



Provisional edition

Tuesday 1 October 2024, afternoon

Official report of debates

Opening of the sitting No 27

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Good evening, dear colleagues.

The sitting is open. Yes.

Sir Edward LEIGH (United Kingdom, EC/DA): Can I ask why again and again these debates don't start on time? Can we please have a rule that all debates should start on the dot?

Joint debate: A shared European approach to address migrant smuggling / Missing migrants, refugees and asylum seekers – A call to clarify their fate

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): I would applaud this as well. You have my apologies.

This is the first time – the first time – since I was elected last January that there is a delay of 10 minutes. There was not even a 1 minute delay in all other sessions. So I accept what you have said but please recall that since I was elected President of this Assembly, which is a great honour, it is the first time – it is the fourth session we have had – and it is the first time that there was a delay.

My apologies. I was with the 11 families of people who came from Ukraine to meet the President of this Assembly because they having missing persons – they are in jail, detained or killed and I felt like I had the obligation having the honour to represent you all not to stay with them only half an hour. It took me 5 more minutes.

So, dear colleagues, I just want to remind you that you should insert your badge before taking the floor. As you begin your speech, please press the microphone button once only.

I have the honour of announcing the results for the election of a judge for the European Court of Human Rights for Poland.

The total number of members voting: 154; the number of spoilt or blank ballot papers: 0; the number of valid votes: 154; the absolute majority of the votes cast: 78.

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.

The votes were cast as follows:

Ms Anna ADAMSKA-GALLANT: 107.

Ms Małgorzata WĄSEK-WIADEREK: 9.

Mr Adam WIŚNIEWSKI: 38.

Ms Anna ADAMSKA-GALLANT, having obtained a majority of votes cast, is elected judge of the European Court of Human Rights for a term of office of nine years, which shall commence no later than three months after her election.

I think we should applaud her.

Dear colleagues,

We now come to the joint debate on two reports from the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons. The first is titled "A shared European approach to address migrant smuggling" presented by Lord Simon RUSSELL; the second is titled "Missing migrants, refugees and asylum seekers – A call to clarify their fate" presented by Mr Julian PAHLKE, which will be followed by a statement by Mr Michael O'FLAHERTY, Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe.

In order to finish by 5:30 p.m., I will interrupt the list of speakers at about 4:50 p.m., to allow time for the reply and the vote.

I call now Lord Simon RUSSELL, rapporteur, to present the first report. As you know, you have 7 minutes now, and 3 minutes at the end to reply to the debate.

You have the floor.

Lord Simon RUSSELL (United Kingdom, EC/DA, Rapporteur): Thank you very much, Mister President.

Dear colleagues and Commissioner for Human Rights, it's a privilege to speak before you today about some of the issues around migrant smuggling which are fuelling the angry and often divisive dialogue of the deaf in our national and international political debates, particularly in this year of elections.

This report aims to contribute in a calm and reasoned way PACE's input to the current discussions on migrant smuggling across Europe.

The smuggling of migrants is cross-national and international by nature. Countering it requires intensive, complex, and continuous cross border cooperation between governments and law enforcement authorities. And this can only work well if sufficient resources are available and when policies and practices are aligned to the same standards and legal definitions. It is an uncomfortable challenge and balancing act for sovereign states and groupings of sovereign states to manage their borders and to combat transnational crime, including instrumentalisation, while simultaneously adhering to international human rights law.

But let me be absolutely clear. I do not consider that it is the role of the Council of Europe to interfere, or to be seen to interfere, with such sovereign rights. These are the competence of nation states and of the EU, to which 27 of our member states belong.

But I do consider that our role is to emphasise and underscore the core principles of human rights and the rule of law which virtually all member states are signed up to. Last year, at the Reykjavík Summit, European leaders reiterated the importance of international cooperation in fighting against the smuggling of migrants. And the Committee of ministers is now reflecting on whether the Council of Europe should adopt an instrument on migrant smuggling.

Last month, the Council of Europe organised the second international Conference on Migrant Smuggling, where I presented the preliminary conclusions of my report. The permanent representatives of member states were present alongside colleagues from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Interpol,

European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation (Eurajust), and prosecutors from member states. We heard about the concrete efforts already underway over the past years to help structure the judicial and police response to this crime.

These efforts are part of the renewed efforts by our partner, the European Union, which has begun the process of updating its legislation in this field. And the rationale for this report is largely due to the timing of these new initiatives. The crime of migrant smuggling is clearly defined in international human rights law in the Palermo Protocol to the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, and it is defined as the procurement of the illegal entry of a person into a state party in order to obtain a financial or other material benefit.

45 member states have signed this protocol, yet national legislation remains very inconsistent, and many countries conflate irregular border crossing and migrant smuggling. It is my hope and contention that if PACE and other bodies work together to acknowledge and address such inconsistencies, this will reinforce and underpin the entirely legitimate right of sovereign states to control their borders while simultaneously safeguarding the rights of people on the move.

I do not believe that these two objectives are not achievable together and can't be reconciled.

The draft resolution and recommendation call for the adoption of a joint definition on migrant smuggling across member states, and this definition should clarify what the crime of migrant smuggling does and does not involve. This would help avoid unintended consequences, such as the criminalisation of humanitarian assistance, and it would help focus the deployment of technical, material, and human resources on the increasingly intensive and coordinated investigative operations against high level structured smuggling businesses and other associated cross-border crimes, without transgressing established human rights protections.

I now want to touch on a difficult, divisive, and contentious subject, the instrumentalisation of migration movements by states such as Russia and Belarus.

As a UK citizen, I am uncomfortably aware of the contentious issue of migrants and refugees arriving across the English Channel, and I can only imagine how shocked and disillusioned one might be in a neighbouring state to have a rogue state weaponise the import and then forcible export of human beings across one's borders. The Assembly adopted in 2021 a resolution on this which was extremely well intended, but I'm sure it is of little help or comfort to the countries which are the recipients of these people being pushed across borders. And I contend that this problem cannot be resolved and diminished by pushbacks. Indeed, I suspect that the controversies that result from pushbacks and the agonising about them in organisations like ours actually brings a smile to the face of those responsible for instrumentalisation, and probably encourages them to redouble their efforts to bring even more misery and political turmoil to their neighbours.

If we want to be credible and efficient in our response to criminal acts, we must be clear, and consistent in our laws, definitions, and principles. Pushbacks are an understandable response from a frontline state that may feel it gets warm words and sympathy from fellow states that in fact breathe a prayer of thanks that they're not in the front line against instrumentalisation themselves. That is cold comfort.

As I mentioned earlier, the timing of this report is quite deliberate. The EU is about to consider a new raft of measures to enable itself and its member states to respond more forcefully and effectively than it does at present. The members of the Council of Europe, which are most heavily affected by migrant smuggling and instrumentalisation, are also EU members. I contend that it is our job to define, collate, and clarify the multiple human rights protections and legal rights which have evolved over time. That is what is behind this report. But it is not our job to tell nation states or the EU how they should respond. It is our job to remind them that there are lines which should not be crossed.

We must work together with them and not run the risk of being perceived as well intentioned and idealistic interfering idiots, or even as unhelpful competitors. It is my hope that this report will help contribute to this what must be a joint effort, and I look forward to the debate and listening to your comments and suggestions.

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

I now call Mr Julian PAHLKE, rapporteur, to present this second report.

You have 7 minutes now and 3 minutes at the end to reply to the debate.

Mr Julian PAHLKE (Germany, SOC, Rapporteur): Dear Mister Chair, dear colleagues,

Before my time as a parliamentarian, I spent more than four years on rescue vessels in the central Mediterranean. I worked tirelessly with many others to prevent people from drowning in the Mediterranean. We had dramatic rescues where everyone survived and was brought to safety.

And we had those rescues where people drowned also in front of my own eyes, simply because we weren't enough rescuers in the area on this day.

And I will never forget the day when we found the body of a drowned woman that had already been floating in the sea for a couple of days. Even with all our efforts, we weren't able to retrieve it because it was already coming apart. We waited for hours for a larger vessel with better equipment. We put so much effort into retrieving this body because we wanted to preserve what was left of this person's dignity; for her not to be entirely forgotten; for her relatives to have at least the slightest chance to know of the death of their loved one.

Like this woman, more than 30 000 people have vanished in the central Mediterranean alone in the past ten years, not even considering the migration routes over land or the deaths at land borders.

It is a question of humanity to prevent people from going missing in the first place, but also to preserve every piece of information when the person actually goes missing; to allow for the families to search for their loved ones, to create certainty, to allow for the necessary paperwork and certificates to be issued, like a death certificate.

All of this matters.

It is therefore my privilege to discuss with you the report and the recommendations.

In brief, I believe that we need a centralised approach to storing the DNA of victims and with this, to also allow for a centralised matching system for relatives. With the help of civil society organisations, humanitarians and the co-operation of states, relatives should be able to turn to an institution when in search for their loved ones.

Also, family often lack access to the country where their relative is buried or the remains are located. If states would improve their access to visas for relatives to attend a funeral or to repatriate the mortal remains, we would allow families to grieve and to finally close a chapter which has remained open for too long.

I was generously hosted by Greece for a visit under my mandate. Their practice of identification after the Pylos incident was outstanding and can serve as an example. But by the use of such practices, we would at least preserve some of the human dignity of those who go missing.

And of course, if such a system would be in place, it would not save a life, but it would be necessary. But it's an answer to the question: which value does human dignity have, and how long does dignity last? And our answer is: human dignity is an achievement of our civilisation and it goes beyond death.

Thank you.

(Light applause)

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

I would now like to welcome Mr Michael O'FLAHERTY, Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe. Mr Michael O'FLAHERTY will make a statement now and I have the honour to give you the floor.

Mr Michael O'FLAHERTY (Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe): Thank you very much, Mister President.

I greatly appreciate the invitation to return to the Plenary. And I thank you and the honourable members for the welcome.

Since I took up the mandate of Commissioner, I've spent a considerable amount of time engaging on issues of migration. I've spent a lot of that time visiting walls – new walls, higher walls along our frontiers. I've witnessed and I've argued against the repudiation of law. And I've observed with increasing concern the opening of the issue of the renegotiation of treaties.

There's one common theme running across these manifestations, and that is the theme of making our borders and our countries more secure. I would argue that it's a dangerous and misguided direction for at least three reasons.

First, this toughening of border policy does not serve its stated purpose, at least in the medium term, it makes the smugglers more daring. It makes them more dangerous, more ruthless and equally effective.

Second, this model of securitisation posits a human rights security zero-sum game that is false. Human rights respectful migration policy is actually better migration policy – predictable, fair, trustworthy.

And third, strategies that lead to the violation of international law are corrosive of the rule of law.

So what would a human rights compliant refugee and migration and border policy look like? It would have at least five elements, which I'll very quickly present to you now, starting with the topics of the two reports before you.

Firstly, on the matter of curbing smuggling, which is a vital task, the smugglers must be treated as the criminals that they are, but nevertheless, I would urge that we pay attention to the root cause of smuggling, and that is the absence of safe and legal pathways for migrants and for their applications for protection to be considered.

Second, we must be very careful in the deals we make with third states in the management of smuggling. Just look at the situation some countries have found themselves in in regard to relationships with countries such as Libya and Tunisia.

And third, as the rapporteur has spoken of just a few moments ago: let's avoid the criminalisation of humanitarian action by insisting that any definition of smuggling be that contained in the Palermo Protocol.

And finally, in terms of criminalisation, for goodness sake, avoid the temptation of criminalising smuggled people.

Turning to the issue of missing migrants, I agree with Mr Julian PAHLKE about the importance of the topic. And he was able to describe in a much more potent form than could I, why it is such an important topic. But if you'll allow, I'd like to concentrate now on the issue of its prevention. Two things here: again, safe and legal pathways are integral to the avoiding of deaths at sea and elsewhere. And second, speaking of the sea, we have got to enhance search and rescue capacity. Frankly, it's a disgrace for our countries together and separately, that we do not have in place in the Mediterranean the capacity to rescue drowning people.

Turning to other areas, once people arrive, it is vital that we give them a meaningful opportunity to apply for international protection and that we give them an individuated determination of their case. And in this context, I don't feel the need to debate pushbacks. For me, it's clear. Pushbacks are an intolerable and egregious violation of law.

Fourth, we need to ensure decent reception conditions. We can do it. Much of the problem we encounter in terms of overcrowding, bad facilities, poor care, is our own doing because we put the reception facilities in the wrong places for tactical reasons. We put them in remote locations and we crowd them into single places where resources are stretched. All such issues can easily be avoided.

Fifth, and finally, I would strongly encourage that our member states consider putting in place independent human rights monitoring systems at the borders. Where this has been tried, it has found to be useful and effective in terms of reducing the allegations of abuse and in general enhancing the sense of trust in the systems.

Time is short, and so I conclude here by means of citing the world's arguably most powerful advocate for better migration policy, Pope FRANCIS. Speaking recently, he recalled that migration cannot be managed by stricter laws or border militarisation. Instead, he said, it requires a justice, fraternity and solidarity.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you. Thank you very much, Mister Michael O'FLAHERTY, for your insightful address.

In the debate I will call first Mr Petri HONKONEN from the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.

Mr Petri HONKONEN (Finland, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister President, dear colleagues.

First I want to thank our rapporteurs, Lord Simon RUSSELL and Mr Julian PAHLKE, for their excellent work on these sensitive questions.

On behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, I must say how unfortunate it is that so often in this Assembly we talk about and consider consequences, because that means that we are already too late. A dead human being in the Mediterranean is somebody's beloved daughter, son, husband, sister or a friend. This terrible phenomenon that we see in the Mediterranean Sea is a severe consequence of the incapability of European states to stop this tragedy that is unfolding before our very own eyes.

This report rightly raises a strong need to have joint efforts to prevent deaths, but also clarify the fate of the lost people.

The European Convention of Human Rights clearly states that member states have a duty to prevent any violations to the right to life and investigate any cases of unnatural death. From this perspective, Europe and EU member states should work better. Building walls will not stop people from seeking refuge. To prevent the phenomenon of irregular migration, we need better international co-operation and functional, safe routes for those who seek safety.

We must engage in co-operation with African countries of origin and better support their development and stability. We must also improve humanitarian aid and support.

The EU's role is crucial in implementing these policies with African states, but also in generating rescue operations.

From a liberal perspective, it would be most desirable that all member states respect human dignity and do their utmost in solving the fate of missing people, but also in recognising unknown bodies.

The toolkit for this is rapidly improving, but there is still some uncertainty in the use of modern technology in these measures. The protection of personal data is important, and I'm also glad that the resolution covers also this aspect.

Thank you.

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

Mr Paul GAVAN, on behalf of the Group of the Unified European Left.

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

On behalf of the United European left, I want to commend the rapporteurs of both of these reports.

And I want to particularly welcome the speech by our new Human Rights Commissioner, who called out very clearly for a human rights compliance migration policy. That's what all of us should be able to agree on in this chamber.

The first thing I want to say is that people fleeing conflict are dying, especially in the Mediterranean, en route to Europe due to a lack of safe pathways. The fact that reports like these need to be written is proof positive of our collective failure to protect desperate and vulnerable human beings trying to make their way to Europe. This failure is compounded by the fact that many of these desperate people are fleeing wars and the aftermath of wars created by western countries.

In the limited time available I want to focus particularly on Mr Julian PAHLKE's report. It's timely given the recent increase of deaths at sea. 2023 was the deadliest year on record for migrants, and the International Organization for Migration has estimated that more than 1 000 human beings have died or been reported missing in the central Mediterranean Sea since the start of 2024.

There are many reasons why migrants go missing, and obvious reasons why we need to ascertain what happened to them, all of which are laid out very well in this report.

The report rightly points out the need for harmonised standards of reporting, investigating, and the handling of information on missing migrants and refugees. The support or lack of for families of missing people is a huge issue. It is awful to hear that some families can't access visas to help with the search or identification of their loved ones, or indeed to arrange their funeral or repatriation.

The financial burden of all of this, as well as the administrative blocks that families face in search of information, is both heartbreaking and cruel.

The report also acknowledges that there are some good practices being used and acknowledged the work of the Missing Migrants Project, the Family Links network and Interpol's I-Familia initiative.

According to data collected by the Missing Migrant Project, globally 68 000 human beings have died since 2014. The remains of 28 000 people who lost their lives during migration have not been recovered. Over 30 000 of those dead or missing migrants were recorded on the Mediterranean routes. We know that search and rescue efforts and the facilitation of safe, regular migration could prevent many of these deaths. But instead, Europe maintains its dangerous policy of pushbacks and dodgy deals with countries who have appalling track records for human rights abuses, like Libya and Tunisia.

On a recent fact-finding trip to Lampedusa for the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons, I heard first-hand testimony from children. Boys who've suffered horrendous torture and abuse at the hands of the Libyan authorities, the weaponisation of migration, the cruel plans for an EU migration pact that will only lead to detention centres across our borders. We must and can do much better.

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

On behalf of the Socialist Group, Mr Paulo PISCO.

Mr Paulo PISCO (Portugal, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you Chair, dear colleagues,

These two reports, on missing migrants and on migrant smuggling, deal with very complex and sensitive domains, where the violation of human rights are permanent, with much violence and loss of lives.

Smuggling migrants is an attractive criminal activity because it has a huge economical return and is not easy to fight, because it often happens beyond our borders and has the complicity of corrupt state authorities and security forces.

But instead of closing our eyes to the frequent barbaric violations of human rights, just because some countries want above all to prevent migrants from arriving at their borders, we need a more human approach, to protect people from violence, exploitation and degrading treatment, as happens in some countries, and bigger political efforts to fight more effectively against migrant smuggling.

It is not acceptable as something normal that so many lives of migrants are lost in the journey, on land and in sea, especially in the Mediterranean, and them just be abandoned. Countries have the moral duty to do everything they can to give dignity to the people that die on their soil without reaching their dream of a better and free life. That is the main subject of the powerful and very human report of our colleague Mr Julien PAHLKE, whom I congratulate.

In this sense, people who die in the journey to reach Europe should not be abandoned, and national practices and procedures to investigate, recuperate and identify their bodies should be effective, including warning their respective families, with respect to international humanitarian law. Human dignity exists also in the way we treat dead people.

On the other hand, the report of Lord Simon RUSSEL, beyond presenting a broad perspective of the legal instruments at the national and international level to fight migrant smuggling, touches on some relevant points, such as the need to protect borders, but with full respect for human rights and of the right of peoples to move.

Even if migration flows can't be stopped by decree, it is of utmost importance to create legal, accessible and safe channels for migrants, paying special attention to women, children and victims of political violence.

Therefore, it is also fundamental to establish co-operation in the domain of migrations with countries of origin, transit and arrival, but I would like to underline this: with a clear accountability, to prevent the scandalous violations of human rights as happens in Libya or Tunisia, as is frequently denounced.

Migrants are not criminals, nor are the humanitarian organisations from civil society that help to save lives in the process of integration.

Above all, migrants are victims of several disorders that affect their lives and their communities, such as poverty, war and repression. That's why these reports are so important.

Thank you.

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

On behalf of the Group of the European People's Party, Ms Dora BAKOYANNIS.

Madam Dora BAKOYANNIS, you have to press the button. Have you inserted your card? Madam Dora BAKOYANNIS, sorry to interrupt. Have you inserted your card? Yeah. Okay. Can you try once again, please? Yes.

Ms Dora BAKOYANNIS (Greece, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Sorry, dear colleagues.

There is a fundamental rule in foreign affairs. Foreign policy should never be dictated by domestic politics. Reducing broader national interests into the opportunism of electoral campaigning and party politics is the quickest path to national tragedies. Migration is a complex international issue of threats and opportunities. As such, it requires close pan-European co-operation and co-ordination.

To labour under the illusion that effective management of migration can be tackled with the dissolution of the European system of collaboration is to cultivate the ground for the rise of radical ideologies in our continent.

On the one hand, Europe solely needs migrant labour. In the EU, we had 5 million fewer working-age adults in 2021 compared to 2011 – 5 million fewer people in ten years. By 2050, Europe may have less than two working-age adults for each elderly person. There is no national insurance system that can withstand such pressure.

On the other hand, it shall be up to us, not the smugglers, to control what kind of migration we need. Illegal migration is a problem that is tackled at the source of the external border. I heard very carefully what everybody says. I live every day the struggle of the Greek coastguards trying to save lives in the Aegean and what it means for every one of them when one child is lost, when one pregnant woman didn't manage to come alive to shore. It is a very difficult situation, dear colleagues.

Raising barriers, as we hear today, between Schengen countries and threatening migrant returns to the countries of first entry can be both dangerous and counterproductive. Experts are adamant they do not provide a fix.

On the contrary, such move could backfire when voters realise that measures do not work, driving even more people to the hands of extremes. So let me try to be as clear as possible. There is no other way than very close co-operation if we want to tackle the problem.

And first of all, we have to be honest with each other. Co-operation and collaboration means that all countries have their share of responsibilities. Greece, Italy, Malta, we are not the only ones who have to deal with the immigration problem. We have to be assured that all the countries together can work and so that we have a clear message to the smugglers that they will not make the decisions and to the immigrants that there is a legal path to come and work and prosper in Europe. These two policies must go hand in hand. If not, I'm afraid we will be sitting here and just recall what might be possible but we didn't do.

Thank you very much.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): On behalf of the European Conservatives Group, Mr Norbert KLEINWÄCHTER.

Mr Norbert KLEINWÄCHTER (Germany, EC/DA, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you Mister President, dear colleagues,

Let's cut the sweet talk.

Migrants going missing or dying in the sea are the cruel side of mass migration. Last year alone, amid the promise of a life in luxury, 1.14 million people sought asylum in the EU, most of who were not actual refugees.

