Mireille CLAPOT is here.

You have the floor, Madame.

Ms Mireille CLAPOT (France, ALDE): Thank you, Mister Chairman.

Mister rapporteur,

Dear colleagues,

As we comment on this excellent report, we look back over ten years. What perseverance, both on the part of the successive rapporteurs and, of course, on the part of the country placed under Council of Europe monitoring! Despite its crises, Albania has taken very seriously the set of commitments and obligations that reflect the fundamental values and principles of our Organisation, such as democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

Albania has also embarked on its application to join the European Union, which has required enormous reforms. On 25 March 2020, the European Council finally decided to open accession negotiations with Albania. I am aware of Albania's particular history and its determination to emerge from the demons of 46 years of dictatorship. The efforts noted in the report bear witness to this.

However, the "land of eagles", as Albania is also known, still faces challenges in effectively implementing these commitments.

Political polarisation remains high. The media are regularly subjected to threats and hostile comments. The electoral framework lacks stability. Diaspora voting is not yet possible. Vote-buying, alas, has not been totally eliminated. Even if the justice system, which is a pillar of the rule of law, has been voluntarily reformed, from the highest courts down to the ordinary judge, it remains too slow and the threshold of cases too low to ease the backlog and restore the confidence of Albanians.

Progress has been made in the fight against corruption, but only five of the 24 recommendations made by GRECO have actually been implemented, as noted in the report by our colleague Mr Ionuț-Marian STROE.

Finally, and to conclude, the issue of minorities is insufficiently addressed, as decrees implementing the law are missing.

These problems are not fatalities linked to a Balkan spirit or to Albanian traditions so well described by the great writer Ismail Kadare. They are linked to legislative action that is still inadequate, but it is true that the rapporteur stresses, in paragraph 46, the need for the opposition and the majority in power to overcome their conflicting relations and respect the role and place that each has in the governance of the country.

The political will to address the Council of Europe's recommendations is clearly expressed by the Albanian authorities and the country's political forces. This is why the resolution proposes closing the monitoring procedure and initiating a post-monitoring dialogue.

I support this resolution and, in conclusion, I would like to salute the role played by women politicians in Albania. This progress is also theirs.

Thank you for your attention.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madam.

We now go to Ms Blerina GJYLAMETI from Albania.

Ms Blerina GJYLAMETI (Albania, SOC): Dear chair, dear colleagues.

Today marks an important moment for Albania, a moment that encapsulates the culmination of 29 years of diligent work, unwavering commitment and the relentless pursuit of progress since Albania became a member of this Council.

A vote that moves Albania into the post monitoring process would not be merely a nod to the past, it would be also for us a beacon for the future. It would be an acknowledgment of the extraordinary strides we have made in reforming our judicial system, in our staunch fight against corruption, in our steadfast advance towards European Union integration.

It would be also an evidence to the improvement we have achieved in the rule of law, democracy and human rights, the very pillars upon which the Council of Europe stands.

Finally, it will be also a fair assessment of our efforts, and this would not be just an achievement for Albania, but also an achievement for the shared values that bind us within this Assembly.

We have worked tirelessly to align with the three pillars of the Council of Europe, and of course much has been done but also much has to be done, and we are really committed to continuing in this path.

As we step in this new chapter we do so with the assurance that our efforts are seen, our progress is recognised, and our direction is affirmed.

This momentous occasion is the sign of support to continue in this direction, to keep striving for excellence, to never waver in our commitments to the principles that this Assembly upholds.

Last but not least, I extend our heartfelt thanks to each member who has stood by us, who has guided us, and who has believed in us, and most particularly to the two rapporteurs Mr Asim MOLLAZADA and also Mr Ionuț-Marian STROE. Your support has been invaluable.

Thank you to all.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Ms Blerina GJYLAMETI.

And the floor now is to Ms Maria SYRENGELA.

Ms Maria SYRENGELA (Greece, EPP/CD)*: Thank you, President.

Ladies and gentlemen.

Ongoing efforts by Albania to roll-up the reforms necessary to join the European family can only be described as remarkable.