It always works according to the same process. There is a community at home that collects money. They send a man, the man pays a smuggler, the smuggler places the man in a boat, the man throws away the passport, breaches one border or several borders illegally, selects a country of destination according to the best access to money, uses the money to fund the community at home and to fund the next trip for the next migrant, and eventually files for family reunification.

All this has nothing to do with fleeing directly from a territory where their life or freedom was threatened, which is a definition of a refugee according to article 31 of the UN Convention relating to the Statutes of Refugees.

We are talking about migrants, we are not talking about refugees.

And it's a system with an extremely high death toll. 37 000 people alone have drowned in the past ten years in the seas, in the hope for a better life, because they're rescue operators, because they're smugglers, promising them the world, and those people die.

It's a shame!

Because what happens if the rescue ship is not there? What happens if, like three days ago, in front of the Canary Islands, the people are so excited to see the rescue ship that the little boat actually capsizes? People die.

And anyone who is part of the migration route, any smuggler, any rescuer, carries the blood of many dead migrants on their hands.

And Mr Julian PAHLKE, you should not be proud of what you did before becoming a politician. You were on those so-called rescue ships, on that so-called humanitarian assistance that is really a part of the smuggler's migration route and a direct help to illegal entry into our border and the cause for the death of hundreds of people drowning in the sea.

So what can we do about missing migrants?

Certainly the solution cannot be to fly in relatives to identify victims, as is suggested in the report. No. Basically, how should we even find out the identification if people have thrown away their passports? Because, surprise! They're not coming from a territory where their life is in danger. They're simply migrants. So we will never actually be able to identify those missing migrants.

And we don't get any further if we protect the smugglers and if we always underline how much we have to protect the migrants. No. If they are criminals and anyone who breaches a border illegally, and especially several borders illegally, is a criminal, then we, as the Council of Europe, with the rule of law, cannot protect these people.

We now need to make sure that no illegal traveler reaches our shores. We need to stop paying and protecting those that make a joke of our borders, of our sovereignty, and of our need for safety and self-determination. That is the only answer to missing migrants and to migrant smuggling.

Thank you.

(Light applause and cheers)

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

Next is Ms Sandra ZAMPA.

Ms Sandra ZAMPA (Italy, SOC): Thank you, President.

First of all, I would like to express my appreciation for the excellent work done by my colleagues Mr Julian PAHLKE and Lord Simon RUSSELL on such dramatic issues as the disappearance of migrants and the need for a shared approach to address migrant trafficking.

We need to multiply the efforts already underway to ascertain the fate of those who go missing by putting in place a properly funded plan of action, respecting human rights and humanitarian law, beginning with the need to identify the bodies, wherever they are found, and give them burial. A tradition that has accompanied our civilization since antiquity and comes from Antigone, the heroine of Sophocles' Greek tragedy. Burying the dead is the first ethical imperative of the living, and it is a heartbreaking duty to remember that in Lampedusa there are no more places in the cemetery, where burials take place respecting the rites of the different faiths.

And then, there is the need to counter traffickers while respecting, however, rights and, in particular, proceeding on a case-by-case basis, distinguishing between those who profit or benefit from trafficking and those who help on a non-profit basis. To them goes our thanks. And those who find themselves forced, perhaps, to drive dilapidated boats. A beautiful Oscar-nominated Italian film *Io Capitano*, which tells the story of a boy forced to become a boat driver, speaks of this. Often they are minors, often they are blackmailed

women, as in the case of the two Iranian women. Their names are Marjan JAMALI, detained with her son and recently under house arrest in Italy, or like Maysoon MAJIDI, in prison for over a year on charges of aiding and abetting, two women who have fled Iran.

I ask that the Council of Europe also join those calling for their release. We cannot make migrants victims twice. Our purpose here is to protect human rights. This is the *raison d'être* of this Council, and at this time, we must really rise to the challenge that the present presents to us. That challenge is to work together to give a future to those who seek a future and to integrate them into our society, certainly to defend them and to protect their lives and dignity.

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

Mr Ioannis OIKONOMOU is next.

Mr Ioannis OIKONOMOU (Greece, EPP/CD)*: Thank you, Mister President, dear colleagues

I will speak in Greek.

I would like to refer to the problem of migration which is an extremely serious issue.

And as we know a certain number of countries are changing tacks in terms of immigration policies and backtracking when it comes to commitments entered into within the Schengen area.

Crises, wars in Africa, in Asia, authoritarian or dictatorial regimes - all these have led to increases in migratory flows. I think there are also economic reasons, as has been said, of people who leave and migrate in search of a better economic future.

But I don't think we should allow smugglers or terrorist organisations to gain the upper hand. We should not allow this lucrative business model when it comes to migrant smuggling to gain the upper hand.

Europe is very much under unprecedented pressure and I believe that today's migrants find themselves in dire straits when arriving in Europe, when they set foot in European countries, they find it hard to be integrated compared to past generations of migrants, I think their life is much harder.

Europe too is living through difficult times. I think our economies in a number of countries are under pressure. Europe's citizens state that one of the main causes of their difficulties is migrants, or migration.

Certainly what we need is to look at the real causes of this phenomenon. I believe we should find effective ways of averting their arrival in Europe. It's too late when they arrive in Europe, along Greek, Italian, Maltese borders. It's too late at that point, we're no longer in a position to manage these migratory flows. What we need to do is co-operate with countries of origin. We need to have a major plan along the lines of a Marshall Plan, possibly, when it comes to co-operating with these countries that are countries of origin of these migrants.

Increasingly, we are hearing talk of 'chosen migration' – in other words, the ability of countries to choose skilled workers who would represent a value added within the economy.

But I think we are up against an interesting phenomenon. The real talents, those who are qualified, are no longer being attracted to Europe, they're attracted by Canada, by North America. So we are not in a position to attract talent.

Greece, my own country, is very much under pressure. We're attempting to stem pushbacks, to save lives, and we'll continue doing that.

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

Mr Marco DREOSTO is next.

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

Ladies and gentlemen,

The recent election victory of the FPO in Austria, the conservative parties advancing in all European nations, from France to Germany, from Spain to the Netherlands, passing, of course, through Italy, have one lowest common denominator: citizens are demanding more security. The strategy of open doors at all costs, of migration policies decided by NGOs, of the lucrative business of co-operatives on migrants, of unpunished human traffickers, is coming to an end. The left is also realising this, but very belatedly.

The UK Prime Minister Keir STARMER, on a visit to Rome, applauded Italy's decision to set up a centre outside its borders for migrants waiting for their asylum claims to be processed. Germany's Socialist Chancellor Olaf SCHOLZ even suspended Schengen to give answers to German citizens who demanded more security.

In short, everyone seems to be waking up. But unfortunately in Italy there are still some who seem instead to go against this very direction and against this awakening. I would like to denounce in this courtroom, where we discuss fundamental rights, human rights, how a minister of the Italian Republic is unjustly serving a trial against him for acting in full compliance with the mandate received from the Italian citizens. This minister is Matteo SALVINI, who is facing up to 15 years in prison for having temporarily prevented, think, six days, the disembarkation of a ship of migrants, asking Europe, that Europe of solidarity, to share the responsibility of reception, in vain, evidently.

It was his duty to defend Italy's borders and ensure that migrant flows were managed in a safe and orderly manner, in the full sovereignty of our country and in the national interest. Matteo SALVINI did what many before him had only promised: to protect our country from uncontrolled migration flows that have often led to human tragedies, it has been said in this room, to tragedies at sea and to serious social problems. We are here today, as always, to say that Matteo SALVINI is not alone. He is on the right side of history, on the side of those who have the courage to make difficult choices for the common good, even at the cost of being attacked, prosecuted, arrested.

Italians, as recent polls show, are with him, and I am sure that by defending Italian borders, Matteo SALVINI has also defended European borders. And in this important international forum where we are, with so many foreign friends and colleagues, I invite you to think carefully about the implications of this unjust political process and to assess this situation with objectivity and intellectual honesty.

That intellectual honesty that evidently many in Italy unfortunately lack.

Thank you.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you for your contribution.

Mr Clause KERN, you have the floor.

Press the button.

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

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank our colleagues Lord Simon RUSSELL and Mr Julian PAHLKE for their very enlightening reports on the tragedies that can befall migrants at the mercy of smugglers.

Forced labour, sexual exploitation and death sometimes await migrants who leave their countries at the behest of smugglers who promise them a better life. My country is no stranger to such tragedies, as several migrants have died trying to cross the English Channel on small boats to reach the UK.

Faced with this tragic situation, we must act to combat the illegal trafficking of migrants with the utmost firmness, without trampling on their rights.

One of the virtues of our colleague Lord RUSSELL's report is that it clarifies the applicable legal framework and certain concepts, as well as highlighting any gaps in the Council of Europe's convention system. It does include a convention on the fight against human trafficking, but not on the smuggling of migrants. Perhaps action should be envisaged in this area to strengthen international co-operation, in line with the resolve expressed at Reykjavik by the Heads of State and Government to combat the trafficking and smuggling of migrants through international co-operation, while continuing to protect victims and respect the human rights of migrants and refugees.

Although controlling their borders is obviously a sovereign right of states, combating the illicit trafficking of migrants requires enhanced international co-operation and therefore real consistency between the member states of our organisation, as was the case with the establishment, in December 2021, of the Council of Europe Network of Prosecutors on Migrant Smuggling.

Given the magnitude of the issues at stake, we certainly need to go further today, ensuring the necessary balance between firmness towards smugglers and respect for migrants' rights.

I believe that greater co-operation between the Council of Europe and the European Union is essential for more effective action, particularly in establishing common rules for freezing or seizing assets derived from migrant smuggling.

Within our respective countries, too, co-operation between the various authorities should enable us to be more effective in the fight against migrant smuggling.

Finally, co-operation between countries of origin, transit and destination of migratory movements must be improved. This implies police and judicial co-operation, of course, but also the effective development of safe, legal migration routes. This will not only protect migrants from smugglers, but also make migrant smuggling less lucrative.

I shall therefore be voting in favor of the draft resolution and recommendation submitted to us today.

Thank you for your support.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you for your contribution.

Lord Don TOUHIG, you have the floor.

Lord Don TOUHIG (United Kingdom, SOC): President, few of us sitting in this Chamber today would disagree that our most precious gifts are our children. They're our future. We love them, we cherish them, we care for them. And yet countless numbers of refugee and migrant children go missing across Europe every year.

As Mr Julian PAHLKE points out in his report, his excellent report, all too often, the plight of these missing children goes unreported, while their vulnerability and exploitation to abuse by criminals is extremely high.

These refugee children not only have the need of our protection, they're entitled to it under the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child. And yet, across our continent, the health and well being of these unaccompanied children is being compromised.

Thousands of refugee children are suffering.

They're being abused, they're being trafficked, they're self-harming. And, President, there is evidence that some have taken their own lives.

To support them, we must challenge those using toxic rhetoric about migration and displaying intolerance and prejudice, which violates basic human rights. Political point scoring about refugees, most especially refugee migrant children, should not be allowed to spoil these children's future.

In Britain, over the past year or so, some 4 000 unaccompanied migrant children were placed in hotels which at that time was illegal. 200 plus have gone missing, one was aged 10. And a whistleblower working in one hotel reported seeing youngsters being picked up in the street outside the hotel and taken away in cars to be trafficked and abused.

Many of these children arrived on British shores in boats organised by criminal gangs whose only purpose is to get as much money for the task as they possibly can.

Those making the journey across the English Channel are seeking a better life, nothing more. Yet many people, not just intolerant, not just extremists, not even those on the far right, but ordinary citizens, have been persuaded that the boat people are the problem, when in fact they are the victims.

The problem is the criminal traffickers who exploit them.

Colleagues, there is a lack of co-ordination across our continent to do anything about this.

My friend Lord Simon RUSSELL in his welcome report points out some of the challenges we face in combating the migrant traffickers. I would mention just two.

First, the traffickers gain considerable profits from a thriving business. And second, Europe has problems with border management, control, and working together.

He concludes by stressing the need for greater co-operation and working together. And colleagues, unless we persuade the nations of Europe to work together, the criminal traffickers will continue unhindered and tens of thousands of migrant children, many of them unaccompanied children, will be abandoned, and their hope of a life dashed.

We know where the criminal traffickers get the boats from. We know where they get the engines from. We even know where they get the petrol to drive the engines from. And yet we do nothing. Working together, using our intelligence services, using our capacity to track, trace, and disrupt these traffickers, using our police and military forces, we can destroy these traffickers.

Colleagues, what are we waiting for?

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you for your contribution.

Madam Aysu BANKOĞLU, you have the floor.

Ms Aysu BANKOĞLU (Türkiye, SOC): Madam Chair,

I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to both rapporteurs for their comprehensive reports on the issues of missing migrants and migrant smuggling.

Migrants are often forced by smugglers to travel in overcrowded and perilous conditions. Smugglers frequently guide them through risky routes, leading to tragedies where many migrants either go missing or lose their lives. As a member of parliament from Türkiye, a country profoundly impacted by this crisis, I would like to emphasise several key points.

Türkiye currently hosts approximately 8 million migrants, making it the world's leading refugee-hosting nation. This situation presents significant economic, political and social challenges. Our country occupies a strategic geographic position, serving as a major gateway for migrants attempting to reach Europe. The ongoing conflicts in Syria and Afghanistan have driven countless individuals, including women and children, to undertake dangerous journeys in search of safety and a better future.

Despite our robust border security measures and regulatory efforts, these are not sufficient to fully curb the smuggling of migrants. In light of persistent conflicts and humanitarian crises, the need for an international legal framework to combat smuggling and protect the rights of its victims has never been more pressing.

Yet, we should also keep in mind that smuggling is a consequence, not a cause. People migrate because they are forced to flee their countries, driven by conflict, persecution, violence, and economic instability. Therefore, any international strategy to combat smuggling must also address these underlying causes.

By focusing on preventive measures such as fostering peace, stability and development in conflict-affected regions, we can reduce the desperation that compels individuals to place their lives in the hands of smugglers.

Moreover, as we tackle the issue of migrant smuggling, we must always uphold the principle that every person, regardless of their migration status, is entitled to fundamental human rights. Anti-migrant and xenophobic rhetoric only fuels populism and racism, which need to be rejected, particularly by decision makers.

In conclusion, the challenges of migrant smuggling and human rights reflect both the determination of those seeking a better life and our shared responsibility to protect their dignity and rights. Let us work together to create a world where migration is a choice, not a necessity, and where everyone can live in safety and dignity.

Thank you.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you for your contribution.

Mr Nicos TORNARITIS, you have the floor.

Mr Nicos TORNARITIS (Cyprus, EPP/CD): Dear colleagues,

As noted during the summit in Reykjavik last year, the smuggling of migrants is a cross-border crime that demands close co-operation, both at regional and international levels.

In our efforts to shape a comprehensive migration and asylum policy, it is important to address the root causes of migration and the main reasons that compel people to engage with criminal groups or illegal activities.

It is also important to create more legal pathways and safe routes to reduce the number of migrants that set out on dangerous journeys, which often have tragic outcomes.

As well mentioned in Lord Simon RUSSELL's report, Cyprus is a good example of the added value of a holistic approach that includes collaboration among all relevant national stakeholders.

Because of its geographic location in the eastern Mediterranean, Cyprus faces a high number of migrants seeking asylum and the path to other European Union countries.

This includes hundreds of irregular migrants arriving by sea, facilitated by smuggling organisations.

In addition, illegal immigrants are channelled by Türkiye, which continues to occupy 37% of the island, from the occupied areas, through the buffer zone, to the government-controlled areas.

As a country that continues to face its own humanitarian issues of missing persons, Cyprus fully understands the importance of learning the fate of missing persons and ending the suffering of their loved ones.

Missing migrants - most often lost at sea, especially small children - cannot be left unaddressed.

Urgent collective action must be taken.

Last but not least, I would like to thank and congratulate the two rapporteurs for their productive work.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you for your contribution.

Mr Mustafa CANBEY, you have the floor.

Mr Mustafa CANBEY (Türkiye, NR): Dear President, dear colleagues,

Today, we are considering this report on the importance of international co-operation in the fight against migrant smuggling.

Türkiye has been a gateway for millions of migrants due to its geographical location and currently hosts more than four million migrants. These migrants are supported not only with shelter but also with basic services such as education and health, and their integration into social life is ensured.

Migrant smuggling is part of organised crime and cannot be solved by the efforts of a single country. Therefore, Türkiye is increasing international co-operation to ensure border security and combat migrant smuggling. As a member of the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center (SELEC), we co-operate effectively with countries in the region in the fight against cross-border crime.

However, an important problem that needs to be addressed in this fight is the missing migrants. Thousands of migrants lose their lives or go missing during their journey of hope. The fate of missing migrants is unknown and most of them do not hear from their families and loved ones.

We have to develop more effective policies against this problem and establish an international solidarity network. Joint action must be taken across Europe to find and identify missing migrants and reach their families.

It is also critical to establish safe and legal migration routes to make the business model of smugglers unprofitable, who endanger the lives of migrants.

Instead of focusing only on border security, more comprehensive policies that protect the rights of migrants and support humanitarian assistance should be adopted.

Thank you.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you for your contribution.

Mister Joseph O'REILLY, you have the floor.

Mr Joseph O'REILLY (Ireland, EPP/CD): Mister President,

I want at the outset to congratulate my good friend and colleague Lord Simon RUSSELL, rapporteur, and also Mr Julian PAHLKE, co-rapporteurs. Can I also acknowledge the remarks of our human rights commissioner Mr Michael O'FLAHERTY, born out of a passionate concern in this area.

I'll just set out some of the stark figures at the outset and it merits doing every time we address this issue.

Since 2014, the International Organization for Migration has recorded 60 000 people who have died in the process of migration, one-fifth of them travelling through Africa, one-fifth in the Mediterranean Sea.

In 2023 alone, 1 851 reputed missing on routes in Africa, 3 129 in the Mediterranean Sea and children trying to rejoin their families included here.

UNICEF record 15 000 children missing.

Trafficking exploitation is a huge feature here, where the children are trafficked off. And I would like to salute two of my compatriots, Ms Annette KENNEDY and Ann Marie RYAN, in Ireland, who are doing pioneering work in dealing with the trafficking issue and addressing it.

In the first three months of 2023, 3 300 children arrived unaccompanied into Europe, 71% of all children. So those tickers remind us of the starkness of the situation. But now let's turn to how we must respond.

We must respond with international partnerships, co-operations with the countries of origin and agreed legal transit routes. I think that is crucial.

Of course, we must internationally co-operate with police and to get to arrest the smugglers who are exploiters in this case. But the co-operation on routes and with the countries of origin is crucial.

We must address the root causes of migration within the countries of origin, whether that is civil strife, poverty, various civil liberties issues. But we, insofar as we can, must address that.

We must also provide legal pathways. And this neatly brings me to the point that these people are virtually all needed in Europe. We have labour shortages. I was only telling our wonderful Secretary of Delegation today, Ms Lawler, that in my town/ village alone I can name a number of restaurants and bars that cannot open for a full week for absence of labour. These people are needed as workers in Europe.

We must provide legal pathways and openings on that level

The Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking of Human Beings is in existence since February 2024, ratified in 46 countries. We must action that convention in every way we can.

Essentially, in conclusion, while policing is crucial to get the exploiters, real emphasis needs to be on legal pathways, elimination of root causes and creating employment opportunities and channeling people into employment opportunities that clearly exist across the social services, across hospitality, across intensive industries right through Europe.

The need for the people is there.

I think it's time we holistically address this question. Thank you.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you for your contribution.

Ms Olena MOSHENETS, you have the floor.

Ms Olena MOSHENETS (Ukraine, ALDE): I thank the rapporteurs for their work about issues that are indeed concerning and important.

While I am defending the peaceful sleep of Ukrainian children on the front line, my own daughter disappeared without a trace. These are the words of the defender of Ukraine and father of 9-year old Valeria who has been seeking refuge from the war in Germany with her mother since 2022.

In June, she disappeared on her way to school. The police found the girl's body in a wooded area. This is not an isolated case.

In March of this year, the German police found the body of a Ukrainian woman who lived in a refugee home. She died as a result of violence. Her newborn daughter is currently being cared for by the local youth welfare office.

We are grateful to the law enforcement agencies of the European host countries for their efficiency in the search for missing persons.

More than 4 million Ukrainian citizens have temporary protection status in European countries. The majority of them are women and children, a group vulnerable to exploitation and human trafficking.

Russian troops in their cities and Russian missiles over their heads have forced them to flee their homes. Now they face language barriers and limited access to local labour markets, and struggle to find long term accommodation. This makes them easy targets for criminals.

Ukrainians are also vulnerable on their own territory. Russia has deported more than 19 000 Ukrainian children from their temporarily occupied territories and about 2 000 young Ukrainians are missing.

The Russian government is resorting to even more shameful schemes of kidnapping children under the guise of so-called care. It turns out that deportation translates to evacuation or rehabilitation in Russian. The Kremlin's proxies launch this criminal activity on the basis of the Oduvanchyky children's hospice. Using the excuse of providing assistance to children with serious diseases (including cancer), orphans and children deprived of parent care, the enemy has created a basis for the future settlement of young Ukrainians in Russia.

We thank the European countries for protecting Ukrainian refugees and support the introduction of provisions to enhance the security of migrants in host countries. We must work together to prevent criminal acts.

Thank you very much.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you for your contribution.

We must now interrupt the hearing of speakers.

Registered speakers who have been present during the debate but have not been able to speak may submit their typed statement within 4 hours to the Session Office for publication in the minutes. This text must not exceed 400 words and must be transmitted electronically.

I call for the Committee's reply.

Lord Simon RUSSELL, you have the floor.

Lord Simon RUSSELL (United Kingdom, EC/DA, Rapporteur): Thank you very much.

You will be delighted to hear, ladies and gentlemen, but I don't really have a great deal more to add. I do have some observations.

I think, if the efforts over the years of organisations like this, in putting together human rights legislation and standards for refugees and migrants were mirrored by the same degree of effort and co-operation and resources by nation states and groups of nation states into prevention, we would not find ourselves in the situation we are in today.

And I think it is a challenge for every single politician here in your particular country to try and encourage your governments of whatever political complexion to take this matter seriously.

And I would also beseech all of you, particularly having listened to some rather unattractive examples at a meeting earlier today of two politicians from a particular country, openly bickering and arguing with one another in front of a Committee which, I'm afraid, I found wholly unacceptable. My view is that we are here as individual politicians to talk and to focus on human rights. We are not here to discuss and fight and debate the political fights that we have at home. That should be left at home and should not be brought into this forum. That is my own personal view.

I've heard people talking about the need for safe routes, for working with the countries of origin. Well, if anybody has any brilliant ideas on how to sit down with the Taliban and work out with them how to set up a structure for providing safe routes of exit, I would be very interested to hear about them. I would be interested to hear about the same approach to the government of Iran, to the government of Sudan – what's left of it – to the government of Syria. I'm not sure how realistic and how effective this approach is.

Until and unless nation states and groups of nation states get real and across the political divide, countries work together, whatever their political views, to take prevention seriously, this problem will continue and it will continue to escalate, and it will give rise to some of the emotions that we heard with one or two speakers. I

must confess, I was wondering what they had eaten for breakfast because it clearly had done something quite unfortunate to their temperament. But I do understand the views and the passion that comes from that. But I'm afraid my view is that gets us precisely nowhere.

We have to work together. We have to help the EU and other organisations do what they have to do, not get in the way. So that is what my plea to all of you would be.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you for your contribution.

Mister Julian PAHLKE, you have the floor.

Mr Julian PAHLKE (Germany, SOC, Rapporteur): Thank you, Mister Chair. Madam Chair. Please excuse me and thank you to everyone who spoke on both reports, for your kind words, for your acknowledgement, and for the decency you showed with regards to both topics, to people smuggling and to people that went missing.

But during the debate, I was also accused, obviously, for what I've done before I became a member of parliament, which was actually the reason why I ran and that was that I rescued people in the Mediterranean. I was accused of having done something wrong. And to be honest, I find that kind of funny because the party from which this accusation is coming actually reported me to the police in Germany. And the police closed the case a short time later. And, therefore, the party actually proved that sea rescue is not a crime and is not being investigated by the police.

[applause]

But I'm also speaking here, and I always find that moving when I'm here. I'm also speaking here as a young German, and I inherited the history of the country I'm living in. And I have no responsibility for the history, but I believe I have a responsibility to protect the consequences that were derived from the years of horror that our country brought over the continent. And one of these consequences is this institution with the European Convention of Human Rights, with our Court.

And I believe democracy is only as strong as the protection of minorities. And, therefore, I'm extremely grateful and thankful to this Assembly that you're supporting both reports by Lord Simon RUSSELL and mine, and that we work together to preserve the dignity of those that have died on the journey, and that we work together to identify them and preserve the last bit of dignity that is left of those people.

Thank you for your support.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you for your contribution.

Mister Oleksii GONCHARENKO, President of the Committee, would you like to respond?

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA, Chairperson of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons): "Thank you very much, Madam President" [spoken in French].

Dear colleagues, I'm speaking now on behalf of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons. We will start with the report by Lord RUSSELL addressing the issue of migrant smuggling, because it's one of the priorities of the Council of Europe now and I think for the years to come.

Discussions are ongoing to agree on a joint strategy. For the past ten years, the European Committee on Crime Problems has developed an action plan on migrant smuggling and also helped develop initiatives like the Europe Network of Prosecutors on Migrant Smuggling. Also, discussions have been engaged with the European Union, especially Eurojust, on this issue.

In this discussion, it is not only welcome, but also very needed that members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and national parliaments are aware of this co-operation and can share their input. At the end of the day, indeed, it is also parliaments which vote on budgets, allocate resources and allow for some policy debate to unfold.

I therefore commend Lord RUSSELL for his excellent work to articulate concrete recommendations explaining how the Council of Europe can help member states address this issue collectively.

The rapporteur has a point. If we want to be efficient in fighting against these criminal acts we need to agree on what this crime is and what it is not. Consistency is the key to ensure an effective policy and judicial response to this crime.

The same logic has been promoted again eloquently by Mr Julian PAHLKE on the issue of missing migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

Let me stress, dear colleagues, how humbling and powerful the hearings here in held in Committee have proved to be on this issue over the past two years. From international organisations, to individuals burying deceased migrants, to families seeking information desperately about their missing loved ones, the urge for policy making and public action is there, and the efforts are many.

It is also a matter of moral imperative for this Assembly. We may disagree on many things, including whether migrants should come to our territory or not, but one thing we cannot disagree on is the imperative of treating people with dignity, including the dead.

I congratulate Mr PAHLKE for looking into so many aspects of this tragic reality and of putting forward innovative ideas to help further the efforts already underway across the world to address the issue.

Here again, one key recommendation which can help enhance interstate co-operation is to agree on a common definition. Such a definition is the first step towards acknowledging the reality, now matter how sad it is. Migrants, refugees and asylum seekers go missing across Europe along migration routes. The Council of Europe, together with others, can and must do something about it.

Dear colleagues, I would like to congratulate both rapporteurs for their timely reports based on a thorough preparation through fact-finding work and hearings by our Committee. I want to thank our Secretariat of our Committee for brilliant work done in support of both rapporteurs and I ask you, dear colleagues, to support both draft resolutions on behalf of Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons.

Thank you very much.

Ms Magdalena BIEJAT (Poland, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Dear Colleagues,

Today we are talking about human smuggling, we are thinking together how to counter this problem. When discussing this topic, it is worth first to realize the reality of migrants crossing the borders of European countries. As a representative of the Polish parliament, I want to cite data regarding the Polish-Belarusian border, through which one of the migration routes passes. The data comes from a report by the Border Group, an organization dedicated to helping people on the move. An organization whose members have themselves been repeatedly harassed and persecuted by Polish border services. I will focus here on the Polish border, keeping in mind that all the figures are many times higher for the Mediterranean and the coasts of Europe's southern borders.

In 2023, 7583 people asked the Border Group for support, of which 3366 were attended, including 324 women and 164 children (including 110 unaccompanied minors). 653 people reported violence by Polish services. There were 2,800 documented cases of pushback from Poland to Belarus. Of these, at least 120 belonged to vulnerable groups: pregnant women, children, seniors or people in need of urgent medical care. 478 people reported having experienced pushback more than once. 601 added that they had faced additional violence at the hands of the officers of the Polish agents during pushback. From August 2021 to December 2023, 72 people died on the border. That number is now almost doubled, as pushbacks and violence by no means stopped after the change of government - aid organizations are warning that the situation in 2024 is in many aspects even worse than under the Law and Justice government.

We also have data, regarding the nationalities of migrants, crossing the border. Syrians are the largest group, followed in turn by citizens of Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan and Ethiopia. All of these countries are experiencing bloody military conflicts or major natural disasters. Migrants crossing the Polish-Belarusian border are therefore refugees who cannot hope for normal, safe life in their home countries.

The vast majority of them used the services of smugglers. This is the only way to get to Europe and thus save themselves and their families from hunger, war and oppression. And nothing will change in this regard as long as we do not create an alternative, legal route for war and climate refugees. Because today - and I say this with shame, as a Polish and European citizen - smugglers pose less of a threat to them than the border guards of European countries.

Unfortunately, however, the steps taken by both the European community and individual member states are going in the opposite direction. The wall of Fortress Europe continues to grow, there is more and more violence, the dehumanization of war and climate refugees goes further and further. Therefore, the first, most important issue is the restoration of the rule of law at Europe's borders, fair processing of asylum applications and an absolute ban on pushbacks.

Mr Joseph Beppe FENECH ADAMI (Malta, EPP/CD): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Thank you Mr President and may I start by congratulating the rapporteur on this excellent report.

This report addresses a human rights issue that is often overlooked but critically urgent: the tragic phenomenon of missing migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Around the world, thousands of people who seek safety, a better future, or simply a life free from violence and poverty, go missing along their journey. Yet, too often, the disappearances of these individuals are underestimated, and their plight remains unaddressed by many governments and societies.

At the heart of this issue lies the fundamental principle of human dignity. Human dignity is not only a right that must be protected during life but also in death. Every person, regardless of their migration status, must be treated with respect and compassion. This extends to the most vulnerable—victims of trafficking, gender-based violence, and torture—who are especially at risk of going missing. Migrants should never face criminalization or administrative scrutiny simply for being in a precarious situation, and no one providing humanitarian aid should be criminalized for offering help to those in need. Migration should never lead to dehumanization.

As states, our primary obligation is to ensure the safety of all persons, as enshrined in international human rights law and international humanitarian law. This includes providing access to safe and legal migration routes, including family reunification, as well as conducting search and rescue operations both at sea and on land. These life-saving operations must be done in full compliance with international law, including the European Convention on Human Rights. Illegal pushbacks that force migrants into dangerous situations must end immediately, as they often result in tragic disappearances or even death. We cannot turn a blind eye to the loss of life at our borders and in our seas, nor can we ignore the pain and uncertainty that families face when their loved ones go missing.

Beyond prevention and protection, it is essential to address the needs of families searching for their missing relatives. Many families, often left in agonizing uncertainty, have a right to know whether their loved ones are alive or dead. This must be respected, even as we recognize that some individuals may choose not to disclose their whereabouts to their families for personal reasons. Nonetheless, we must ensure that families are supported in their search efforts without facing obstacles due to the legal or administrative status of the missing person. When a large group disaster occurs, such as a shipwreck or a border incident, dedicated disaster victim identification teams must be deployed to provide standard, cross-border identification processes.

States should work together to harmonize their approaches to managing and recording cases of missing migrants and unidentified human remains. This involves not only improving the medico-legal framework but also sharing data across borders in compliance with data protection laws. International organizations like INTERPOL, the Red Cross, and the International Commission on Missing Persons can play a vital role in facilitating this cross-border collaboration.

We also need to address the specific challenges posed by unaccompanied children. They are particularly vulnerable to going missing, and we must ensure their systematic registration and protection. When these children do go missing, diligent search efforts must be made, and they should be referred to appropriate accommodation or reunification efforts in a safe and child-sensitive manner.

Finally, we must ensure that the graves of deceased migrants are respected, clearly identified, and permanently marked, either by name or by a unique code. Every effort should be made to honor the religious and cultural beliefs of the deceased, in accordance with international human rights standards.

In conclusion, the tragedy of missing migrants demands urgent and coordinated action. Let us come together—across nations, institutions, and organizations—to ensure that the rights of all people, in life and death, are protected. We owe it to the families of the missing, to those who have perished, and to our shared humanity. Thank you.

Mr Pavlo BAKUNETS (Ukraine, EC/DA): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Dear members of the Assembly!

First of all, I want to thank each one for your efforts to protect democracy, rule of law, and human rights in Europe.

I want to thank Lord Simon Russell and Mr. Pahlke for the opportunity to discuss two important reports on major issues in Europe today: migrant smuggling and the crisis of missing migrants and refugees. These reports show how important international cooperation is to solve these problems.

I also want to thank all the countries that you represent here - in this assembly for their strong support of Ukraine. We are going through the hard war which russia still maintains against Ukraine.

That's why, I want to add another urgent issue to this discussion: the forced deportation of Ukrainian children to russia since the invasion of Ukraine.

These children are taken from their homes, placed in foster care, or re-educated in russia, trying to erase (destroy) their Ukrainian identity. This is not just an attack on these children—it is an attack on Ukraine's future.

I want to underline the start of Parliamentary NETWORK on the situation of the children of Ukraine!!!

Forced migration does not only mean people getting lost on the way. It also means that governments force them to move, which also results in people losing their identity. We need to solve these issues together, focusing on protecting human rights and ensuring the dignity of every person, especially children.

Therefore, I call on You – Ukrainian partners - to take immediate action to stop these forced transfers, to start international cooperation to bring the Ukrainian children back to their families!

I also ask you to mention problem of war and civilian Ukrainian prisoners.

At the end I ask to give permission for Ukraine Army to use long-range missiles and weapons from our partners. This is the only real way to ensure safety in Europe and to return the focus to peace, democracy, and human right

The 1 of October we have big national holiday – Day of brave Ukrainians from middle ages to now.

Thank you our Heroes defenders!

Ms Iva DIMIC (Slovenia, EPP/CD): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Dear Colleagues,

I congratulate the rapporteurs on their excellent and in-depth reports. Both documents shine a light on the urgent need for a comprehensive strategy to combat migrant smuggling and illegal migration. As we delve into this topic, it is essential to recognize the complex interplay between our sovereign rights and the fundamental rights of individuals seeking safety and opportunity.

Illegal migration must be brought under control. This is not just a statement; it is a call to action. Many countries are grappling with the ramifications of unregulated migration, and the challenges are manifold. One of the most pressing issues is the ruthless exploitation by smugglers and international smuggling networks. These organizations operate with a singular focus: profit. They show no mercy for the vulnerable individuals who turn to them in desperation. Every year, countless lives are lost or put at risk because of these heinous rings.

Therefore, it is imperative that we establish a robust framework to control our borders while also safeguarding the right of individuals to travel and seek refuge. This is a delicate balance: the sovereign right to control borders collides with the human right to seek safety and a better life. How do we navigate this tension?

The resolutions proposed in both reports emphasize the need for a common European approach to tackle migrant smuggling. This is not just about enforcement; it is about fostering a spirit of cooperation and coordination among member states. By aligning our legislation with Council of Europe standards, we can create a cohesive strategy that is both effective and humane.

Furthermore, we must recognize that one of the most effective ways to undermine smuggling operations is to dismantle the financial incentives that drive them. Preventing this business from becoming lucrative is essential. Smuggling networks thrive on the vulnerabilities of individuals and the gaps in our legal frameworks. Therefore, we must work tirelessly to establish legal mechanisms that prevent, detect, and combat these operations.

In conclusion, the journey ahead is complex, but the path is clear. We must take decisive steps to control illegal migration while upholding our commitment to human rights. Together, through coordination, cooperation, and the establishment of sound legal frameworks, we can tackle the scourge of migrant smuggling. Let us commit to this cause—not just for our own nations, but for the countless individuals whose lives are at stake.

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

The Mediterranean lies between Africa's dreams and Europe's fears, it is the cradle of Europe yet it is becoming a mass grave, growing larger each year. In recent years, certain Council of Europe member states, politicising an issue that is of a humanitarian nature, have progressively adopted tougher and more restrictive laws and measures, aimed at combating causes that motivate refugees to flee.

It goes without any saying, that protecting human rights and having effective migration management policies aimed to create secure and legal paths for entry and undermine the business model of refugee smugglers, are not competing goals. Rather, human rights protection should be at the heart of any legitimate and effective migration policy.

People in Serbia especially those living in Vojvodina, northern part near the border with Hungary, are vitally interested in those, legitimate and effective, migration management policies: according to UNICEF, since the migration crisis of 2015 more than 1.5 million refugees and migrants have passed through Serbia, of which between a third and a quarter were children.

Since 2015 we have witnessed a constant stream of refugees, unfortunately with strong support from cross-border smuggling and trafficking networks. For a years, reports of violence and gun-battles have become common near the border between Serbia and Hungary. Thousands of migrants have been camping in the area, looking for ways to cross with the help of people smugglers. We are witnessing conflicts among migrants, or more precisely, wars among criminal gangs.

According to numbers from Serbian NGO the Centre for Asylum Seekers, during 2023, some 1,500 migrants attempt to cross into Hungary every day - many handing over cash to people smugglers. In 2023, Frontex detected almost 100. 000 irregular border crossings to the EU through the Western Balkan route.

Since the August last year, there were few shootings which left dozens of people dead and seriously wounded. Shootings happened not only at abandoned farming warehouses near the villages of Horgos or Hajdukovo, but even in front of the market – in September last year migrants had fired shots a few hundred meters from the city center in Subotica.

Trying to reconcile two aspects: sovereign right to control its borders and the rights of people on the move, in the fourth quarter of 2023, Serbian police carried out a series of raids to drive out traffickers. More than 800 officers were involved, including anti-terrorism units and the gendarmerie. These forces deployed drones, helicopters and combat vehicles.

So, above all, it is important to investigate and prosecute trafficking gangs who exploit migrants; to address factors that drive migration of their own origin countries, dealing with the countries of origin and of transit, facilitate and to maximize the potential of voluntary returns and reintegration, by exploring formulas for financial assistance.

Ms Regina BASTOS (Portugal, EPP/CD): *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in French.*

Ms Sally-Ann HART (United Kingdom, EC/DA): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Illegal migration and people smuggling challenges the sovereignty of states and threatens the security and stability of our borders. As a Conservative, I believe that every nation has the right—and indeed, the duty—to control its borders. Unregulated, illegal migration undermines this principle and puts at risk both national security and social cohesion. The smugglers who profit from this chaos are nothing more than criminals exploiting people, and they must be stopped.

The report rightly identifies migrant smuggling as a transnational crime. However, we must go further in our response. While some may argue for increasing legal pathways for migration, we must first focus on deterring illegal entry and dismantling the smuggling networks that thrive on it. If there is no deterrent—if criminals and migrants alike believe they can cross borders without consequence—then we are inviting a continued influx of uncontrolled migration.

The U.K. Conservative government led the way in thinking outside the box with its Rwanda policy, which was immediately scrapped by the new Labour Prime Minister....but this Conservative policy seems good enough for Germany - which has also reinstated land border controls after its disastrous open-door policy, igniting fierce controversy within the EU.

We need stronger border controls, more robust enforcement mechanisms, and severe penalties for those engaged in smuggling. Our justice systems must treat smuggling as the serious crime it is. We need greater international cooperation and a clear, consistent approach that prioritises the safety and sovereignty of our nations.

Deterrence is essential. Smugglers and those who pay them must know that attempting to enter a country illegally will result in swift consequences. This does not mean criminalising the migrants themselves but ensuring that those who attempt to circumvent our legal systems are turned back and that smugglers face severe penalties. The business of migrant smuggling can only be disrupted if it becomes unprofitable and dangerous for those involved. This requires not just law enforcement, but a clear message: illegal entry will not be tolerated.

Furthermore, humanitarian efforts must be channelled towards helping people where they are, rather than encouraging dangerous and illegal journeys. We must invest in stabilising regions affected by conflict, climate change and economic hardship, reducing the drivers of illegal migration rather than simply opening more pathways to Europe. This is where targeted international development aid can help. Finally, we cannot allow well-meaning but misguided humanitarian efforts to undermine the rule of law. Supporting migrants in distress is one thing, but aiding illegal entry weakens the integrity of our borders and creates a pull factor for more to attempt the dangerous journey. We must be firm in distinguishing between genuine refugees in need of protection and those exploiting our systems for economic gain.

A strong deterrent is essential. We must not only dismantle smuggling networks but also send a clear message that illegal migration will not be rewarded. Only then can we protect our borders, uphold our sovereignty, and ensure that migration is safe, legal, and controlled.

Vote: A shared European approach to address migrant smuggling / Missing migrants, refugees and asylum seekers – A call to clarify their fate

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you for your contribution.

The general discussion is closed.

We now come to the examination of the first report entitled "A common European approach to combating the smuggling of migrants" (Doc. 16032).

On this first report, the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons has presented a draft resolution to which 7 amendments have been tabled, and a draft recommendation to which no amendments have been tabled.

We shall begin by examining the draft resolution.

I have been informed by the Chairman of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons that the 7 amendments were rejected by a two-thirds majority of votes cast.

Is this the case, Mister Chairman?

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA, Chairperson of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons): Yes, yes it is.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): If no one objects, I consider these amendments definitively rejected.

If there is an objection, we'll have to check that it has the required support of 10 people. Is there any objection?

Could you stand up, please?

The Committee Chairman's request is therefore rejected. Amendments 1 to 7 will therefore be discussed in the usual way. They will be called in the order in which they apply to the text, as published in the collection of amendments.

We'll start with Amendment 2. Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS has the floor to support Amendment 2 on behalf of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons.

Mister ZINGERIS, you have the floor.

Who is in favour of Amendment 2? If the amendment is not supported, it will not be put to the vote.

I repeat: is there anyone in favour of Amendment 2?

We'll move on to Amendment 3.

The floor is also given to Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS to support the amendment, or someone else if you wish.

If there is no one to support Amendment 3, we'll move on to the next amendment.

Mr Norbert KLEINWÄCHTER (Germany, EC/DA): Madam President.

Amendment 3 is by me, Mr Norbert KLEINWÄCHTER, and it asks to delete paragraph 4. And that's because the paragraph says that we should extend our actions to situations where international humanitarian law is not applicable. However, the Convention on Human Rights is international law, so we cannot extend our validity past the validity of international humanitarian law in general. So the entire paragraph doesn't make sense. It needs to be deleted. Otherwise it's just going to be foolish. Delete Paragraph 4. That's the amendment. Thank you.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you for your intervention.

Does anyone wish to speak against the amendment?

Yes, you have the floor.

Mr Julian PAHLKE (Germany, SOC, Rapporteur): The Amendment obviously doesn't make any sense because if you look in the text of the law, it is a very short article to which we take a reference. But if we look how the court is interpreting this article, it is actually very broad and it gives life and it makes law something living, something that is interpreted over and over again. And the court that belongs to this institution has a very clear view, and I therefore ask you to reject this Amendment.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

The Committee rejected this amendment by a two-thirds majority.

We will now proceed to vote on the amendment.

The vote is open.

Amendment 3 is not adopted.

We shall continue with Amendment 1.