However, the progress achieved has been overshadowed by deteriorations in terms of the rights of minorities in Albania.

I would like to underline the fact that the report does refer to changes which have been made to the map of local authorities in the country. These changes might have led to improvements in local management, but the reform has meant that the number of people of certain ethnic minorities in local authorities are less than 20%. This means that the right to use local languages for purposes of administration have been reduced.

At the same time, Albania is also accused of non-implementation of certain rights which are granted to ethnic minorities. The country itself adopted these reforms in 1997.

This is worrying, because it sends a very negative signal to the Greek minority in Albania. At the same time, it also strikes a worrying note when it comes to democratic pluralism and the rights of minorities in the country.

On this point, I would like to refer more specifically to the Greek minority, whether we're talking about the right to self-determination, or the right of all Greek children and grandchildren of Greeks in Albania to be able to use their language at all levels of education. Whether indeed we are talking about the protection of property rights for the Greek minority.

On all those issues, the Albanian authorities are obliged to respect the rights of all the minorities.

Things reached a low point when we have the mayor, Fredi Beleri, for example, who is still in prison quite illegally.

We have no intention to try to tell the Albanian judiciary what to do, we would simply ask them to read the report. What's important and what's right.

The importance of recognising the situation of the mayor, Fredi Beleri, and the importance of him being able to lay down his oath.

We call for a fair trial and for the presumption of innocence to be fully respected.

The European Acquis means that international law with respect to minorities, international law and human rights be respected.

The Albanian authorities are called in the report to demonstrate that they do respect European values. At the same time, they have to take on the values and ideals of the Council of Europe.

The Council of Europe is the most noted organisation when it comes to protection human rights, so we can't accept any backsliding when it comes to human rights and the rule of law.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Maria.

Next speaker is Ms Etilda GJONAJ. I hope I pronounced it well.

Ms Etilda GJONAJ (Albania, SOC): Thanks.

First of all, let me thank Mr Ionuț-Marian STROE, the rapporteur of the report on Albania and everybody among the colleagues who are staying here and discussing the report on Albania, very important in this phase.

Since our accession in 1995, Albania has been steadfast in its commitment to honour the obligation of membership.

Over the past decade, Albania has undergone significant legal and institutional reforms marking a transformative journey.

We designed and implemented a radical and unparalleled reform in the justice system in 2016 marking a historic milestone in Albanian statute.

Guided by the conviction that a fully-independent judiciary is crucial for Albania's integration, we have shown our commitment to upholding the rule of law. We championed a justice model that positions Albania as a model in the region.

Through the implementation of comprehensive institutional and legal framework, this reform has fundamentally reshaped the judicial system.

By preventing political influence from the judiciaries appointment and promotion procedures, it has created a justice system devoted to the principles of fairness, integrity, independency, effective and accessible for all citizens.

Fight against corruption through the vetting process of judges and prosecutors and through special structures for fighting organised crime and corruption has delivered notable successes.

Justice reform has been the green light for the Albanian path in European integration and has been highly appraised from both the European Union and the Council of Europe itself.

On the other side, we have embarked on a rigorous path strengthening democracy and enhanced freedom of expression, protect minority rights, improve the rights of vulnerable groups, and also build up a political climate that would strengthen the check and balances.

Even me, as general rapporteur for violence against women for the Assembly, it is a praise the immense work that has been done in advancing and promoting the gender balance and advocating and protecting women's rights, especially those that are exposed by all forms of violence in compliance with Istanbul Convention.

Albania has been praised by the European community and the other leaders as an accountable ally for the security and stability in the region, and we have been 100% in the same line as all European countries and other international organisations for foreign policy.

I totally understand the Greek colleagues about the Beleri case, but this is a justice issue. Since it is a justice issue, this is the justice reform that we designed to deal with the cases that are under this power.

Thank you.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Next speaker is Mr Alain MILON.

Mr Alain MILON (France, EPP/CD): Thank you, Mister Chairman.

The last time our Assembly was able to express an opinion on the situation in Albania was in 2014. It has to be said that a great deal of progress has been made since then, which we welcome.