The floor is given to Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS to support it, or anyone else.

Is there no one to support the amendment?

If not, we'll move on to the next Amendment, no. 7.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS also has the floor.

Thank you, Mister ZINGERIS.

Mr Norbert KLEINWÄCHTER (Germany, EC/DA): Madam President, you just called Amendment 7, is that correct?

[In French] It is my amendment, so I am going to present it.

So in the draft resolution delete the third and the fourth sentences. And the reason is that the opposite of what's written there is true.

According to the Geneva Convention, refugees must flee to the next safe area in order to be recognised. It is only then that their illegal entry into foreign territory may not be punished. This cannot be said for people coming to Europe from mid Africa. Considering many refugees are already arriving at a border from a safe territory, imprisoning and expelling them is legal and in conformity with human rights. So this paragraph here, Paragraph 10 is simply false.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Does anyone wish to speak against the amendment?

Mister PAHLKE?

Mr Julian PAHLKE (Germany, SOC, Rapporteur): Obviously, this report has been written with the view on the law of the United Nations in mind. And the United Nations are very clear. And they allow people to move through several countries because there are many reasons why people flee, and it's also because they flee from bombs through many countries that are being dropped, and they may not be safe in a country in between.

So to have a coherent view of law, we must reject this amendment because it just doesn't make any sense.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you for your contribution.

The Committee rejected this amendment by a two-thirds majority.

We will now proceed to vote on the amendment.

The vote is open.

Amendment 7 is not adopted.

We'll move on to Amendment 4. Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS also has the floor to support this amendment.

Mr KLEINWÄCHTER, you have the floor.

Mr Norbert KLEINWÄCHTER (Germany, EC/DA): Madam President,

I'm sorry, these are my amendments, so I'll take the floor.

Mr Norbert KLEINWÄCHTER (Germany, EC/DA): So Amendment 4 asks to delete paragraph 5 because what's in there is simply wrong.

It says that Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights states that "member states have a duty to prevent violations of the right to life". That's true. "And to investigate any cases of unnatural death or unlawful killings". That is false. Just read the article in the European Convention. We cannot put in our reports things that are not true about the Convention. We are based on the Convention. So please, for legal correctness, delete this paragraph. It's of very dire quality.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you for your attention.

Does anyone wish to speak against the amendment?

Mister PAHLKE, you have the floor.

Mr Julian PAHLKE (Germany, SOC, Rapporteur): Obviously the interpretation of the Court of Human Rights is completely different. And in this way there is no grey zone in-between. And we have to look into what is stated in the report. That cases of unnatural death have to be investigated. And I think this is in everyone's interest to also protect the people that are still alive, that cases of unnatural death are investigated, to know the cause and also to maybe find a perpetrator if there is some. This is the way every judicial system in the world works.

And therefore I ask you to reject this amendment.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Excuse me.

You have to press the button and put in the card.

Mr Bob De BRABANDERE (Belgium, EC/DA): I believe a mistake has been made.

You have been announcing the amendments to the RUSSELL report and at the same time, Mr KLEINWÄCHTER and Mr PAHLKE have been answering all the time.

So this is a complete mix-up that's been going on here.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): One moment, please.

We're sorry, but Mr Norbert KLEINWÄCHTER has made a mistake.

We've followed the rules.

Yes. Go ahead, you have the floor.

Mr Serhii SOBOLIEV (Ukraine, EPP/CD): Dear colleagues,

I don't understand what we are doing.

We have two reports.

You announce the amendments from one report using the name Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS, who is the first in these all amendments.

But now we have a report, another one, where it's announced the author, real author of this report. So please, exactly, look for what report we are discussing now. And we have answers not on... make a pause, please! And find the real report!

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): One moment, please. One moment, please.

Mr Serhii SOBOLIEV (Ukraine, EPP/CD): Make a pause, please, and find the real report.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Excuse me, but we've started the meeting, and I said we were going to examine the first report entitled "A shared European approach to address migrant smuggling" (Doc. 16032).

I announced this before we started talking about the amendments.

Mr Bob De BRABANDERE (Belgium, EC/DA): [in French] ...do not call Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS and then you give the floor to Mr Norbert KLEINWÄCHTER!

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): But I was giving the floor...

Shall we start again?

Excuse us, we'll start again and try to do it bit by bit.

I'll start again.

We now come to the examination of the first report: "A common European approach to combating the smuggling of migrants" (Document 16032).

On this first report, the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons has tabled a draft resolution to which there are 7 amendments, and a draft recommendation to which no amendments have been tabled.

The 7 amendments were therefore rejected by the Committee by a two-thirds majority of votes cast.

Is this the case, Mister Chairman? Yes ?

If no one objects, we say, we consider these amendments definitively rejected.

If there are any objections... Yes, you objected, you stood up, there were more than 10 people, so we'll start with Amendment 2.

Amendment 2 is to be defended by M Emanuelis ZINGERIS or Mr Serhii SOBOLIEV.

Is Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS here?

Mister SOBOLIEV, you have the floor. Thank you for your time.

Mr Serhii SOBOLIEV (Ukraine, EPP/CD): It's not the amendment replaced by me. It's our act that no ten people in this hemicycle who are standing up against the decision of the Committee to reject by two-thirds. So if nobody - you can move forward and not announce these amendments. If I'm not correct, please check this.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Yes, we have to go through the amendments one by one, precisely because there has been an objection.

So we have to vote on them one by one and someone can defend the amendment and, if there is objection, do so.

But we have to go through this process, amendment by amendment.

Mr Norbert KLEINWÄCHTER (Germany, EC/DA): ... confused but in fact, the objection was to the other report. Since it wasn't announced, we didn't protest the negation of the amendments to the RUSSELL report.

So RUSSELL passes without amendments because the Committee has already said "no" by two-thirds.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Right, thank you, excuse us.

We will now proceed to the vote on the draft resolution on Doc. 16032, on "A shared European approach to address migrant smuggling".

The vote is open.

The draft resolution contained in Doc. 16032 is adopted.

(Applause)

We will now examine the draft recommendation.

Mr Paul GAVAN (Ireland, UEL): I ask for a recount of the vote given the confusion. In the confusion we thought we were actually voting on one of the amendments, not the resolution. So I just wish to record that this is not our vote. It was not the correct way. We want to support this motion. We want to support the resolution.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Okay, let's redo... given the confusion, let's redo the vote on the draft resolution, "A shared European approach to address migrant smuggling" (Doc. 16032).

Excuse us and thank you.

The vote is open.

The draft resolution contained in Doc. 16032 is adopted.

(Applause)

We shall now proceed to vote on the draft recommendation contained in Doc. 16032. I remind you that the majority required is two-thirds of the votes cast.

The vote is open.

The draft recommendation contained in Doc. 16032 is adopted.

(Applause)

Right, let's move on.

We now move on to the second report entitled: "Missing migrants, refugees and asylum seekers - A call to clarify their fate" (Doc. 16037).

On this second report, the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons has submitted a draft resolution to which 7 amendments have been tabled, and a draft recommendation to which no amendments have been tabled.

We begin with the draft resolution.

I have been informed by the Chairman of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons that the 7 amendments were rejected by the Committee by a two-thirds majority of votes cast.

Is this the case, Mr Chairman?

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA, Chairperson of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons): Yes.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): If no one objects, I consider these amendments definitively rejected.

If there is an objection, we'll have to check that it has the required support of 10 people.

Is there an objection? There are more than 10.

The Committee Chairman's request is rejected.

Amendments 1 to 7 will therefore be discussed in the usual way. They will be called in the order in which they apply to the text, as published in the collection of amendments.

Amendment 3.

Mr Norbert KLEINWÄCHTER has the floor.

Mr Norbert KLEINWÄCHTER (Germany, EC/DA): Thank, Madam President. So the request is to delete Paragraph 4. Namely, that says that the obligation in law to treat the deceased with dignity should extend to situations where international humanitarian law is not applicable. And in fact, the Convention on Human Rights is international law. We cannot extend our validity past the validity of international humanitarian law. So this entire paragraph doesn't make any sense. It's legally completely false and needs to be deleted.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Does anyone wish to speak against the amendment?

Mister PAHLKE, you have the floor.

Yes, you can speak against it if you like.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA, Chairperson of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons): He's the rapporteur, he will speak when you ask the position of the rapporteur.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): You may speak.

Mr Julian PAHLKE (Germany, SOC, Rapporteur): So, on Amendment 3, obviously, the law is something very lively, something that can be changed. And I'm basically opening a way for discussion, a discussion that is supported by many lawyers, by many experts on the field. And because it is an achievement of civilisation that the human dignity defines who we are as humans. And we believe that this dignity should be extended beyond life, and that it's also applicable when someone is dead, and that we still preserve certain values. And therefore, I ask you to strongly reject this amendment. Thank you.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you for your contribution.

The Committee rejected this amendment by a two-thirds majority.

We will now proceed to vote on the amendment.

The vote is open.

Amendment 3 is not adopted.

We will now move on to Amendment 4.

Mr Norbert KLEINWÄCHTER has the floor.

Mr Norbert KLEINWÄCHTER (Germany, EC/DA): Thank you, Madam President.

The request is to delete Paragraph 5. It says that Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights regulates that member states have a duty to prevent violations of the right to life. That's correct. And to investigate any cases of unnatural death or unlawful killings. And that is false. You all just have to read Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights and you will find out that what's in this article is simply wrong and therefore should be deleted, because we are the body that actually is based on the European Convention on Human Rights, and we shouldn't put false things in our reports. This is very poorly done and we should delete it. Thank you.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you for your attention.

Does anyone wish to speak against the amendment?

If you wish to speak against the amendment, you may do so, Mister PAHLKE.

You may speak.

Mr Julian PAHLKE (Germany, SOC, Rapporteur): Well, on Amendment 4, some people in this Assembly live in their own reality. And I believe we cannot help them.

The European Court of Human Rights is very explicit on this case and on the interpretation of Article 2, and it says that each member state has to investigate cases of unnatural death. And I think this is in all our interest because it makes perfect sense. After all, a prosecutor obviously wants to protect the living, and this is a pretty normal procedure for every prosecutor in our member states and our judicial systems.

So please reject this amendment.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

The Committee rejected this amendment by a two-thirds majority.

We will now proceed to vote on the amendment.

The vote is open.

Amendment 4 is not adopted.

We'll continue with amendment... Yes?

Mr Bob De BRABANDERE (Belgium, EC/DA): Just wondering. I might be mistaken, but is Mr Julian PAHLKE here speaking as a rapporteur or the defendant of the amendments, or speaking against the amendments? Because that's not very clear to me.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): As rapporteur, he can speak against the amendment.

We will therefore move on to Amendment 5.

Mr Norbert KLEINWÄCHTER has the floor.

Thank you.

Mr Norbert KLEINWÄCHTER (Germany, EC/DA): "Thank you, Madam President" [spoken in French].

This amendment asks to delete Paragraph 8, which says that we should create legal migration routes, including for family reunion and reunification. That should be a priority. Just as the provision of humanitarian assistance along migration routes.

So this paragraph actually calls for state-led rescue ships, like being part of the smuggling business. And we don't want to be part of the smuggling business. We don't want people to die any more. So we cannot be part of the smuggling business. We should take this out. It's in-humanitarian.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you for your attention.

Does anyone wish to speak against the amendment?

Mister PAHLKE?

Mr Julian PAHLKE (Germany, SOC, Rapporteur): Well, I'm actually in the report calling for legal, safe, and predictable routes, as it is stated, for example, in the Global Compact for Migration, which is a UN instrument, and therefore it perfectly makes sense. And I believe that family reunification is something that should be dear to us all. And I'm under the impression that the family as a value and as a construct is also something very valuable to conservative and members of the far right. And therefore, please reject this amendment.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

The Committee rejected this amendment by a two-thirds majority.

We will now proceed to vote on the amendment.

The vote is open.

Amendment 5 is not adopted.

We will now move on to Amendment 6.

Mr Norbert KLEINWÄCHTER has the floor.

You have the floor, thank you.

Mr Norbert KLEINWÄCHTER (Germany, EC/DA): Yes, Madam Present.

I am happy to give back the compliment to Mr Julian PAHLKE: He is an activist smuggler. And therefore the paragraph also says that pushbacks are legal practices which may also lead to disappearance and must stop immediately. But sorry, actually refugees are defined by entering the next...

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Please, Sir, can you wait?

I think we should respect everyone's right to speak. Everyone has the right to speak, but you must do so and not interrupt each other, please. And we have to speak with respect. Otherwise, we can't go on working on this amendment.

I ask you, please, to speak with respect and not interrupt each other.

Thank you for your time.

Mr Norbert KLEINWÄCHTER (Germany, EC/DA): Thanks, Madam President.

So the paragraph here says that pushbacks are illegal practices which may also lead to disappearance and must stop immediately.

But this is counter to the actual factual basis. According to the Geneva Convention, refugees must flee to the next safe area in order to be recognised, in order to be defined as refugees.

And, of course, people who are not refugees but migrants can be pushed back, they can be expelled, they can be incarcerated.

This is legal, according to humanitarian law, according to the Geneva Convention, according to the Convention on Human Rights.

Your paragraph says the opposite and therefore it needs to be deleted.

Thank you.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you for your attention.

Does anyone wish to speak against the amendment?

Mister FRIDEZ, you have the floor.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC): Thank you, Madam President.

There's a lot of confusion here.

If we don't want these people to be turned back, or to be in danger, we need safe channels, which is what is being proposed. In fact, in the history of refoulements, we must accept people who are migrants, assess their situation, but not send them back out to sea with the risks we know.

And if we have to carry out search and rescue operations at sea, it's actually the law of the sea that requires it. We have to rescue people in difficulty. So if there were safe migration routes, we wouldn't have these problems and we could treat people properly.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

The Committee rejected this amendment by a two-thirds majority.

We will now proceed to vote on the amendment.

The vote is open.

Ah, excuse me, did you want to speak?

Excuse me. Someone has already spoken against. Normally, we can't do that. Someone has already spoken against.

The vote is now open. The vote is open.

Excuse me, Mister GONCHARENKO, the position has already been defended by Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ.

[Someone next to her tells her that Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO can give his position] You can give the position, in any case, if you like.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA, Chairperson of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons): For a second. Thank you very much.

Dear Chair,

The problem is that, as I know, our procedure is next we have one person speaking for, one person speaking against in a way and then we need to listen to the position of the rapporteur. Mr Julian PAHLKE is the rapporteur, so he can say if he is in favour or against – without long speeches. He is in favour or he is against. Also you are saying for others, what is the position of Committee. That's all. That's how I see it. And we can finish it. There are not many amendments here.

Thank you.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Excuse me, Mister GONCHARENKO, but someone... We made the amendment and someone spoke for it and someone spoke against it. And we can't have two... Otherwise, we'd have to turn the floor over to the other side so that someone else could speak. It's one against, one for, but that's it. Thank you.

The Committee has therefore rejected this amendment by a two-thirds majority and we shall now proceed to vote on the amendment.

The vote is open. It's Amendment 6.

Amendment 6 is not adopted.

We will now move on to Amendment 2.

The floor is given to Mr. Emanuelis ZINGERIS or whoever wishes to support the amendment.

Go ahead, you have the floor.

Mr Norbert KLEINWÄCHTER (Germany, EC/DA): Since it deletes part of my deletion request, I'm just taking over this amendment. Of course, the sentence is completely wrong –pushbacks are illegal practices, etcetera.

That's what I explained before. So it's fine to delete just that one sentence and Amendment 2 should be adopted, of course.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Does anyone wish to speak against?

Mister PAHLKE, you have the floor.

Mr Julian PAHLKE (Germany, SOC, Rapporteur): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Pushbacks obviously lead to people disappearing.

Look at what is happening in Libya when people are being returned to the country and end up in what German diplomats have described as KZ-like camps [sic]. And that is only me quoting this report.

And it is also stated in the Report 2022/62 from 12 October – two years ago, exactly two years ago. And I'm a bit confused because Ms BILOZIR, who is also in support of this amendment, voted on this resolution and this report.

And, therefore, I think we should reject it unanimously.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Yes?

Mr Paweł JABŁOŃSKI (Poland, EC/DA): Madam President, I would like to support what Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO said before and refer you to Rule 34.9, which is very clear.

One person in favour, one person potentially against. And then the Committee's opinion may be expressed either by the Chair of the Committee or the rapporteur.

And the guidelines say very clearly the Committee's position shall only be given in favour or against – one word.

This is what Mr Julian PAHLKE can say in this debate because he's the rapporteur. The rules say it very clearly.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Excuse me, but the person likely to speak against can be the rapporteur.

Someone speaks for the amendment, someone speaks against the amendment, and we get a view from both sides. It's a good thing to continue. And the Committee has already taken a position.

That's enough. It's one for and one against.

Mr Paweł JABŁOŃSKI (Poland, EC/DA): Madam President, I understand, and it's normal. That's true. But if one is the rapporteur, the role is different in this Assembly, and it should be limited to this role. Simply speaking, we are referring to the specific Rule 34.9.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Excuse me, but the rapporteur has already taken a position in the Committee. He can speak...

Moving on.

The Committee rejected this amendment by a two-thirds majority.

We will now proceed to vote on the amendment.

The vote is open.

Amendment 2 is not adopted.

We will now move on to Amendment 7.

Mr Norbert KLEINWÄCHTER has the floor. Thank you, Mister KLEINWÄCHTER.

Mr Norbert KLEINWÄCHTER (Germany, EC/DA): Thank you, Madam President.

This amendment asks to delete the third and fourth sentence of Paragraph 10, which basically says "immigration detention should only be a measure of last resort and for the shortest period possible, pending the enactment of a return procedure, et cetera, et cetera".

And it misquotes article Article 31 of the Convention related to the status of refugees. The opposite is simply true. According to the Geneva Convention, refugees must flee to the next safe area in order to be recognised. It is only then that their illegal entry into foreign territory may not be punished. So what you are claiming here is simply wrong and this needs to be deleted.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Does anyone wish to speak against the amendment?

Mister PAHLKE, you have the floor.

Mr Julian PAHLKE (Germany, SOC, Rapporteur): Obviously, it's not about the right or wrong interpretation of law. It's about that some members of this Assembly want to keep people in detention indefinitely. This is what we call for if we will take this amendment and, therefore, I ask you to reject it.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

The Committee rejected this amendment by a two-thirds majority.

We will now proceed to vote on the amendment.

The vote is open.

Amendment 7 is not adopted.

We now move on to Amendment 1.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS or someone else has the floor. Mr SOBOLIEV? Does anyone wish to support the amendment?

It's Amendment 1. If no one supports it, it will not be put to the vote.

Agreed. We'll move on.

We shall now proceed to vote on the draft resolution contained in Document 16037. A simple majority is required.

The vote is open.

The draft resolution contained in Document 16037 is adopted.

(Applause)

We shall now proceed to vote on the draft recommendation contained in Document 16037.

I remind you that the majority required is two-thirds of the votes cast.

The vote is open.

The draft recommendation contained in Document 16037 is adopted.

(Applause)

All set...?

Current affairs debate: Deteriorating situation of human rights, rule of law and democracy in Azerbaijan

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Dear colleagues, the next item of business this afternoon is a current affairs debate on the “Deteriorating situation of human rights, rule of law and democracy in Azerbaijan.”

Order!

Speaking time is limited to 3 minutes for all members except the first speaker, chosen by the Bureau, who is allowed 7 minutes.

The debate will end at around 6:30 p.m.

In the debate I call first Ms Lise CHRISTOFFERSEN. You have 7 minutes now, and 3 minutes at the end to reply to the debate.

Just before I give the floor to Mr Piero FASSINO for a personal statement.

Piero, we are listening to you.

Mr Piero FASSINO (Italy, SOC): Thank you, Mister Chairman.

No, just to apologise and say that in the last vote on the resolution we approved, I was mistaken. I was in favour and not against.

Thank you.

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

Dear colleagues, I call now Ms Lise CHRISTOFFERSEN.

Lise, you can have the floor.

Ms Lise CHRISTOFFERSEN (Norway, SOC): Thank you, Mister President.

And dear colleagues,

On 24 January, our Assembly resolved not to ratify the credentials of the Azerbaijani delegation. The Assembly was among other things worried about the lack of co-operation in the monitoring procedure and lack of invitation to observe the early presidential election of 7 February. It also cited the human rights situation in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Unfortunately, as we approach the COP29, recent developments point in the wrong direction.

The Azerbaijani authorities decided not to invite the Assembly to observe the early parliamentary election of 1 September. On 26 August, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared *persona non grata* the 76 members of our Assembly who had voted in favour of the non-ratification of the Azerbaijani's delegation. The ban will only be lifted if their delegation's participation in the Assembly is restored.

Moreover, the way in which the parliamentary election of 1 September was conducted raises again concerns about respect for democratic standards. The Election Code does not meet international standards, including the recommendations of the ODIHR (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights), the Venice Commission, and the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights.

As stressed by the ODIHR, the election took place in a restrictive political and legal environment which resulted in a contest devoid of competition. During the election day, independent media reported widespread instances of violence against independent candidates, carousel voting in favour of pro-government candidates, ballot stuffing, unregistered voters, and serious irregularities in the vote count.

The ruling New Azerbaijan Party won 68 of 125 seats in the Milli Majlis, the rest of seats being occupied by so-called independent candidates. The leading opposition, Azerbaijan Popular Front Party, did not take part in the election, for the seventh straight time. The turnout was just 37.3%, the lowest figure in all elections.

Moreover, the election of 1 September took place against the background of continued repression of dissenting voices, characterised by increased restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly, and association, with continuing crackdown on political activists, critics, civil society and media representatives.

A few months before the election, the authorities arrested dozens of journalists such as those from Toplum TV, Abzas Media and Channel 13, who had professional experience in covering elections. Turan, one of the few independent media left, is exposed to continuous pressure.

The authorities also arrested civil society activists with experience in monitoring elections. As our President pointed out yesterday, the Václav Havel Prize winner Anar MAMMADLI is back in prison, as well as Akif GURBANOV, one of the candidates shortlisted for this year's prize.

Further arrests occurred this summer. At the end of July, during the candidate nomination and registration phase, government critic and former diplomat Emin IBRAHIMOV was arrested on charges of hooliganism. According to some reports he was subjected to electric torture. Moreover, a Talysh researcher Iqbal ABILOV, who resides in Belarus, was placed in detention on remand on charges of treason and ethnic hatred.

On 21 August, political analyst and doctoral candidate at the Charles University in Prague, Bahruz SAMADOV was apprehended by the State Security Service on charges of "treason", while attempting to leave the country.

In August, new serious charges were brought against six journalists and economist Farid MEHRALIZADA in connection with the "Abzas Media" case. These new charges have increased the potential maximum sentence to 12 years of imprisonment.

The overall human rights situation in Azerbaijan remains dire. Local human rights groups have reported that at least 303 individuals were imprisoned on political grounds.

In addition, we face the unsolved situation around the Armenian prisoners of war and civilian captives who are still detained in Azerbaijan, as mentioned in our Resolution 2483 of 2023, in addition to the fear of ethnic and cultural cleansing after Azerbaijan took control over Nagorno-Karabakh.

It should also be noted that since the end of January 2024, the authorities refused to hold high-level talks in Baku with the CPT, the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. Last June, they also refused to accept its *ad hoc* visit. Moreover, none of the CPT's key long-standing recommendations regarding allegations of torture and ill-treatment have been implemented. On 3 July the CPT made an unprecedented statement about the persistent lack of co-operation by the Azerbaijani authorities and decided to publish its report of the 2022 *ad hoc* visit to the country.

To conclude, all these developments are very deplorable, the level of suppression seems unprecedented, and complicate even more co-operation with the Assembly and the Council of Europe.

We should strongly condemn lack of co-operation with the Assembly and the CPT. But we should also hope that these negative developments will not lead to a permanent rupture in relations with the Azerbaijani authorities. We should stand ready for a dialogue and support the authorities in taking steps to uphold the

fundamental values to which they subscribed when they joined the Council of Europe. However, if there is no improvement as regards our mutual co-operation and the overall situation in the country, we should remain vigilant and defend our values.

Thank you.

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

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

On behalf of the United European Left, I wish to state our huge concern at the continuing path of the authoritarian Azerbaijan regime towards ever greater levels of oppression towards its own citizens, as well as its appalling treatment of the former citizens of Nagorno-Karabakh and its bellicose and threatening behaviour towards its neighbouring country Armenia.

This year both so-called Presidential and Parliamentary elections were held in a manner that would even make the leadership of North Korea blush.

President ALIYEV has won five consecutive elections since succeeding his father, Mr Heydar ALIYEV, in 2003. A 2009 referendum abolished the term limit for the presidency and the post of vice-president was created in 2016 and surprise, surprise was immediately granted to the president's wife!

To be clear, we are talking about a cruel dictatorship, run as a family mafia dynasty. Responsible for ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh and the oppression of its own citizens. Mr Ilham ALIYEV and his henchmen make television's *Sopranos* look like social workers by comparison.

The state of human rights and democracy in Azerbaijan has deteriorated even further in recent years with the detention of human rights activists, opposition figures and independent journalists on politically motivated charges. And, of course, the ethnic cleansing of over 100 000 citizens of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Arbitrary arrests, indefinite detentions, severe beatings, torture and forced disappearances have all become systemic means of oppressing people in the most appalling manner. This year the number of political prisoners has tripled as the regime works to ensure that all opposition voices are silenced in the run-up to COP29 in November. It's a sad reflection that world powers continue to gift COP to some of the worst regimes on the planet. Money, once again, trumping human rights.

In the light of all of these actions, it is clear that the Assembly was correct to refuse to ratify the credentials of the Azerbaijan delegation earlier this year.

Our values are supposed to be rooted in democracy, human rights and the rule of law. The Azerbaijan regime believes in alternatively in plutocracy, torture and the rule of terror.

I believe it is time to initiate a complementary joint procedure between the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly in relation to the many serious violations by Azerbaijan of its statutory obligations to this organisation.

Thank you.

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

Ms Azadeh ROJHAN from the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group.

Ms Azadeh ROJHAN (Sweden, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Mister President,

Over the past years we have witnessed the government of Azerbaijan systematically erode the basics of freedom, human rights, and rule of law in Azerbaijan. A very concerning situation that is rapidly getting worse.

Let us start with the state of elections in Azerbaijan. They are neither free nor fair, opposition parties face constant harassment and many independent candidates are disqualified or imprisoned under false charges.

In democracy, elections are meant to reflect the will of the people. Yet in Azerbaijan, elections have become a tool for the regime to maintain its grip on power.

Freedom of expression, one of the most fundamental rights in any society, is almost non-existent.

Journalists are silenced, media outlets are forced to close and those who dare to speak out are arrested.

Furthermore, the justice system in Azerbaijan is deeply flawed. It operates under the direct control of the government, leaving little room for fairness or independence.

Political prisoners, several of them have been named here today, are routinely denied a fair trial and reports of torture and inhuman treatment in prisons. This Assembly has rapidly called on Azerbaijan to release political prisoners. Yet the government continues to turn a deaf ear to these demands.

And the situation has become even more concerning when we look at Azerbaijan's recent behaviour on the international stage, including towards this assembly and CPT. The government has blocked attempts by this Assembly to send observers, refusing to allow reporters and election monitors to access the country.

And now the decision to impose entry bans on 76 members of this Assembly. This is a clear violation of Azerbaijan's obligations as a member of this organisation. Such actions make the current position of Azerbaijan in the Council of Europe even more difficult.

Azerbaijan needs to understand that changes need to be seen so that the country can get back its credentials to this Assembly. As of today it is difficult to see when that could happen.

Thank you.

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

Mr Niklaus-Samuel GUGGER from the Group of the European People's Party.

Mr Niklaus-Samuel GUGGER (Switzerland, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Dear Mister Chairman,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am speaking on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party (EPP), and we clearly state that Azerbaijan must immediately consider how it wants to behave as part of the Council of Europe.

I will start with a personal example, which was also discussed in detail in the Council of Ministers. I was blacklisted along with 75 other Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) members because of my vote on the credentials of the Azerbaijani PACE delegation in January 2024. However, I was the only one to be made an example of. When I tried to enter Baku as a member of the OSCE election observation delegation for the presidential elections on 3 February, I was rudely turned away and my diplomatic passport was taken away. This was despite the fact that I was officially accredited as a Swiss OSCE election observer. When I protested in Baku, the security officer showed me a list of names of people who are not welcome in Azerbaijan. Switzerland immediately reacted formally and asked Azerbaijan for an answer and asked questions about a possible blacklist. Subsequently, Azerbaijan repeatedly denied the existence of such a list and justified my expulsion with my commitment to the humanitarian reopening of the Lachin corridor.

As a reminder, there are currently six interstate cases pending before the European Court of Human Rights concerning Armenia and Azerbaijan in relation to Nagorno-Karabakh. These cases concern allegations of widespread violations of the European Convention on Human Rights. Then in August – this is really an escalation – the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry officially admitted after six months that a blacklist does indeed exist and that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe deputies who voted against the delegation's credentials on 24 January are, therefore, unwelcome in Azerbaijan.

To clarify, I voted this way not because I am an enemy of Azerbaijan, but because I am committed to implementing the values of the Council of Europe. These values have been struggling in Azerbaijan for some time as the CPT Committee noted in June 2024, for example, in a public statement on conditions in Azerbaijani prisons.

In a world that is constantly changing, the importance of human rights remains more irreplaceable than ever. The Council of Europe, which has played a central role in Europe since its foundation in 1949, has enshrined human rights, democracy and the rule of law at the heart of its mission, and we as the Group of the European People's Party (EPP) will clearly uphold these.

That is why we demand, firstly, the lifting of the blacklist and the associated entry ban on 76 Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe members; secondly, an end to discrimination, political persecution and restrictions on press freedom. This would be real proof that the Azerbaijani Government wants to engage positively with the values and proposals of this Institution.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Sir Christopher CHOPE on behalf of the European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance.

There's a problem with a microphone.

Sir Christopher, can you please press the button?

Sir Christopher CHOPE (United Kingdom, EC/DA, Spokesperson for the group): Mister President, I share the views of the previous speaker in saying it's important that we should support the implementation of the values of the Council of Europe. And I think it's a pity, therefore, that we are not able to have a dialogue with parliamentarians from Azerbaijan during this debate and more widely within this Assembly.

And whilst I share many of the concerns expressed by Ms Lise CHRISTOFFERSEN in her opening remarks, I don't think that we should be singling out Azerbaijan and its members for unfair discrimination. I think we should bring them in under our big tent in the same way as we continue to have Türkiye under our big tent, despite the fact that Türkiye is guilty – much more guilty, in my view, and according to the Committee of Ministers – of egregious refusal to comply with court rulings of the European Court of Human Rights, and particularly in the Kavala case, refusing to comply with the Article 46.4 requirements of the Committee of Ministers.

Why is it that some members of this Assembly think that we should treat the case of Türkiye less seriously than the case of Azerbaijan? We surely should not be involved in supporting double standards. And let us also remember that we are out of step with the international community. The international community supported Azerbaijan's presidency of COP29. One hundred and twenty members of the non-aligned states of the United Nations have supported Azerbaijan as the president of that organisation for some four years. We know that our own Secretary General, and indeed the Commissioner for Human Rights, visited Azerbaijan less than 12 months ago, again pursuing dialogue rather than confrontation.

And I plead with my colleagues to say, why don't we try and welcome the Aziri delegation, both government and opposition members, back within this Assembly so that we can perpetuate dialogue? Because it's only with dialogue that we're going to improve the situation for the residents in Azerbaijan. And it's only through dialogue that we're going to be able to promote effectively the values of this organisation.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Mr Claude KERN on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.

Mr Claude KERN (France, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister Chairman.

Dear colleagues,

Nine months after taking the decision to suspend the rights of the Azerbaijani delegation in our Assembly, we meet again to debate the deteriorating situation of human rights, the rule of law and democracy in Azerbaijan.

In January, when I was representing the Chairman of the Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee), I pointed out in the chamber that the Monitoring Committee had examined the situation in Azerbaijan on several occasions over the previous months, notably during the latest visits by the co-rapporteurs.

My colleague Mr Mogens JENSEN drew an uncompromising conclusion on the serious violations of the principles of democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The Monitoring Committee deplored the Azerbaijani delegation's lack of co-operation in the monitoring process, and was particularly disappointed by the fact that the co-rapporteurs on Azerbaijan were denied access to the persons detained for political reasons.

In January, when we refused to ratify the credentials of the Azerbaijani delegation, we left the door open, indicating that this decision could be reviewed should we see any significant improvement in the areas mentioned by our rapporteur.

Unfortunately, the situation in Azerbaijan has deteriorated rather than improved, and I condemn the decision by the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs to declare *personæ non gratæ* the 76 members of our Assembly – including myself – who voted against ratification of the Azerbaijani delegation's credentials last January.

President ROUSOPOULOS expressed himself very clearly and firmly in August. I would like to thank him and quote him, as I agree with every word he used: "This is a more than regrettable signal, which only makes Azerbaijan's current position within the Council of Europe more difficult. Member states are committed to democratic standards: blacklisting those who have voted their conscience can only backfire.

The last presidential election campaign was a travesty of democracy, against a backdrop of increasing repression of independent media and potential opponents. Repression also took place during the campaign for the recent parliamentary elections. The OSCE election observation missions were highly critical in both cases.

In early September, Amnesty International stressed that "the alarming new arrests and detentions of people critical of the government must not be ignored. The international community must condemn them in the strongest possible terms. Over the past two weeks, during the election campaign, two prominent figures have been arrested on trumped-up charges, and others have been threatened and harassed".

Nor can I forget Azerbaijan's constant hot and cold attitude towards the negotiation process underway with Armenia to achieve a just and lasting peace in the South Caucasus, or the hostile ventures it is making towards France, notably in New Caledonia.

What is Azerbaijan really after? Does it still adhere to the values of the Council of Europe? This is the fundamental question we must ask ourselves with lucidity, in the hope that this debate will lead it back onto the path of democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights.

Thank you.

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

Ms Aurora FLORIDIA is next.

Ms Aurora FLORIDIA (Italy, SOC): Sorry for my delay.

Thank you, Mister President.

Dear colleagues,

I stand before you today to address an issue that strikes at the very foundations of this institution, a pillar of democratic values and human rights.

Following a vote in January 2024 within this Assembly in which the majority of us opposed the ratification of credentials for Azerbaijan's delegation, the Azerbaijani government in September declared 76 of our members *personæ non gratæ*, thereby banning their entry into the country.

The timing of this decision appears deliberately chosen, as Azerbaijan is set to host a United Nations Climate Change Conference in November. The Azerbaijani government has made it clear that unless their delegation's mandate within the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe is restored, the parliamentarians who opposed them will be barred from attending the climate summit.

This ultimatum, which mixes diplomatic retaliation with global climate negotiations, sets a dangerous precedent. It undermines not only our democratic values, but also the integrity of international co-operation on critical issues like climate change.

Equally troubling is a double standard being applied. While those of us who advocate for climate change solutions and human rights are blacklisted, Azerbaijan has placed no such restrictions on the participation of fossil fuel lobbyists at COP29. In fact, their influence is growing despite the urgent need to phase out fossil fuels and transition to sustainable energy.

This discrepancy undermines the credibility of COP29 and threatens to derail meaningful climate action. I recall that just a few months ago, our Assembly discussed the importance of mainstreaming the human right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment, emphasising the need to strengthen the legal framework protecting this right. It is essential to ensure a sustainable present and future for generations to come.

On the contrary, the stakeholders who should face scrutiny are given an open platform in Azerbaijan, while elected representatives committed to defending democratic principles and human rights are being silenced and banned.

This raises serious questions about the future of climate governance.

How can we ensure a fair and just transition if critical voices challenging a country like Azerbaijan, where human rights, the rule of law, and democracy appear to be deteriorating and silenced, while those representing powerful fossil fuel interests remain unchallenged.

As we approach COP29, we must demand not only action on climate change, but also the protection of human rights within the host country.

Climate justice is inseparable from the defence of democratic principles and is closely linked to the pursuit of social justice. Therefore, dialogue and diplomatic efforts with Azerbaijan must be strengthened to establish robust human rights safeguards for all those affected by the longstanding conflict.

Please remember that it's time to address the climate crisis effectively.

Thank you.

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

Ms Biljana PANTIĆ PILJA.

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

The discussion on this topic without colleagues from Azerbaijan does not make much sense.

In principle, we oppose the exclusion of any member state from the work of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe or any other organisation. On the other hand, accession of some entities or territories to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe is even worse. But I will stick to the topic.

I believe that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe should serve as a platform for dialogue on an equal and inclusive basis and should prioritise the promotion of this idea. Unfortunately, this discussion will not contribute to such a dialogue.

Let's be honest: without the participation of the Azerbaijani delegation, such an initiative can hardly meet its stated objectives. Instead of fostering a constructive dialogue, it risks intensifying tensions and undermining reached results.

I would like to point out that the decision not to ratify the credentials of the Azerbaijani delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in January was needless and counterproductive.

Insisting on this solution can only lead to mutual accusation and further alienation. This decision undermines and kindles the role of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe as a platform for meaningful dialogue. Return to dialogue and restoring the Azerbaijani delegation's participation in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe is necessary, especially having in mind the current situation in Europe and the world.

We need a constructive and mutually respectful dialogue instead of execution and monologue.

With its recent history, Serbia is the best example showing how important and essential dialogue is, and we have learned this lesson from you. Please do not step out of this.

Thank you.

(Light applause)

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

Mr Armen GEVORGYAN (Armenia, EC/DA): Mister President, I believe that our organisation is unique in terms of positioning itself as a bastion of democracy, human rights, and rule of law on one hand, and continuously making compromises with members who are consistently ignoring these fundamental values.

I would like to bring attention of my colleagues from United Kingdom and Serbia to the fact that the case of Azerbaijan in the Council of Europe is a vivid example of a member that not only failed to become more democratic and open since membership, but even succeeded in turning into a more authoritarian regime and in fact a family monarchy.

The strategic restraint of the democratic world towards Azerbaijan and pseudo-democratic efforts of establishing proactive relations, allowed Azerbaijan to turn our region in a zone of instability, conflicts, and big human tragedies.

The leadership in Baku is bullying other states, including those in our region, to build relations by manipulating its hydrocarbon reserves, taking force, and ethno-religious closeness with Türkiye. None of this has anything to do with anything this organisation stands for.

Colleagues, a few months ago Baku hosted a so called Congress of Independence Movements from French-colonised Territories.

Now let's be clear, finally, isn't this a direct challenge to the democratic security in Europe? Azerbaijan is not only now a provider of natural gas, but also encouraging separatism and armed resistance.

The Azerbaijani regime is hosting the COP29 UN Climate Change Conference in Baku to only legitimise the two recent non-democratic elections, as well as the horrific ethnic cleansing of the entire Armenian population from Nagorno-Karabakh, where these people have been living for millennia.

Azerbaijan is a major oil and gas producer in the Caspian, by which it makes significant damage to the Caspian seabed. The oil and gas export funds are spent to only cement the dictatorship as well as arms build up to threaten others and fight wars.

Only a few weeks remaining to the COP29 and hundreds of political prisoners are still in Baku, including dozens of Armenians, prisoners of war, as well as the leadership of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Mister President, Azerbaijan is a risk factor to many international organisations and initiatives. It is discrediting any democratic human rights and rule of law initiatives it has become part of. I believe the time has come for us to seriously re-evaluate the role of Azerbaijan in this organisation.

Let me conclude by calling upon all parliamentarians in the Assembly to make best efforts with their governments and urge Azerbaijan to release all political prisoners and Armenian hostages ahead of COP29.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Ms Blerina GJYLAMETI, but I think she is not here, so I'm going on with Ms Elvira KOVÁCS.

Ms Elvira KOVÁCS (Serbia, EPP/CD): Distinguished President, dear colleagues,

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe is the European political body with the widest democratic legitimacy, since it reflects the parliaments' composition of almost all European countries. Hence, diminishing this scope always carries the risk of undermining its own legitimacy.

This might be the case with the decision from January this year not to ratify the credentials of the Azerbaijani delegation. With such a decision, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe undermines its own legitimacy, together with its credibility as a platform for meaningful dialogue, since at least 10 million citizens of a European country are no longer represented within its ranks and are left without a voice.

Today, Azerbaijan is a valuable factor in the international order based on law, peace and security. The high achievements of its culture are an inseparable tile of the European cultural mosaic and its natural resources are of vital importance for the well-being of our continent.

Azerbaijan is located in a region where the values of the Council of Europe are not without those who contest them, nor are they unquestionably accepted as the optimal form for the life.

I believe that the denial of credentials to the Azerbaijani delegation in the body of the Council of Europe in which the citizens are most directly represented was wrong. Quite the contrary, at a time of enormous challenges for the European continent and for the whole world, greater cohesion and the greatest possible democratic legitimacy of the Council of Europe is needed.

I am convinced that the full participation of the Azerbaijani delegation in our work would influence the polarisation of European values and democratic procedures among this significant population.

I hope that we could agree that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe should function as a platform for dialogue on an equal and inclusive basis, and should prioritise the advancement of this idea.

In a nutshell, I would like to support and call for a return to dialogue and the resumption of participation of the Azerbaijani delegation in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

All efforts need to be channelled in this direction. What is needed is a constructive and mutually respectful dialogue, with the participation of all. And this is possible in this body only if their credentials are ratified.

Thank you for your attention.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Ms Zeynep YILDIZ is next.

Ms Zeynep YILDIZ (Türkiye, NR): Dear Chair, dear colleagues,

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) faces two fundamental risks. One is being confined to continentality and the second is disregarding equal treatment among its member states.

The Council of Europe was established with the aim “to achieve a greater unity between its members”, as envisioned in the founding statute of the Council.

You may remember that when Karabakh was under Armenian occupation, we made numerous speeches affirming that Karabakh is a part of Azerbaijan’s internationally recognised territorial integrity.

Why, then, are we unable to adopt the same stance when the same member state takes a step to protect its own territorial integrity and restore the displaced Azerbaijanis to their homeland after 30 years? We need to accept that there is a difference in our approach.

When will we realise that stigmatising member states through double-standard measures is gradually shrinking the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and confining it to a narrow continental scope?

Now, we should be discussing the return of our Azerbaijani colleagues by approving their credentials and welcoming them back to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, but on the contrary, we witness that the fragile dialogue medium is restrained instead. In their absence, with full of resentment, Azerbaijan is tried to be judged. And this is not fair.

This situation shows that we are drifting away from the rational approaches that form the foundation of our institution.

We foresee that discussing issues about Azerbaijan here, while they are absent and unable to defend themselves or share their views, will not contribute to raising the democratic standard of the member states.

Therefore, what we need to do now is to invite Azerbaijan back to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and re-establish a democratic and multilateral medium for dialogue, rather than pinpointing Azerbaijan here and engaging in extrajudicial executions against Azerbaijan in their absence.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has the function of resolving conflicts, not creating them, and instead of pushing Azerbaijan away, we should embrace Azerbaijan to preserve the pluralistic composition of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Thank you.

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

Ms Elisabetta GARDINI is next.

Ms Elisabetta GARDINI (Italy, EC/DA): Thank you President,

Dear colleagues,

Very often, if not almost always, the calls of international bodies on the situation of human rights and respect for the rule of law in Azerbaijan focus on the situation of the Armenian minority. We see this, for example, with the decision of the International Court of Justice in November 2023, or again with the remarks last January of the then Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, in which she focused precisely on the situation of displaced Armenians.