Reforms have been undertaken to guarantee the independence and integrity of the judiciary, a major challenge for respect for the rule of law.

The 2016 constitutional reform led to a complete reorganisation of the Supreme Court and the Constitutional Court, in line with the recommendations of our monitoring commission. It also saw the creation of a High Council of Judges and a High Council of Prosecutors. Most importantly, the qualifications of judges and prosecutors are now effectively verified, and over 60% of those verified have been disqualified. This shows just how necessary this procedure was and remains.

The establishment of a new judicial map has also led to a significant reduction in the number of cases pending before the courts, helping to strengthen the confidence of Albanian citizens in the judicial institution. Significant progress has also been made in the fight against corruption, with the creation of specialised judicial institutions to combat this scourge, which unfortunately remains all too widespread in Albania.

I am also delighted that the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights concerning the restitution of property looted by the Communist regime from 1944 to 1992 have been implemented, enabling Albania to turn a painful page in its history.

Despite this progress, many issues of concern remain.

These include the ongoing tensions between the various political parties. Our rapporteur puts it very strongly when he notes that "political polarisation in the country, aggravated by masquerades between and within parties, undermines the system of checks and balances and limits parliamentary control". This is obviously a major point of concern, as is the very negative trend in press freedom. I'm also concerned about the inclusion of minorities in political power, while administrative and territorial reform seems to have had exclusionary effects.

Not everything is perfect, far from it, even if progress benefiting Albanian citizens is real and visible. I therefore take note of the political will to respect the commitments made when Albania joined the Council of Europe.

I shall, therefore, be voting in favour of this draft resolution, which recommends closing the monitoring procedure concerning Albania and initiating a post-monitoring dialogue with a view to addressing the remaining concerns, which require a strong commitment from the Council of Europe.

In conclusion, I would like to thank and congratulate our rapporteur for this comprehensive report.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Next speaker is Ms Klotilda BUSHKA.

You have the floor.

Ms Klotilda BUSHKA (Albania, SOC): Thank you, Mister President.

Honourable members of the Parliamentary Assembly,

The report prepared by Mr Ionuț-Marian STROE, for which we stand and we extend our deepest gratitude, it is simply a reflection of Albania's transformative journey.

The justice reform, the cornerstone of our progress, has yielded tangible results, strengthened the rule of law, and laid the ground for a more transparent and accountable judiciary.

Referring to the comments of my dear Greek colleague here, and not only related to the Himarë mayor-elect, as we are standing here in this organisation for the rule of law, I'd like to point out that no interference should be done in the justice system activity.

In Albania, due to the justice reform, everybody is equal before the law. This is not just a provision, but a legal reality which we should respect and uphold.

The justice reform along with several other reforms undertaken over the last decade has been pivotal in achieving the positive assessment we discussed today.

Albania's reforms have touched upon the three pillars of the Council of Europe: human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

In the realm of human rights, Albania has made strides in anti-discrimination efforts, ensuring that all citizens are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve. Our democracy has been bolstered by reforms in public administration and electoral processes, making our institutions more representative and responsive to the needs of the people.

The rule of law has been fortified through relentless fight against corruption and organised crime. These efforts have been recognised internationally as evidenced by Albania's exit from the enhanced monitoring procedure of MONEYVAL last October.

This exit is a clear indication of our dedication to combating financial crimes and enhancing transparency in our financial system.

Let us also acknowledge the support provided by the European Union and the Council of Europe through the horizontal facility programme, which has been instrumental in consolidating key reforms in the judiciary, property rights, and the penitentiary system.

These reforms have not only brought Albania closer to European standards, but they have also improved the daily lives of our citizens.

However, let me reiterate that we must recognise that the journey does not end here. We have a lot to do.

The positive assessment should serve as encouragement for Albania to continue its reformative path with even greater vigour.

It is with this spirit that I urge the Parliamentary Assembly to support the report and facilitate Albania's transition into post-monitoring dialogue. In doing so, we reaffirm our collective belief in the principle that binds us together as members of the Council of Europe.

Thank you, Mister Ionuț-Marian STROE, for your excellent work, and thank you members of the Assembly for considering Albania's continued commitment to our shared ideas.