However, I recall that last May President Ilham ALYEV signed an amnesty decree with respect to 150 prisoners, while religious tolerance has always characterised co-existence in Azerbaijan, where Catholic and Orthodox churches, mosques and synagogues are built at state expense to ensure equal treatment of all religions, as also demonstrated by the appreciation expressed by the Pope during his visit to the country.

You see, therefore, how all situations should not be considered exclusively from one perspective, but need a 360-degree approach. Moreover, I do not escape the impression that the issue of the protection of the rule of law and human rights in Azerbaijan is viewed precisely in light of the tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which, moreover, are now at a stage that allows cautious optimism.

In this regard, I would like to remind everyone of Secretary of State Antony BLINKEN's meeting on September 26 with the Armenian Foreign Minister and the Azerbaijani Foreign Minister on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. Secretary Antony BLINKEN praised both ministers for the progress made by Armenia and Azerbaijan toward a lasting and dignified peace, and encouraged both countries to continue to make progress to finalise an agreement as soon as possible. Italian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Antonio TAJANI also saw the two foreign ministers in separate meetings in New York and urged them to return to a constructive dialogue to find a diplomatic solution, also offering Rome's mediation and proposing to evaluate the successful model of South Tyrol.

We join, therefore, in the wishes so authoritatively expressed, trusting that both countries will approach each other with a constructive attitude.

I also hope that COP29, which will be hosted in Baku starting at the end of November next year, can be an opportunity for the country to reaffirm its commitment to international law, showing the existence of a free and independent civil society. And I hope that following the parliamentary elections in September, the Azerbaijani delegation will resubmit its credentials as soon as possible to this Assembly, which I am sure will evaluate them with balance and a spirit of inclusiveness.

I thank you.

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

Frank SCHWABE, you have the floor now.

Mr Frank SCHWABE (Germany, SOC): Dear Mister President, dear colleagues,

We have to know that we are not discussing about the conflict between two countries.

This is what the government, so-called government of Azerbaijan, wants to say. No, this is not about it. And it's not about criticising the people of Azerbaijan. They are very brave and honest people.

It's about a government who has no legitimisation to be a government, because all the elections, whatever we saw, are falsified elections.

This is the truth, and this is the situation in the country. And we have some values and we have some rules. And even if you don't commit to the values of this organisation, you have to commit to the rules. If we start to allow countries not to commit to the rules and to follow the rules of this organisation, this will be the end of this organisation. And we have 46 member countries, and we have different situations in a lot of member countries who spoke about it, but we are 40, 45.

And this is a difference to Türkiye, who allow and who keep the fundamental rules of this organisation when it comes to the question of monitoring the country.

And this is what Azerbaijan was doing: they prevent us, and I want to remind, this is a debate, they prevent us to go to the country. They prevent us to observe the elections. They imprison more and more people, three times more than maybe one and a half years ago. This is the situation.

And the situation is, can we allow a country, a government to do so, or can we not allow it? Because again, when we start it and when we say not stop, then other countries will follow. I'm unfortunately quite sure about it.

And what Azerbaijan was doing, they didn't answer to us. They answered in accusations of Islamophobia. They answered to imprison more and more people, including the human rights prize winner Anar MAMMADLI and others. This was the answer from Azerbaijan.

And now, meanwhile, they didn't invite us again to the next so-called election. And what they did as well is to ban. We're not open about it, it looks like. But now we have an understanding that they banned 76 members of this organisation. How we should work together, how we should cooperate when one country acts at the end in this way?

And let me quote Leyla YUNUS. Leila YUNUS, one of the brave people who have to be outside of the country, who cannot be in the country any more.

She wrote to me in a letter last week:

"In February 2023, there were 93 political prisoners in Azerbaijan. But then Ilham ALIYEV, the president, launched a large scale campaign of repression in the country. And as a result, a number of those arrested and convicted, tortured and subjected to numerous human rights violations has been drastically increased. The new list of political prisoners prepared on 23 September 2024 includes 319 people."

This is what's happening and what was happening in the last month. And now we have to take a decision. Do we allow Azerbaijan to change the values and rules of this organisation? Or do we ask Azerbaijan to commit to the values of this organisation and, at the end, to commit with the rules of this organisation? If the country and the government is willing to do so, they are very welcome back in this Assembly.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Mr Joseph O'REILLY is next.

Mr Joseph O'REILLY (Ireland, EPP/CD): Freedom House has designated Azerbaijan as one of the most authoritarian states. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)'s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) have grave reservations about the recent elections establishing firmly a family monarchy.

Arbitrary arrests, indefinite detentions, severe beatings and torture are a common feature. Three hundred and nineteen individuals are in prison on political charges.

At the heart of all of this is the fact that the COP conference is coming to Baku, and there's an effort to clear the streets, to remove all protests, to, in some way, "sanitise" the place, to create a false impression of calm upon the arrival of the international delegations.

The Armenian prisoners of war are being mistreated and not being released. It's shocking that we have Václav Havel prizewinners and finalists in jail, and it's shocking that we still remain without peace on the borders.

So it's my essential contention that we cannot both openly condemn the absence of human rights, the lack of proper society in Azerbaijan. We are the international organisation for the protection of law, of human rights, of democracy. Democracy doesn't seem to enter into it. But, in this case, we're talking about an absence of law and order in any real sense. And we're talking of a breakdown of human rights.

On that basis, Azerbaijan must remain, unfortunately, outside the scope of this body but we must remain unequivocal in our condemnation of what's happening there, unequivocal in our pursuit of a satisfactory outcome, and to establish a normal society there.

I think Mr Frank SCHWABE put it well when he said, we have no problem with ordinary Azeri people. Of course we don't. Decent, good people trying to eke out their existence. But they are victims of a regime, of a governmental structure that, in the words of my distinguished Irish colleague, Mr Paul GAVAN, would put you in mind of North Korea and would make the *Sopranos* look harmless. So I think, in conclusion, we do need to be unequivocal in our condemnation.

Thank you.

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

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 texts can be submitted, electronically if possible, no later than 4 hours after the list of speakers is interrupted.

Now I call Ms Lise CHRISTOFFERSEN to reply for 3 minutes.

Ms Lise CHRISTOFFERSEN (Norway, SOC): Thank you, Mister President, and thank you to all the speakers in this current affairs debate.

And as I heard in the debate, the speakers on behalf of the political groups, as well as other speakers, obviously share the same worries about the deterioration of the human rights situation in Azerbaijan. And that's a good starting point for further efforts to assist Azerbaijan to move into the right direction.

I note that there are different opinions regarding their credentials, but no one has yet closed the door for renewed attempts to establish a new dialogue. And we are not going to decide today.

The task as rapporteur is really difficult these days without the invitations and denied to carrying out the meetings we have been asking for. And it was shocking to experience journalists and human rights activists that we had met with earlier that they were being arrested and ill treated during our last visit. One of them is Ulvi HASANLI, the director of Abzas Media.

For the time being, we have to base our work on information from other sources, among them civil society, human rights organisations, journalists. And our last meeting took place today, actually with human rights organisations, media representatives, and the lawyer of Akif GURBANOV.

So now what?

It's difficult to say where this will end, but I think for the good of the people of Azerbaijan, we should try to establish a more fruitful dialogue where all our institutions, the Assembly, the Committee of Ministers and the Secretary General act in a more co-ordinated manner.

And I have noted that our new Secretary General already has taken some initiatives.

The message from the civil society to the Council of Europe today is rather clear. It is of no use just to release a few political prisoners. A binding action plan needs to be set up in order to change the restrictive laws on political parties, NGOs and media.

We should bear that in mind.

And to conclude, whatever will happen now until January, it goes without saying that all attempts at a renewed and better dialogue must be based on the principles of the Council of Europe.

Thank you.

Mr Markus WIECHEL (Sweden, EC/DA): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Mr President,

At its session last January, the Assembly voted to deprive the Azerbaijani delegation of its voting rights for the year 2024. Seventy-six Assembly members - a clear majority - voted in favor of this proposal.

Ironically, me and the other seventy-five members, were declared persona non grata in Azerbaijan. It must be hard to find a better way for the Azeri regime to show us that our decision was right.

The reason for such strong action was, that the Assembly had come to the conclusion that Azerbaijan was no longer living up to either its membership obligations vis-à-vis the Assembly and the Council of Europe, or to the core values of our organization.

In a democracy, these basic values should after all not be so difficult to fulfill.

The freedom of expression and the right to peaceful assembly have been curtailed. Journalists and human rights defenders have been arrested and now face long prison terms. Over 230 people have been charged on purely political grounds, a doubling since only a few years ago. Meanwhile, a new law requires media outlets to register with the authorities, or be shut down along the lines of similar legislation in Russia.

The Assembly has furthermore been refused entry into the country, including for the observing of the presidential election to be held next February.

We have also witnessed Azerbaijan's recent repressive military actions in the brutal and over-night expulsion of about a hundred thousand ethnic Armenians from Nagorno-Karabach. There, many expelled families had lived for many generations. At the same time the Lachin corridor - the territory's only supply link with Armenia - was as most members of this Assembly know, closed by Azerbaijan.

The present deterioration in Azerbaijan's human rights situation stands in stark contrast to the rapid and fundamental liberalization that took place in the country after it joined the Council of Europe in 2001. The same day it signed the European Convention on Human Rights. Hope was the air in those optimistic days - in Azerbaijan and elsewhere in the region, much different from today's much more morose prospects.

In conclusion, Mr President, this Assembly owes it to its fundamental principles to respond firmly to Azerbaijan's broadside violations of them. I hope and trust that today's debate will enlighten us further in this respect.

Thank you, Mr President.

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

Dear President, dear Colleagues,

There have been, there are and there will continue to be shortcomings and developments in each Member State that we criticise. We monitor these issues through our instruments within the Assembly and other bodies of our Council. We work together through dialogue, interaction and cooperation to address them effectively.

Indeed, the Council of Europe was founded on the idea of solidarity and coordination. Closer cooperation between European countries, based on a constructive dialogue, will not only help to prevent future conflicts, but also provide a platform to uphold our fundamental values.

The most important element at this point is an ongoing dialogue based on mutual tolerance, a constructive approach, empathy and common sense. And the true centre of this dialogue is our Assembly.

By joining us in 2001, Azerbaijan has become an important partner in achieving our primary goal.

It has also made a significant contribution to the diversity of our Council, has valued mutual tolerance and understanding, and has contributed to the peace and stability of the volatile region of Caucasus.

But today, unfortunately, the Azerbaijani delegation is not with us and we are having a one-sided discussion about them. I do not think that this is conducive to productive dialogue.

Dear Colleagues, we are celebrating the 75th anniversary of the establishment of our Council. Our motto is "United around our values".

Of course, there will be some shortcomings and disagreements in this unity, as in the past. But at the end of the day, what is important is that we stand together. Because in the end, we can only overcome these things through our unity.

Thank you.

Mr Jone BLIKRA (Norway, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Member States of the Council of Europe have undertaken to respect the standards of democracy.

We should recall that in 2001 debate on Azerbaijan agreed to honor several specific commitments listed in the Assembly Opinion 222.

As a member country we are all obligated to work for the principles of democracy and the rule of law as well as respect for human rights and fundamental freedom of all persons.

After more than 20 years after joining the Council of Europe, debate on Azerbaijan has not fulfilled major commitments.

On the contrary, the regime in debate on Azerbaijan have speeded up a policy of actively working against the core values of the Council of Europe.

The arrest of journalists and others who speaks against the regime and on the behalf of human rights, and the decision of declaring members of this assembly as "persona non grata" is resent activity from det debate on Azerbaijan regime.

In the conflict concerning Nagorno-Karabakh, we have information that many from the Armenian leadership in Karabakh was rounded up, arrested and sent to Baku.

This is actions that shows us that the debate on Azerbaijani policy is based on ideas that is the opposite of the values this institution is founded on.

If we don't see any action from the debate on Azerbaijan regime to respect basic rights, I am willing to start talking about excluding debate on Azerbaijan as a member of The Council of Europe.

Ms Khatia TSILOSANI (Georgia, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Dear Colleagues,

According to the CoE core principles, we need to work jointly to ensure the engagement of every member State to strengthen democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in our countries. To achieve these goals we need to make all efforts to work together and be more concentrated on cooperation, rather than exclusion. We have an absence of the Azerbaijani delegation and lack the opportunity to have their opinions and suggestions on the matter. At the same time, we have to consider that recently the parliamentary elections have taken place in the country and it is very important to enrich PACE with new expertise and newly elected MPs who represent the Azeri people. Therefore, I think that following the values of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, it is important that all sides be presented, that they can participate, and that we should discuss the possibility of establishing direct communication with the newly elected parliament. We all acknowledge the importance of Azerbaijani's engagement in PACE and we expressed our readiness to mediate in this process. We suggest starting communication with the newly elected parliament. We are ready to mediate the process in case the PACE defines this. As mentioned, every single member of the CoE should benefit from such an important political platform as PACE. Therefore, we strongly believe that there can be touching elements to reach an agreement based on dialogue. We do hope that in 2025 Azerbaijan will return to the PACE.

Ms Meryem GÖKA (Türkiye, NR): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Dear President and Colleagues,

PACE's core mission is to preserve unity by providing a platform for dialogue and fostering the protection of the fundamental rights of the people within its member states, based on the principles of open dialogue and inclusivity.

The exclusion of the Azerbaijani delegation prevents the deputies of a member state from participating in the activities of the Assembly, which directly undermines the democratic foundation of PACE.

By closing the doors to Azerbaijan's representation, we risk shutting down one of the few critical channels for dialogue in the region.

This decision not only isolates a member state but also jeopardizes the fragile efforts toward peace and stability in the South Caucasus.

It was very interesting to observe that the increased criticism of Azerbaijan and its subsequent suspension occurred after Azerbaijan's retaking of the occupied Karabakh region.

Naturally, this creates the impression that Azerbaijan is facing repercussions from certain parties for reclaiming its previously occupied territories.

The Assembly has a specific responsibility to demonstrate that this is not the case.

Democracy is not the exclusive right of a few nations, nor should it be wielded as a tool to create divisions.

Progress can only be achieved through inclusive dialogue, and when we exclude voices from the conversation, we hinder that progress.

Azerbaijan faces clear double standards.

As Europe faced a natural gas crisis from weaning off Russia supplies due to the war in Ukraine, reliable partners like Azerbaijan were sought.

In July 2022, the EU signed an agreement to double Azerbaijan's gas exports by 2027, clearly recognizing it as a trusted ally.

Yet, when it comes to representation in PACE, Azerbaijan is excluded.

Is this not contradictory?

Recognized as a partner in times of need, but denied equal representation when it matters most—this inconsistency undermines the principles of fairness and cooperation we strive to uphold.

We hope this Assembly will reconsider its decision, as this is essential not only for fairness to Azerbaijan but also for safeguarding the unity and common values of the Council of Europe.

Thank you.

Ms Pelin YILIK (Türkiye, NR): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Dear President, dear Colleagues,

The background to the current tense and fragile state of relations with Azerbaijan dates back to last year.

The Nagorno-Karabakh issue has been a source of sensitivity for the Azerbaijani people for three decades. They have regained their land after years of displacement and suffering.

They felt that they had been wronged and that our Assembly had not stood by them, even though it was clear from the report of the United Nations mission that the criticisms and accusations against them in this matter were false.

I believe that the main reason for this perception was the lack of dialogue, which is the key and the prerequisite for building bridges and promoting understanding.

Moreover, a one-sided dialogue, in which we simply express our criticisms and expectations without having a response, could create new barriers to understanding, as there are no Azerbaijani members here in the Hemicycle and therefore no mutual exchange.

Dear Colleagues,

Our Assembly is an institution based on dialogue and cooperation. We should promote inclusivity, not exclusivity. We must use our platform to break down barriers and cultivate an environment where each of us feels recognised and empowered to build meaningful connections and work towards common goals.

Constructive dialogue requires the participation of all relevant parties to ensure that perspectives are fully represented and understood. By discussing the situation in Azerbaijan without their representatives, we risk perpetuating misunderstandings and resentments and making it more difficult to find common ground.

Therefore, I believe it would be beneficial for us as an Assembly to work together on ways to reduce tensions, identify the most conducive messages to convey to the Azerbaijanis, and create a constructive environment for dialogue.

Thank you.

Ms Seda GÖREN BÖLÜK (Türkiye, NR): *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in French.*

Current affairs debate: Situation in the Middle-East: escalation of violence and mounting humanitarian crisis, particularly in Gaza

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

Dear colleagues,

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

So we need 1 minute to go to the next item of business this afternoon, which is a current affairs debate on the situation in the Middle East and I'd like to call those who are responsible to take their seats. Ms Saskia KLUIT is here.

Yeah, you have to come in front.

So, as I said, the next item is a current affairs debate on the situation in the Middle East, escalation of violence and mounting humanitarian crisis, particularly in Gaza. Speaking time is limited to 3 minutes for all members except the first speaker, chosen by the Bureau, who is allowed 7 minutes. The debate will end at around 7:30 p.m.

In the debate, I call first, Ms Saskia KLUIT. Saskia, we have 7 minutes now and 3 minutes at the end to reply to the debate. You have the floor.

Ms Saskia KLUIT (Netherlands, SOC): Thank you, President.

It is a heavy responsibility to open this debate and to ask for your urgent attention to the situation which is evolving now and is worsening by the hour.

We are watching an extreme escalation of violence in the Middle East. With the escalation of the might of Israel's military operations in Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, and the next few days will be crucial.

It is a conflict with very deep roots and wounds on all sides. We are divided, but however difficult, we must try today to find a common ground and human rights-based way forward. I welcome the continuing work in the Sub-Committee on the Middle East on finding political solutions even if it's really difficult.

And I commemorate, my friends, that it is our collective responsibility not only to take political stances but also, or most importantly, to foster peace human rights and safety in this region.

That is why I would like to ask you today, to go beyond our political differences and our political stances. It is my wish that we can debate and focus on the humanitarian side of this conflict and the human rights that we stand for.

To start, it is important to commemorate that our Assembly has condemned the attacks of Hamas in the strongest words. These hideous crimes committed during that attack represent a complete violation of human rights and human dignity, for which the perpetrators should be held accountable.

And we should call for and keep calling for the immediate return of the hostages and call upon Hamas to grant immediate access of the Red Cross to the hostages. The bodies of the hostages who are not alive any more should be immediately returned, in dignity, to their loved ones. And we send unwavering support to all the families of the hostages.

But, dear colleagues,

A year after these dreadful events of 7 October, the military operations of Israel are still continuing unabated in Gaza and the West Bank and have now extended to Yemen, Syria and this morning has physically crossed the borders of Lebanon with a ground offensive for Israel.

In Lebanon, the recent escalation has placed already immense strain on the humanitarian situation. Thousands are missing or dead, one million people have already fled – 100 000 to Syria and I have really great concerns about how they are doing safety-wise and in well-being. My heart goes out to all of them. We should stand in solidarity with the people of Lebanon today and we should speak our support for them in these challenging times.

And we are here to defend human rights and human dignity. So we must speak up out and loud about the most fundamental of those rights, and that's the right to live.

Protection of that right is the foundation of our work in this Council especially, and maybe foremost in times of conflict and war. So I urge you again to focus this debate on the urgent vital needs of ordinary people in the Middle East who are suffering and dying.

Now, first of all, I call our own states and council members states to immediately prioritise peace, prioritise de-escalation in Lebanon and other areas, and prioritise the protection of civilians and humanitarian workers in this conflict. That is our task in this conflict.

But even in this moment of escalation, it is clear that the situation in Gaza has no comparison in the region. It's one of the highest importances that we prevent the situation from spilling over to other areas in the Middle East. Imagine the impact of 45 000 bombs on a highly densely populated area.

As you know, I am the designated rapporteur on the humanitarian situation of women and children in Gaza, the West Bank and Israel – a report I hope to complete next year. And I would like to share with you some of the information we have got at hearings we organised during the last two months because these are the effects we might be facing on a much bigger ground and we should fight to prevent it.

Gazans have no means to escape. They are besieged. They are trapped. The Gaza population is constantly on the move to avoid harm, while in fact, they cannot avoid harm. Nowhere is safe. Nine out of 10 people, around two million people, are displaced from their homes. Everyone has been forced to flee every month. Already one million Lebanese are on the run. So in the region, we are facing three million people who are not at home anymore.

We have heard many times 41 000 people have been lost, 95 000 have been injured, including 70% women and children. The list of identified victims of Gaza already contains 215 pages of only the names of children. At least 250 humanitarian and medical aid workers have been killed, mostly on duty.

But what most people don't realise is that due to the collapse of the healthcare system, we are looking at a much bigger number of casualties. The safest estimate is that we are looking at 120 000 people who have died from ailments and sicknesses that could have been easily prevented, like women having a C-section having to die because of a lack of penicillin. Their babies dying because of a lack of milk.

The children of Gaza are living trauma on trauma. They are losing their home, their schools, their friends, their families. About 17 000 children are without their parents. Many of them have been forced to assume the role of parent. They have to take care of their siblings, often leading to exploitation or sexual violence against them. Every day, 10 children have their limbs amputated. So while we are talking here this week, 50 children will have lost a limb. President, when we meet again in January, if nothing has changed, we could fill this room with children who have lost an arm or a leg or both.

Another 177 000 women are at stake for non-communicable diseases that are not treated. Hunger and poor nutrition are dangerous things when you are pregnant. The healthcare system has collapsed due to widespread destruction of the medical infrastructure but also due to the lack of supplies, of essential goods, and that is caused by administrative and physical restrictions – a serious breach of international law. As a result, the population no longer has access to simple medication.