Thank you.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Ms Klotilda BUSHKA.

The next speaker is Mr Ioannis OIKONOMOU.

Mr Ioannis OIKONOMOU (Greece, EPP/CD)*: I will speak in Greek.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are debating here a report about Albania.

At the very heart of this report, is a matter that is essential both in terms of human rights, but also in terms of values.

I'm talking about Fredi Beleri, an important member of the Greek minority in Albania. He was elected as a mayor in the most recent local elections, and since yesterday, his name has been put forward as a candidate to the European elections on behalf of the New Democracy party.

Mr Beleri was imprisoned on some very dubious pretexts. Since he's been imprisoned, he has been deprived of any right to defend himself.

According to Albanian legislation, there is absolutely no provision which prevents people who have been subject to such accusations being able to lay down their oath as mayor.

If Albania really wants to be a full member of the European family, they can't ignore European legislation.

The court in Albania took a decision based on prior instructions to ensure that Mr Beleri couldn't be appointed as mayor. Once again, they completely ignored the presumption of innocence.

I would also like to refer to some information which we heard during the hearing. Mr Arsen Rama, who is an essential witness, was bribed so as to be persuaded to say that Mr Beleri tried to bribe voters.

The day after the decision taken by the Albanian courts condemning Mr Beleri, the Council of Europe's decision to terminate the monitoring procedure for Albania was instrumentalised by Albania so as to burnish its credentials in the field of human rights and rule of law, while ignoring other events.

The events I'm referring to represent a clear infringement of the fundamental rights of the Council of Europe. Respect for democracy and rule of law are non-negotiable demands, but they are systematically violated by the Albanian Government.

This is why the termination of the monitoring procedure is unjustified. Protection of ethnic minorities and of the rights of the Greek minority are issues where Albania must always be subject to close scrutiny in the post-monitoring stage.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Mr Andrej HUNKO is next.

Mr Francesco SORBARA, you have the floor.

Mr Francesco SORBARA (Canada): Good evening everyone, good evening esteemed colleagues.

Thank you to the co-rapporteurs for this very comprehensive report.

Canada and Albania have enjoyed a close relationship for several years now, during which Canada has noted Albania's role in contributing to political stability in Southeast Europe.

In Canada there is a law or a bill that has been put in motion which would actually declare October Albanian heritage month as well as the minister of foreign affairs has visited Albania recently.

Today Canada appreciates Albania's clear and marked progress made in honouring its obligations and commitments to the Council of Europe as outlined in this report.

However, despite considerable progress, some valid concerns have been raised by the co-rapporteurs, concerns that remain key issues for the future of all Albanians.

For example marked progress is still needed regarding the protection of human rights, including through the respect for freedom of the media, as journalists continue to be the subject of intimidation strategies in the country, an issue that was raised by Canada during Albania's universal periodic review by the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2019.

But also with regard to the respect and protection of the rights of minority Albanian citizens. On this last point, Albania, like Canada, is a diverse and multicultural society, which I recognise comes with its shares of opportunities, but also challenges. To that I would first echo the report in mentioning that Albania's adoption of the 2017 law on the protection of national minorities was a major and welcome step forward. For the first time providing formal and legal recognition of 9 existing minorities in the country.

However, five years later, much remains to be done in terms of implementation namely, as pointed out by the co-rapporteurs, in respect to the right of education in minority languages.

We have two official languages in Canada and we know the importance for our citizens in minority situations to have access to quality education.

To quote the co-rapporteurs, "Education and minority languages is an important tool for minorities to protect their culture and ensure their rights".

The full implementation of Albania's 2017 law, with respect to the right to education in minority languages, will therefore contribute to Albania's human rights obligation as part of the Council of Europe, but would assist the successful conduct of the European Union Albania accession negotiations launched into 2022.

Today, just as the co-rapporteurs state "they strongly welcome the start of the EU accession negotiations", I will highlight that Canada also supports Albania's accession into the EU and its aspirations.