I will try to speed up, but a lot needs to be said.

Humanitarian organisations are working day and night and they keep going to work even though they are being shot at, they are being bombed and they are being intimidated. They are real heroes, and I think we should pay them respect for going to work every day.

It's not only, however, a humanitarian issue if we attack humanitarian workers. It's also a moral one and it's also an illegal one. And we should stand for the safety of the workers. Because if we allow humanitarian law and regulations to be violated by conflicting parties in a conflict where democracy plays a big role, what are our human rights worth? What is our human rights order worth if we do not fight for them in this conflict?

We cannot accept a manmade humanitarian crisis of this scale, because it will be the new normal and other people will be hurt in other conflicts. So we should push for an immediate de-escalation and permanent and unconditional ceasefire. And that's the essential first step.

Pending the ceasefire, we should not rest. We should call on Israel and conflicting party to ensure that the military operations do not further destroy civilian lives or infrastructure. And we should call urgently on Israel and all parties in the Middle East to fully respect international boundaries, humanitarian law and regulations which have been installed for exactly the situation we are talking about now.

So that means no attacks on civilians or humanitarian structures. Humanitarian personnel should be guaranteed safe working conditions in all situations. And we should have safe access points for conflicting and de-escalation zones, especially in Gaza. They must be open at all times for medical and humanitarian work.

I look to a debate about this aspect of the conflict, President, because we should be silent when children sleep, but not when they die.

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

For those colleagues who might... for colleagues who might be wondering why there were 2 more minutes added, it is because Saskia asked for it and she will have less time to reply.

So I open now the list. On behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group, Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ.

Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ (Switzerland, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister Chairman.

The Middle East has gone up in flames, and the word that comes to mind today is "apocalypse". The fire had been smoldering for decades, with regular but limited fires, against the backdrop of a geopolitical situation of unimaginable complexity, with hatreds passed down from generation to generation.

On October 7, 2023, this hatred led to appalling crimes that we must firmly denounce. But today, we are witnessing the consequences of the law of retaliation applied without limit, with a government's headlong rush. In Gaza, the Israeli army's strategy was twofold: to free hundreds of hostages held by Hamas and deal Hamas a fatal blow; to decapitate its leading forces and render Hamas' military strength inoperative. The method: to bomb rather systematically and invade this small strip of land overpopulated by 2 million inhabitants - a very young population, who have always lived in the equivalent of an open-air prison.

And one year on, we can see the results of this strategy of attrition: 80% of the territory ravaged, infrastructure destroyed, including hospitals, a thirsty, starving people, and an incalculable number of dead and wounded, including how many children and women? And how many mutilated? Hamas puts the death toll at over 40 000. Some voices, such as that of Guillaume ANCEL, a French military specialist, put the figure higher, with many more corpses under the rubble. Gaza today is absolute horror. A ravaged territory in which a trapped and desperate population is trying to survive, with humanitarian aid and relief supplies arriving in dribs and drabs.

A lack of water, a lack of food, medical care impossible despite the enormous needs. There's no medicine, no antibiotics, no anaesthetics. There are not many operating theatres. There's no more equipment. There are countless infections and epidemics. Polio is said to be back. These are the dramatic findings of NGO medical witnesses.

Today, we must demand two priorities for Gaza: an immediate ceasefire and humanitarian aid. But now, the war is moving to the north of Israel, to Lebanon. What are the consequences? We can fear the worst, especially for civilians, once again. The rules of international humanitarian law, the Geneva Conventions, are being trampled underfoot.

Let me conclude with two final remarks. Today's tragedies bear the seeds of an unquenchable thirst for hatred and vengeance that will be passed on from generation to generation for a long time to come. Secondly, starting a war is the easy part: the hard part is building peace, especially lasting peace.

Today, we are moving further and further away from these outcomes and this peace. Today is a time of horror and suffering. The answer today? An immediate ceasefire and, of course, the release of all hostages still held.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): On behalf of the Group of the European People's Party, it is the leader of the group, Mr Pablo HISPÁN.

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

The violence in the Middle East is reaching levels that we have not ever witnessed to date. It will be the first anniversary of the terrorist attacks against Israel in just a few days time.

The consequence was hundreds of murdered and more than 200 taken hostage.

Since 1945, Israel had not suffered an aggression as terrible as this.

Today, almost one year later, 100 Israelis remain hostages, which is a good sign of the inhumanity of the Hamas terrorist group. Hamas knew that the reaction to its aggression would be implacable. Its unprecedented attacks would face an unprecedented response. Once again, the worst enemy of the Palestinian people is Hamas. We all know the rest of the story.

Israel launched a military operation with levels of devastation unseen to date. There are now thousands of dead in Gaza and the destruction has no parallel in history. The humanitarian drama is undeniable and affects the most vulnerable, especially women and children.

Nobody can remain indifferent to this reality which moves all of us, time and again, and is unacceptable.

On the other hand, we have witnessed unprecedented displacement of the population. The Palestinian population has suffered from it, the Israeli population is suffering from it, particularly those who live in the north of the country, and the population of Lebanon is suffering. There are tens of thousands of men, women, and children displaced from their homes. Many have lost everything. There are thousands of civilians who live in terror, day after day, because of the bombs, rockets, and drones which make no difference, do not distinguish between civilian and military objectives.

Calling any of these collateral victims is unacceptable. It doesn't matter whether they're Palestinians, Israelis or Lebanese. This escalation is undeniable and appears unstoppable. What's happening in Lebanon adds a new chapter of horror to this war. The civilised world is asking for an end to this conflict, which will only be possible at the negotiating table at which all stakeholders in the region, including Iran, recognise the right of Israel to live in peace with some safe borders and a viable Palestinian state, with recognised borders and wishing peace with all of its neighbours, including Israel, a region that may put an end to so many decades of hatred and warring.

Regrettably, fear and hate continue to conquer the hopes and wishes for peace, but peace will come as long as we urge the parties to put an end to the hostilities, stop the escalation, and respect all civilians and release the hostages. Without doubt, there is an opportunity for peace and humanity.

(Light applause)

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

On behalf European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance, Mr Lőrinc NACSA.

Mr Lőrinc NACSA (Hungary, EC/DA, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you very much, Mister President.

Dear colleagues, we strongly condemned the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel on 7 October last year.

We recognise Israel's rights to self-defence. And Israel has the right to guarantee the security of its citizens for the long term. Our consistent position since the beginning of this war is based on the following pillars:

One, we must ensure that nowhere in the world can there be a terrorist attack as brutal as the one that took place in Israel on 7 October last year.

A further escalation of the conflict and the outbreak of a regional war must be prevented.

Third, the civil population must be protected.

And fourth, all hostages must be released immediately and without preconditions.

We are deeply concerned with the recent escalation in Lebanon. The confrontation may result in a broader regional war and has the potential to further destabilise the country.

Therefore, we stress the importance of avoiding further escalation and support the efforts aimed at finding a sustainable solution.

We call for the implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 1701.

Maintaining the dialogue with the countries of the region through diplomatic channels is essential.

We believe that peace and security in the Arab region are closely linked to Europe's security as well.

We therefore should do everything in our power to increase stability and mitigate conflicts in Europe's southern neighbourhood.

The conflicts on the Middle East directly threaten Europe in the form of migration and terrorism.

We remain committed to ensure that Lebanon receives all the necessary assistance to face the current challenges, whether arising from the political impasse, the rise of non state actors, or the heavy burden the large number of Syrian refugees puts on local communities and authorities.

We support the strengthening of the state institution in Lebanon, including the Lebanese armed forces, in order to help the country overcome its political instability.

Although the promising negotiation on the extension of the Abraham Accords have been set back by the terrorist attacks, we remain committed to the extension of the Abraham Accords in order to normalise relations between Israel and the Arab countries of the region.

Thank you very much, Mister President.

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

One behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, Ms Carla MOONEN.

Ms Carla MOONEN (Netherlands, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Imagine a Middle Eastern region where peace prevails. A place where leaders actively seek diplomatic solutions, engage in meaningful negotiations, and prioritise the welfare of all citizens. A place where people can safely remain in their homes and communities.

Imagine Gaza, where 600 000 children can return safely to their schools. A place where basic needs like food, clean water, and medical care are accessible to all. A place where vital infrastructure and homes are restored.

Envision this and what is necessary for the citizens of Israel and Gaza to live in peace and security, free from fear and conflict.

What do we have to do to reach this imagination?

From my perspective, and that of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), we must first condemn all acts of terrorism and violence, regardless of their origin. We must firmly reject extremism on all sides.

Second, it is crucial that all prisoners are released, including those kidnapped from Israel. We must bring everyone back to their homes.

Third, we must put an end to the spillover violence affecting all neighbouring countries, one of them is Lebanon. Ending war must be our shared goal.

Moreover, the European liberals strongly believe in the necessity of a two-state solution. We must support a framework where Israel and a future Palestinian state co-exist peacefully, with recognised borders and mutual respect. The need for a two-state solution has never been clearer. Once stability is achieved, we should invest in economic co-operation and development in the Palestinian territories.

Yesterday, we heard Václav Havel Human Rights Prize winner Vladimir KARA-MURZA. He reminded us that what we decide in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe matters elsewhere in the world. And that means that I urge you all to be brave to bring light into this darkness and to advocate for a future where Israelis and Palestinians can coexist peacefully.

And that means in praxis that we have to take the necessary actions, such as Resolutions, in this Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

The time is urgent and I really hope that one day our imagination will be true. But that can only happen if we are brave and take measures.

Thank you.

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

Mr George LOUCAIDES, on behalf of the Group of the Unified European Left.

Mr George LOUCAIDES (Cyprus, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister President.

Dear colleagues,

Seventy-five years of Israeli illegal occupation of Palestine and continuous ethnic cleansing.

Seventy-five years of violations of international law and human rights and the collective punishment of the Palestinian people.

Decades of enforced apartheid regime in the West Bank and an open-air prison in Gaza.

One year of continuous genocide in Gaza and the murder of tens of thousands of civilians, the majority of whom are women and children.

One year of the almost complete destruction of Gaza.

One year of weaponising access to water, energy, food, and healthcare.

One year of murders of over 120 journalists and almost 200 humanitarian workers.

One year also of escalating Israeli violence in the West Bank.

The crimes committed by Israel and the subsequent suffering of the Palestinian people are endless.

Dear colleagues,

As the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, we rightly condemned Hamas's brutal attack that led to the murder of innocent civilians on 7 October and demanded the immediate release of hostages.

It is disheartening that, on the contrary, we have not to date demonstrated resolve and sensitivity towards the genocide in Gaza unfolding daily before our eyes. In fact, the only resolution of this Assembly demanding an immediate ceasefire was adopted on the condition that Hamas be completely dismantled, thereby in effect calling for Israel to continue the war indefinitely. This is what we have done.

By the same token, during this session, most of the political groups and the Bureau did not want to hold a debate under urgent procedure on the humanitarian situation in Gaza, nor adopt a new resolution, the content of which could potentially be unsettling.

We have said this before, dear colleagues.

The way this Assembly has dealt with Gaza constitutes, unfortunately, a dark page in the history, in its history, impacting the credibility of this Organisation designed to protect and safeguard human rights.

Unfortunately, double standards and hypocrisy prevail.

In order to restore the credibility and dignity of this Organisation and serve peace and stability in the region, we must:

Call a spade a spade, uphold international law, and clearly condemn its breach;

Demand the protection of human rights of the Palestinian people and Israel's *de facto* state of impunity;

Call for an immediate and lasting ceasefire, both in Gaza and Lebanon;

Condemn all actions that deepen and extend the war to the wider region, as Israel has already started its ground invasion in Lebanon;

Demand that Israel respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Lebanon; and

Ensure that UN resolutions on Palestine and the Middle East are implemented.

Thank you, dear colleagues.

(Light applause)

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

Thank you, George.

I will give now the floor to Ms Meirav BEN ARI.

Ms Meirav BEN ARI (Israel): Thank you, Mister President.

It was very hard for me to focus in all these things that I heard here. And I prepared a speech, but it's a waste of time.

It was very hard for me to focus because when you're speaking about human rights, my family, all my family, sitting in the safe room when 102 missiles from Iran shooting on Israel and no one, no one, speaks about it. And at the same time, eight people were murdered now in Tel Aviv from a terror organisation, terror attacked, 8 people went to the street, went back from the job and murdered next to their houses.

Millions of Israelis sitting now in the safe room because Iran shot missiles for Israel. Why? Is there one Israeli soldier in Iran? No, because Hamas and Hezbollah, that you didn't even mention, they are the proxies of Iran and they control the region. But Israel won't let them, because Israel fighting your war, for the civil war, for the democratic liberal world.

And you have to understand, you can say whatever you want, this is the reality now in Israel, and you can leave. But I'm not wishing to any one of you to go through what I'm going through now when all my family is under attack, when all my people is under attack. And why?

You can go out. Like the representative of human rights in Türkiye. You have to be ashamed of yourself. You speak about human rights. Where did you get the numbers for Gaza...

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Sorry to interrupt. I would like to ask you not to use expressions which are shameful for others. You have the right to say whatever you want but please...

Ms Meirav BEN ARI (Israel): I was clear...

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): I understand the situation that your country lives through and especially your personal situation now, but please don't use such expressions.

Ms Meirav BEN ARI (Israel): It's very hard to speak about human rights without even mentioning Hezbollah, that is a terror organisation. Without even mentioning the brutal attack, the 7 October attack that now we are one year from 7 October, and still people in Israel are sitting in their safe rooms and their life is in danger.

And I reach for you, and I want to tell you that if you want to hear the other side of the story, I'm here. I come here every four months to speak about Israel. But you have not just - you need also to listen and to understand that Israel is eager for peace and wants peace in the Middle East.

But if we want peace, we need to destroy Hamas and Hezbollah because they are organisations of terror. They don't know human rights. They don't understand human rights. You have a partner in Israel. I told it all also to the Chairperson.

You can use us to bring peace to the Middle East and not terror. Thank you.

And I'm sorry if I was a little bit... It's a very hard time now in Israel. You can see on your website everyone is under attack. I'm sorry.

(Light applause)

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

Mr Bernard SABELLA (Palestine): Thank you, Mister President and esteemed members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Let me start with wisdom.

There is no victor in war, and all are winners in peace.

And when we speak about the current state of affairs in the Middle East, it's the result of an ongoing war and unresolved conflict between Arabs and Jews in Palestine and Israel.

The humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip is catastrophic. 155 000 expecting mothers have been and continue to go through hell because of the war. There are 650 000 students who are denied regular schooling. Over 400 teachers have been killed during the war. Mental health and psychological support is needed, not only for Israelis but for Palestinians as well.

There were many reports, from the World Bank to the University of Cambridge, to other well respected institutions, that spoke of the devastation and horrendous conditions facing 1.9 [million] displaced Palestinians, most of whom are children and women.

There is no hope except with the cessation of war. We need to stop this war and we need to work out a plan to end Israel's occupation of the Gaza Strip and the rest of the occupied territory.

The international community and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe among its most serious organisations monitoring human rights, rule of law and democracy are called upon to take action.

The suffering will continue and what we are witnessing in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and across Israel and parts of the Palestinian territory is the fact that war is going on and we are at a loss and there is no leadership for peace on the Israeli side.

If Israel wants peace, then it needs to have the leadership that will work for peace, and not for ongoing wars all over the Middle East.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister SABELLA. I want to thank you very much.

Ms Aurora FLORIDIA is next.

Ms Aurora FLORIDIA (Italy, SOC): Thank you.

Mister President,

Dear colleagues,

It is not easy now to speak after these two speeches. My heart is heavy. It's heavy for the tragic situation in Israel and it is heavy for the tragic situation in Gaza. We are here today not to discuss the complex, terrifying and tragic political situation in Gaza and Israel and line up behind one position or the other.

Today at the Council of Europe, the cradle of human rights, it is essential that our Assembly focus and concentrate on the human rights crisis and the humanitarian disaster in Gaza, and particularly on women and children. This is the topic of this report. The health care system in Gaza is collapsing and there is now the risk of a complete medical shutdown. Women, particularly pregnant and elderly women, are facing life threatening challenges due to the lack of supplies and adequate care. Children are suffering from preventable diseases by a lack of clean water, electricity and medical infrastructure. It is our duty to acknowledge the broader

humanitarian disaster, the displacement of families, the destruction of homes and the long term psychological trauma inflicted on Gaza's children. International organisations like UK Med and Children for Europe are doing vital work under extreme conditions but humanitarian aid alone cannot solve the crisis.

An immediate and enduring ceasefire is urgently needed to allow humanitarian aid to reach those in need and to facilitate the return of displaced families. The Council of Europe must advocate for all parties in this conflict to follow and to respect international humanitarian law, to seek to limit the effects of armed conflict, to protect civilians and to ensure access to the basic human right to health care. I appeal to the Assembly to separate the political from the humanitarian issue and to act swiftly and effectively in order to ensure a living environment that is as healthy and safe as possible, especially for women and children.

The women and children of Gaza cannot wait any longer. I think and believe it is time to get out of the humanitarian paralysis in which we find ourselves for the sake of human beings who are truly at the end of their tether. Thank you.

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

Mr Piero FASSINO.

Mr Piero FASSINO (Italy, SOC): In these hours, agencies around the world are pounding the news of thousands of missiles that Iran is launching on Israeli cities. So, we are faced with another chapter in a tragedy that has already claimed thousands and thousands of lives in Gaza, in Lebanon, in northern Israel, and in the coming hours may determine them in Israeli cities as well. It is obvious that, in the face of such a picture, it is right, as has been proposed, to be able to distinguish a purely political dimension from the humanitarian dimension although this distinction, in absolute terms, is difficult. It is clear that, on the humanitarian level, we have to work to try to be close to the population, because it is on the civilian population of Gaza, of Lebanon, of the Israeli cities, of northern Israel that this war has been and is being unloaded, endangering the lives of hundreds and thousands of people, their daily living conditions, their right to be cared for, their right to be able to feed themselves.

All this should move us and push us to make sure that humanitarian action is, in some way, strongly supported. Knowing well that when we talk about humanitarian action, we must also be able to call each party to its responsibility. Here, rightly, many appeals are made to the Government of Israel, and I too join my voice to this appeal.

I would also like to mention, however, that if the casualties in Gaza are such a high number, it is because Hamas has consciously, cynically structured its military architecture under schools, under mosques, under hospitals, under civilian homes, and this has contributed to the fact that the number of casualties was higher than it could have been because of the Israeli military offensive, which has been harsh and which we must continue to judge in its harshness. Just as we cannot forget that when we talk about humanity, we have to know that there are families, brothers, sisters, children, mothers, fathers, who have been mourning for a year the fate of their loved ones, who are hostages of Hamas, and even today, here, here, family members of the hostages have come to visit us and have reminded us of this tragedy.

So, to act so that really everyone has a chance to be protected in their human dignity requires being able to address all the actors in this conflict. To the government of Israel, from whom we demand respect for international law and humanitarian law. To Hamas, from whom we must demand something we no longer demand. It says here the UN resolution, 1701. The UN resolution says "unconditional release of hostages." Unconditional release of hostages until now is not there, and indeed Hamas uses hostages for negotiation. So, all this we have to see, and we have to play our role as guardians of rights where they are violated by anyone, addressing anyone.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Mister Joseph O'REILLY, you have the floor.

Mr Joseph O'REILLY (Ireland, EPP/CD): Thank you, President.

At the outset, could I just briefly congratulate Ms Saskia KLUIT on her report and on her fine exposition of it?

May I remind us all that we are primarily a human rights organisation, where the rule of law, democracy and human rights are sacrosanct.

We should suspend geopolitical and ideological divides, and we should unite around those core principles and values on this question.

We should recognise that in Gaza, we've had an effective genocide with the death of 40 000 people directly, 120 000 people indirectly. On the West Bank we've had an escalation of violence, now in Lebanon, and tragically, and we all have heavy hearts around this today, a further escalation.

The response of Israel, and I say this with total sensitivity to our colleague here, has been disproportionate to the horrific events of 7 October.

Nobody in this room is anyway equivocal in the condemnation of what happened on 7 October, but the response is completely disproportionate, illegal, and immoral.

We have to return to our core principles on this one.

We in Ireland have recognised the Palestinian State and I'm very proud of our Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Taoiseach and Tánaiste Simon HARRIS and Micheál MARTIN and their work in this area, both. We really believe in Ireland, and I think a lot of people do, in a just sustainable solution around the 1967 borders, and in a situation where there is mutual respect.

So I think we as an Assembly are duty-bound, I think, to come out clearly and say that we're suspending any particular geopolitical concerns, any particular ideologies, and that we are recognising here an abuse of human rights, genocide, a mass murderous situation, and that the whole region is at risk of conflagration.

And that we, as an Assembly, I think, we have to come out unequivocally and speak about this and say this clearly.

And there are no blurred lines here and this is a very grievous situation.

Thank you.

Mr David MORRIS (United Kingdom, EC/DA, President of the Assembly): A new chamber.

Thank you, Mister O'REILLY.

I now call Ms Theo CLARKE, United Kingdom.

Ms Theo CLARKE (United Kingdom, EC/DA): Thank you, Mister President.

As a member of the UK delegation to the Council of Europe, I rise to speak in this debate about the mounting humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

I wish to focus today on the context for maternal and newborn health, and in particular the challenge of birth trauma.

As a recent member of the UK Parliament's International Select Development Committee, I wish to call attention to two of our recent relevant reports.

The first is on the humanitarian situation in Gaza and the second on the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office's approach to sexual and reproductive health.

I also chaired the recent UK birth trauma inquiry, which looked in detail at the risks women face in childbirth, and that has lessons for all of us as member states on how to improve maternal health outcomes.