Nevertheless, in order to achieve those aspirations, I strongly support the reports' cause for full of implementation of Albania 2017 law on the protection of national minorities and the enactment of a proper Albanian legislation or greater protection of freedom of media.

It is a matter of values shared and defended by Canada and this entire Assembly.

Merci beaucoup, grazie, thank you.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Dear colleagues,

I must now interrupt the list of speakers.

The speeches of members on the speakers list who have been present during this 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 the type written text can be submitted electronically, if possible no later than 4 hours after the list of speakers is interrupted.

I now call Mr Ionuț-Marian STROE to reply to the debate.

Mr Ionuț-Marian STROE, you have 3 minutes.

Mr Ionuț-Marian STROE (Romania, EPP/CD, Rapporteur): Thank you, Mister Chair.

Thank you, dear colleagues, for your words, for your interventions.

Of course, I will take somebody's words and begin with the fact that, of course, nothing is perfect.

You saw that the Committee was fully aware, and we, the rapporteurs were fully aware of the numbers of concerns which remain to be addressed. Even if the authorities and the political forces in the parliament have assured us about their will to address all these remaining concerns, I will say from the very start that if no tangible or concrete progress will be made in addressing all these concerns and recommendations, Albania can be returned to the full monitoring procedure.

Of course, I will start explaining some things about the situation of the jailed mayor, Mr Beleri.

In this case, of course, if you don't know, was dealt with by the justice system and received the conviction for electoral fraud.

Of course, I understand some affinity for the members of the Greek community, but we are not in a position to judge on this case or make some statements about the case of electoral fraud.

However, we had some questions, we had some concerns which are specified in the report about the delayed judgment of the case, about the detention period, about the fact that this mayor was not permitted to take his mandate.

In this respect we have urged the authorities to respect the principles of due process and presumption of innocence.

We discussed in detail this case also in our visit to Albania.

The second thing that I will mention is about the media.

Mister Stefan SCHENNACH, you are totally right. I mentioned in the report that the Albanian authorities will mandatorily adopt effective and anti-SLAPP legislation, because the media environment, from our point of view, is the only area where we feel that no real progress has been made since the last report 10 years ago.

The freedom of the media is one of the main things when we are talking about democracy.

About minority rights, I cannot agree with the idea of one or two of our colleagues that the situation is deteriorating. No. The minority rights situation did improve, but of course, we clearly say that they still need further implementation of this law by adopting those three fundamental subsequent essential by-laws needed to implement the law on minorities adopted in 2017.

The political environment, yes. Unfortunately, Albania has some kind of sad history regarding this political dialogue between the forces in the parliament or in the country, but there are signs of improvement. There is dialogue between them. There are ad hoc committees formed. There are reforms that are starting in those committees in the parliament. For the first time we can say that the political dialogue is at least, for this moment, established.

One more thing to be added about the implementation of the decision of the courts. Yes, there are some problems. I mentioned them in the report. Being very honest, dear colleagues, implementing the decisions of especially of the European Court of Human Rights is a hard process for all the countries.

Okay, I will close, and I will say only one thing.

Dear colleagues, let's look at the bigger picture. The monitoring and post monitoring process is based, of course, on dialogue. We need to help this country to better its democracy, and we must guide them.

Thank you very much.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): I would give the floor to the Chair of the Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (also known as the "Monitoring Committee"), Ms Zanda KALNIŅA-LUKAŠEVICA.

Zanda, you have the floor for 3 minutes.

Ms Zanda KALNIŅA-LUKAŠEVICA (Latvia, EPP/CD, Chairperson of the Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee)): Dear President,

Dear colleagues,

This report marks an important moment for Albania and its democratic consolidation.

Evaluating the clear, marked progress made by Albania over the last years in honouring its commitments and obligations to the Council of Europe, the Committee proposes the closing of the monitoring procedure and to open a post-monitoring dialogue.

This is a very important achievement of the country. It took 19 years to arrive at this moment, and it was not an easy road.

Serious challenges had to be faced and obstacles overcome.

These obstacles are outlined in the report. A systemic political crisis, a polarised political environment, pervasive corruption, the influence of organised crime, and weak judicial institutions.

However, as the report underlines, together with the help of the Council of Europe and its other friends, Albania has successfully overcome most of these challenges.

The political crisis is largely overcome even if some of its root causes still remain to be addressed.

The judiciary has been reformed and the country courageously implemented a successful vetting procedure for its judiciary that should be, and already is, an example for other members states.

A comprehensive institutional structure has been put in place to fight corruption and organised crime and which has started to show tangible results.

This has been achieved by both the ruling majority and the opposition.

The report clearly shows that crucial progress was made when the opposition and the ruling majority overcame their polarisation and zero-sum game and policies and engaged in dialogue and co-operation for the better of the country. That has been a very important factor in reaching our conclusion and should be a guide for all. It is also an achievement of the monitoring procedure.

Indeed, this is an achievement of the monitoring procedure.

The report clearly shows that role played by the rapporteurs, the Monitoring Committee and the Assembly in encouraging and helping the different ruling majorities and the opposition to overcome their differences and find common solutions, and then providing it with recommendations and expertise and of maintaining a constructive and open dialogue with all political forces and stakeholders in the country.

Here I would like to join the rapporteur for both highlighting and thanking the Albanian delegation and Albanian authorities for the cordial and constructive dialogue with our rapporteurs and Committee over all these years.

Our work is not yet over. I hope, no, actually I'm sure that this excellent and fruitful co-operation will continue during the post-monitoring dialogue to resolve the few remaining, but nevertheless crucial issues and concerns.

I would like to thank our rapporteur, Mr Ionuț-Marian STROE, for his excellent, excellent work, and also all the previous rapporteurs whose work contributed to the report.

As Mr Ionuț-Marian STROE noted himself, monitoring reports are often group efforts.

I thank you very much, and I hope, dear colleagues, you will support this report as proposed by the Committee.

Thank you.

Vote: The honouring of obligations and commitments by Albania

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Sorry to interrupt. We don't have time, Zanda.

I have received an oral amendment from Mr STROE on behalf of the Committee which reads as follows.

“At the end of paragraph 16, insert the following words:

'The Assembly highlights the importance of respecting the protection of property and calls upon the Albanian authorities to ensure the enforcement of final judicial decisions issued by domestic courts on this matter thus avoiding the need for new cases to be brought before the European Court of Human Rights.'"

The President may accept an oral amendment on the grounds of promoting clarity, accuracy, or conciliation and if there is not opposition from ten or more members to it being debated.

If this oral Amendment is agreed to, Amendment 1 will fall.

In my opinion the oral Amendment meets the criteria of Rule 34.7.a. Is there any opposition to the Amendment being debated?

That is not the case. I therefore call Mr STROE to support the oral Amendment.

You have 30 seconds.

Mr Ionuț-Marian STROE (Romania, EPP/CD, Rapporteur): Thank you, Mister Chair.

The Amendment misses a very important human rights aspect: the non-execution of the domestic court decision in the property cases. From my point of view, I fully support the referring to this important issue in the resolution. However, I felt the the text could be more concise and strengthened. In this way, I was proposing that compromise Amendment to be put after paragraph number 16.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Does anyone wish to speak against the oral Amendment?

No.

The Committee is obviously in favour.

I shall now put the Amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The oral Amendment is accepted.

We will now proceed to vote on the draft resolution contained in Document 15950 [as amended].

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The draft resolution is accepted unanimously.

Dear colleagues,

I have the honour to announce the results on the election of the judge to the European Court of Human Rights for Liechtenstein.

Total number of members voting: 131

Number of spoilt or blank ballot papers: 1

Number of valid votes: 130

Absolute majority of the vote cast: 66

The votes were cast as follows:

Mr Alain Chablais: 79

Ms Marie-Louise Gächter: 3

Ms Catherine Reiter: 48

Mr Alain Chablais, having obtained the majority of votes cast, is elected judge of the European Court of Human Rights for a term of office of 9 years, which shall commence not later than 1 September 2024.

The Assembly will hold its next public sitting tomorrow at 10:00 a.m. with the agenda which was approved on Monday.

The sitting is adjourned.

Good night.