The UK strongly condemned the horrific attacks perpetrated on Israel by Hamas last year, but conflict has now ensued in response, and the situation in Gaza has become one of the worst humanitarian disasters in the world. The UN Secretary-General himself has said, "If there is a hell on earth, it is the lives of children in Gaza".

Our committee of parliamentarians visited Egypt to see a hospital in north Sinai, the closest region to Rafa in the Gaza Strip, and British MPs heard firsthand about the challenges facing the healthcare system in Gaza, which is falling apart.

The importance of skilled healthcare workers in the provision of maternal and newborn health is essential. Doctor Sebastian Taylor told our inquiry that most newborn deaths happen within the first few days after delivery and that most maternal deaths happen on the day of delivery. That tells us that the place where the mother delivers and the newborn arrives needs to be a place of considerable safety and quality of care. But how is this to be provided when only a third of Gaza's hospitals are still functioning and working with as little as 30% of their staff?

Nearly two million people are displaced, and it's becoming increasingly difficult to provide medical care to mothers and their newborn babies. We know there's a lack of health infrastructure, medical equipment, supplies including milk and medication, and there are very few facilities.

Almost all of maternal deaths are occurring in low income and middle income countries and particularly in conflict areas such as Gaza, with particularly high levels of maternal mortality.

We know that increasing access to high quality healthcare is an effective way to reduce maternal mortality and birth trauma.

The UK government recently stated in our *White Paper on International Development* that no woman or baby should die of preventable causes in pregnancy or childbirth.

So, I welcome that the UK has committed to the global financing facility for women, children, and adolescents of up to 95 million between now and 2025, but there is so much more that we can do.

So today, I call on all member states to commit to reducing the risk of maternal and newborn mortality and the rates of birth trauma in conflict zones, such as Gaza. We must listen to mothers on the ground. They urgently need our help and ensure that health outcomes for mothers and their babies are being improved to further save lives.

(Light applause)

Mr David MORRIS (United Kingdom, EC/DA, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Miss CLARKE. I now call Mr Alfred HEER.

Mr Alfred HEER (Switzerland, ALDE): Dear Mister Chair,

One year has passed since the terrorist attack on innocent people in Israel - babies, children, families brutally tortured and murdered by Hamas terrorists.

As human defenders in the Council of Europe, we should condemn those horrific attacks by Hamas.

And as a human rights institution, we should defend the state of Israel for the right of self defence.

Hezbollah has sent nearly 10 000 rockets to the state of Israel.

And if Mr Bernard SABELLA said we need to stop the war, he's right. But how do we stop the war?

We stop the war if we stop Hezbollah. We stop the war if we stop Hamas. We stop the war if we stop the Mullah regime in Iran.

The Mullah regime and its offspring, Hamas and Hezbollah are cancerous tumours in the Middle East. They are a cancerous tumour in the nations of Arabs, and they are a danger for the lives of Jews and Arabs alike.

Israel is the only democratic state in the Middle East. They share our values of democracy, of human rights and of rule of law.

I always said about the tragedy, about the innocent people that die, about the children that die on both sides, also in the Arabic world, in the Palestinian world, they suffer, it is true, but they suffer not because of Israel. They suffer because of the mullahs, they suffer because of Hamas, and they suffer because of Hezbollah.

And so I ask you, and I urge you to take a firm stand for Israel. They defend our values, our core values, of human rights, of rule of law. We should defend those values, and we should stand behind Israel, and we should stand behind Israel to fight evil.

This is the only way that we will have peace in the Middle East.

Thank you.

Mr David MORRIS (United Kingdom, EC/DA, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister HEER. I now call Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN.

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

It's really very complicated to speak here, to speak today when we are facing the ongoing escalation of the conflict in the Middle East, not too far from my region. And this is not the first discussion of the escalation in the Middle East in this hemicycle. But I'm afraid it's not the last one, because from time to time, we are coming back to this issue.

I heard the very emotional speeches of my colleagues from Israel and Palestine. I would like to say that first of all, I would like to wish peace to the region, to all of you and to all of your relative, but please also take into account that very often in other regions, people are also in safe places because we are under attack by the weapons which also use the technologies which are produced by Israel.

So it's a very complicated issue. And I would like just to say from the very beginning that there is no justification for any kind of terrorism. There is no justification of hostage taking. There is no justification of any type of wrongdoings under international law.

But honourable colleagues,

Terrorism is not only about the subjects who committed these kind of acts, but it's also about the methodology of committing or attacking, because when you are using very sophisticated technologies, but the methods, the means you are using them amount to terroristic methods, is also not a good possibility for the further continuation.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Peace in the region has no alternative and we should concentrate on the ways of how to get better possibilities for better sustainable peace in the future.

I would like just to say that if we are so sophisticated and we are able to spend a lot of money to create such sophisticated technologies of war, it is easier to find more sophisticated technologies for peace.

My government also recognised Palestine because we do believe that a two-state solution is one of the best options to go ahead with the de-escalation of the situation in the Near East. We do believe that Palestinians and Israelis should mutually recognise for the Palestinians the right of the Israeli state for their existence and self defence. There is no doubt about it and for Israel, we should do our best to convince our Israeli colleagues to recognise the right of Palestinians to live in their own statehood.

Peace is imperative, and I do believe, and all of us should think, that it is impossible to respect human rights, to provide rule of law and build a democratic society when we are engaged in war.

Thank you.

Mr David MORRIS (United Kingdom, EC/DA, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Vladimir.

I now call Ms Nerea AHEDO.

Ms Nerea AHEDO (Spain, ALDE)*: Thank you, Chairman.

I will speak in Spanish.

I begin by condemning Hamas' attack, the terrorist attack which a year ago claimed the lives of more than 1 200 Israelis, and the taking of hostages. I say this, of course, but I would also like to condemn the disproportionate action by Israel. More than 40 000 killed in Gaza, more than 14 000 children. They've been at schools and hospitals. Humanitarian aid workers and others have been attacked, all in the interest of releasing hostages and theoretically putting an end to Hamas. All of this has caused a terrible humanitarian crises, which has caused hunger, forced people to move, and caused hospitals to overflow.

What is more, there have been attacks on the West Bank; the bombing of Lebanon. In this case, there was an end to Hezbollah, with collateral damage also among civilians, old people and young children. It is now a land incursion, and they have been bombing in Syria and Yemen to put an end to Hutus. I don't know whether it'll be possible to bomb all of these, but I wonder what will happen in this hypothetical condition that they do manage?

This is not a question of anti-Semitism. I have lived too long with a terrorist organisation, my own country, with ETA, but this disproportionate response, instead of diplomacy, one which does not respect international humanitarian law and human rights, reduces itself to the same level as a terrorists.

I would have expected much more from a state of the rule of law than from a terrorist organisation, but they're almost at the same level, and it's very dangerous what's happening. The violence has caused this region to be a powder keg. It has caused a huge humanitarian disaster, a situation that nobody wants, a situation where we are close to open war.

We must bear in mind there are people from the outside, there are other actors, such as Iran and also the United States. I mean, what is the international community doing? What could it do?

At the moment, diplomacy is not working, so I wonder whether we lack tools, ideas? Is it a lack of skills in the willingness to negotiate? Are there no repercussions if we don't try peace talks and we allow violations of international law? I think the international community must act urgently to give a response to this humanitarian disaster in terms of medical care and food, but that's just a plaster. The situation was problematic before and the West Bank as well. What we need is to put an end to this barbarism and demand a political solution now because in the 21st century, we cannot solve conflicts worse than how it was done by previous generations. Thank you.

Mr David MORRIS (United Kingdom, EC/DA, President of the Assembly): Thank you. I now call Ms Zeynep YILDIZ as the last speaker.

Sadly, at this point we have to curtail the debate and conclude the list of speakers.

Ms Zeynep YILDIZ (Türkiye, NR): Thank you, Chair.

Dear colleagues,

Ms Ayşenur Ezgi EYGI, a 26-year-old Turkish-American human rights defender, was deliberately targeted and murdered by Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) recently in Nablus, the West Bank, during a peaceful protest against illegal Zionist settlers, just like Ms Rachel CORRIE.

If such a protest had even been obstructed in any full or observer member state of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), it would have sparked discussions about the right to protest. Yet, over the past year alone, Israel has killed 224 human rights defenders and humanitarian volunteers and 134 journalists.

Dr Jumann ARFE, a mother, was also targeted by the IDF along with her newborn twins. If this were a case of domestic violence, we would have talked about it extensively right there.

However, when women are killed by Israel, it is ignored by saying comfortably "Palestine is not Europe". This has led to our failure in documenting Israel's violations of women's rights in Gaza.

The Saint Porphyrius Greek Orthodox Church, along with several mosques and churches in Gaza, was targeted by Israel. If this had been a matter of culture, we would have debated its preservation for days. However, when Israel destroys history, we choose to turn our backs on this common heritage of humankind.

Three-year-old Rim, along with thousands of other children in Gaza, has been targeted and murdered by Israel. We often spend months debating protecting children online, education opportunities for children, but when it comes to the children of Gaza, we have failed to defend even their right to life and prevent the ongoing genocide.

In five days, President NETANYAHU's government's genocidal attempt in Gaza will complete one year, though the occupation spans decades. That's the reality we know by heart.

The longer we remain silent, the more the occupation expands. Now, over a million people are fleeing Lebanon following Israel's operations on the ground, and this unrestrained incursion of Israel threatens regional and global stability and security and requires concrete sanctions.

Türkiye was among the first to sever commercial relations with Israel. Representatives of the countries that supply weapons to Israel must remind their governments that they are responsible towards the history of humanity.

I extend my greetings once again to the Palestinian people, who have resisted years of embargoes, bombings, starvation, and even genocide.

"Everything happened while I was alive, let people know this," says a Turkish poet.

The genocide in Palestine happened while we were alive, and we cannot stop it. Let the people and history know this.

Yes, we have shared values right there. This is our shared shame of hypocrisy. This is our shared shame to name the State of Israel as a democracy. So, this is our common shame of not stopping the genocide in Palestine.

Thank you.

Mr David MORRIS (United Kingdom, EC/DA, President of the Assembly): Thank you so much for that impassioned speech. Sadly, 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 4 hours after the list of speakers is interrupted.

That concludes the list of speakers.

I call Ms Saskia KLUIT to reply.

Saskia, you have 1 minute.

Ms Saskia KLUIT (Netherlands, SOC): Thank you, Mister President.

I want to thank my colleagues for a civilised debate.

I think many new topics came to the table, like the demonstrators and the safety of them, the journalists.

And we have a lot of work to do in this Council about the Middle East and situations that arise from this conflict.

I think it is really good that we discuss this topic. I'm looking forward to discuss it again in January. I really hope we'll spend these months thinking about, as my Spanish colleague already suggested, solutions, because for me it's utterly unacceptable that we have a room filled with children who have lost their legs, their hands. We have to fight for them. That is a manmade crisis. They die and get hurt because we don't prioritise our humanitarian laws, our humanitarian regulations that were made after the second world war, especially to protect civilians in times of conflict.

So I hope we meet in January again and we will have a good discussion and support for a good resolution, because that is needed.

Mr David MORRIS (United Kingdom, EC/DA, President of the Assembly): Thank you so much.

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

Thank you.

Mr Graziano PIZZIMENTI (Italy, EC/DA): *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in Italian.*

Ms Gökçe GÖKÇEN (Türkiye, SOC): *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in French.*

Ms Luz MARTINEZ SEIJO (Spain, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

The international community cannot remain impassive in the face of the suffering of thousands of people, we cannot live with death and destruction or normalise violence.

A new escalation of violence has increased in Lebanon, we must call again for de-escalation, for peaceful coexistence between countries, for peace.

It is now a year since we condemned the shocking terrorist attack by Hamas in Israel. We continue to do so today and to call for the release of the hostages; we stand with the Israeli families who are suffering, but today I would ask for the same unanimous condemnation of the disproportionate response and the violation of international humanitarian law in Palestine by the Israeli Government.

More than 41,000 killed, 94,000 wounded and 10,000 missing. Most of them children and women. Serious problems for health care, mental health, return of diseases such as polio.

At the moment 9 out of 10 people are displaced in the Gaza Strip. Forced displacement is considered a war crime. The killing of civilians, journalists and humanitarian workers has not stopped. We have normalised attacks on schools and even seen the killing of civilians, journalists and humanitarian workers.

We have normalised attacks on schools and even seen the number of dead counted by the weight of human remains found in the rubble. This Assembly must be committed to rights and freedoms; it has a duty to defend peace.

Spain, my country, has taken very important steps, since the beginning of the conflict in Gaza we have positioned ourselves in favour of international legality and peace efforts. Last month in Madrid we promoted a ministerial meeting with the entire Arab-Islamic group in order to have a joint voice between countries, a united voice on the application of the two-state solution, Israel and Palestine, recognising the state of Palestine as a fully-fledged state within the international community, the true solution for achieving peace in the Middle East. This is not new and I must remind you that it was supported by all European countries 33 years ago.

We must offer a political perspective that restores hope to the Palestinian people. A ceasefire that puts an end to the violence, guarantees humanitarian assistance to the civilian population and the release of all hostages.

We must denounce the occupation of Palestinian territories and illegal settlements, contrary to UN Security Council resolutions.

Ms Sena Nur ÇELİK KANAT (Türkiye, NR): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Since we last convened, the situation in Gaza has deteriorated significantly due to Israel's indiscriminate bombings and obstruction of humanitarian aid. The Israeli government has shown no restraint in blatantly committing war crimes and crimes against humanity. A study published in *The Lancet* estimated that the death toll in Gaza could exceed 186,000, factoring in indirect causes like starvation and lack of healthcare. Mothers in Gaza have buried over 17,000 children, and Gaza now holds the grim record for the highest number of child amputees in history. The world, tragically, has remained a passive observer to what is effectively the first live genocide in human history.

Israel continues to target and murder UN personnel, aid workers, journalists, and human rights defenders with impunity. A recent example is the targeted killing of Ayşenur Ezgi Eygi, a 26-year-old Turkish-American human rights defender, shot by an Israeli sniper while peacefully protesting settler violence in the West Bank. Ayşenur, like countless others, made the ultimate sacrifice in defence of the Palestinian people's right to justice, freedom, and independence; their legacy should inspire us all in the ongoing pursuit of peace.

We have repeatedly warned about the potential for regional escalation of this conflict, and today, this risk is becoming a reality. Recent Israeli attacks in Lebanon destabilized an already fragile nation, risking another refugee crisis. The conflict has also spread to Yemen, where tensions between Houthi forces and Israel have escalated. Israel's military operations across the region, including attacks on diplomatic missions, have brought it dangerously close to a full-scale confrontation with Iran, which could have catastrophic consequences for the Middle East and beyond.

International community have not only failed to hold Israel accountable but are complicit by supplying it with arms unconditionally. If the international community, including this assembly, continues its double standards and shameful failure to act, we risk not only regional war but also the collapse of the credibility of our institutions and the rules-based order.

We must urgently call for the implementation of UNSC Resolution 2735: an immediate and permanent ceasefire, unhindered humanitarian aid, release of hostages and unlawfully detained Palestinians, sanctions and arms embargoes on Israel, support for ICC and ICJ proceedings, an end to illegal occupation, and a two-state solution based on the 1967 borders.

The time for words is over. The international community must act now before the region—and the world—spirals further into chaos.

Mr Namık TAN (Türkiye, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Honorable Chair, Esteemed Members

I address you today with a deep sense of urgency as the devastating conflict in Gaza and Lebanon continues to unfold, threatening not only regional stability but also global peace.

Let me be absolutely clear: I condemn the violent attacks by Hamas on October 7, which targeted innocent civilians, without reservation. Terrorism can never be justified.

At the same time, we cannot ignore the deeper roots of this crisis. The occupation of Palestinian territories, the continued expansion of illegal settlements, and the denial of basic human rights to millions of Palestinians have created a volatile and unsustainable situation.

The conflict is now spilling over into neighboring countries, further destabilizing an already fragile region. Escalating tensions along Israel's northern borders and the potential involvement of other regional actors threaten to draw the Middle East into an uncontrollable spiral of violence.

A cessation of hostilities is critical, not just to stop the immediate bloodshed but to prevent a wider, regional war that would have disastrous consequences for peace and security far beyond Gaza.

In this moment, we must remember that a military solution will never bring true peace. A two-state solution, grounded in international law, remains the only viable path forward. It is the only way to ensure the Palestinian people's right to self-determination and to secure lasting safety and dignity for both Palestinians and Israelis. Without this, the cycle of violence will continue, to the detriment of all.

Europe, with its commitment to human rights, democracy, and justice, must take a principled stand. It is not enough to condemn violence. We must champion a future where Palestinians and Israelis can live in peace, where security and dignity are guaranteed for all. This assembly has a responsibility to push for an immediate cessation of hostilities and to support the long-term goal of a just and lasting peace.

As I have stated before, we all have a responsibility to act. In these critical times, Europe's role as a leader in human rights and democracy is more important than ever. I call upon all of you, as leaders committed to social justice, to reflect deeply on these issues. You can do more... you must do more... to help bring an end to this conflict... before it is too late!

Thank you!

Ms Valérie PILLER CARRARD (Switzerland, SOC): *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in French.*

Mr Paul GAVAN (Ireland, UEL): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

The title of this current affairs debate references “the escalation of violence” and “the mounting humanitarian crisis, particularly in Gaza.” But it doesn't say who is escalating the violence. And that significant, isn't it?

When it comes to other conflicts this assembly has no problem calling out the guilty party.

But here we have an illegal war, another illegal occupation, but this time accompanied by a campaign of genocide against an entire nation of people.

This campaign is backed by massive supplies of arms from the US, Germany, Britain and Italy. So it's a profitable genocide for some.

Tens of thousands of innocent men, women and children torn asunder. The Lancet tells us that the death toll could easily be 186000 people. Tens of thousands of children murdered. But nobody in a position of power in this Assembly has yet issued any clear condemnation of these events.

And that is shameful.

Last week I listened to an aid worker explain that every day in Gaza 10 children have their limbs amputated due to life threatening injuries. We also know that a deliberate policy of starvation of Palestinian people is in place. Yet the powers that be in almost all political groups here consistently avoid having an urgent debate where this Assembly is called to actually take a stand on the matter.

Which means that the current policy stance of this assembly is that set last January when an urgent debate gave a green light to Israel to continue the genocide.

The fact that Human Rights Assembly is choosing not to condemn a genocide, not only beggars belief, it also undermines the credibility of everything that we do here.

Yesterday in your opening speech Mr President you were very clear in your condemnation of the Hamas violence of the 7th October. It is a matter of regret to me that almost one year into the genocide of the Palestinian people you have still not uttered any clear condemnation of Israeli actions. We have had two previous current affairs debates on topic of the ongoing slaughter of the innocents, yet no statements from the Office of the President of this Assembly was forthcoming subsequent to those debates

"Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." Martin Luther King.

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

The state that we have been experiencing in Gaza for a full year and that has been extended to the Lebanon line by Israel today, in a broader picture, tells us the actual reality that requires us to confront the new phase of a century-long imperial continuity. So what should the issue really tell us?

There is a century-long imperial continuity between the Balfour Declaration in 1917 and Trump's official acceptance and declaration of the united Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in 2017. The issue needs to be analyzed over the dispossession of Palestinians, the process of destruction of Palestine as a homeland, and Israel's role as an implementer of the imperial policies, sieging and redesigning the entire region, the Middle East.

Such that, thirty years after Balfour, while the global system was being reshaped in the post-World War II period, we witness the first institutional step with the United Nations' 1947 partition plan of Palestine. This division, which was carried out in the name of determining the borders between Palestinians and Jews, distributed 57 percent of the Palestinian lands to the Jews and 43 percent, including Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza, the southern line extending to Egypt and the northern line extending to Lebanon, to the Palestinian Arabs. Only a year later, in 1948, with the establishment of Israel as an official state, a part of West Jerusalem, the Egyptian border line in the south and the Lebanese border line in the north were de facto transferred to Israel. And the 1967 Six-Day War would create a dynamic that resulted in the occupation by Israel of almost all of West Jerusalem, some of the lands of Jordan, Syria and Egypt, parts of the West Bank and Gaza, and perhaps, as a final point, East Jerusalem.

Since 1967, we have witnessed Israel periodically intervening in the territories of regional countries through conventional or unconventional means and gradually expanding its sphere of influence, as what we are now experiencing. As Israeli historian Ilan Pappé says, this poison, derived from a sick neo-Zionist and messianic ideology, is not only infecting the region and spreading conflict to the region, but also undermining world politics and the balance of power. Perhaps in the end, ironically, it will bring about the end of the century-old imperial political architecture.

Mr Cemalettin Kani TORUN (Türkiye, NR): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Dear Colleagues,

For decades, Israel has been following Zionist ambitions in Palestine, destroying the lives and property of the Palestinian people and violating their every right to freedom. However, after October 7, these Zionist policies turned into the gravest genocide of the century. Israel has dropped more than 70,000 tons of bombs on the Gaza Strip since last October, far surpassing the of Dresden, Hamburg, and London combined during World War II.

42 thousands of civilians were mercilessly massacred in front of the eyes of the whole world. The murderous Netanyahu Government bombs schools, hospitals, and offices of international organizations indiscriminately. A war crime is being committed where 17 thousand children have been murdered.

Despite the decisions of international courts and the United Nations, a ceasefire couldn't be reached, and the Netanyahu government, encouraged by the silence of the world, adds a new one to its massacres every day. Despite the people around the world call to the governments into action for Palestine, unfortunately the Zionist lobby prevented decisive steps from being taken.

Now, I would like all my colleagues to ask themselves the following question: why can't we stop the worst massacre of the 21st century? Why can't international organizations such as the United Nations and the Council of Europe stop the actions Israel?

This has two answers. Either the European states and the US, which claim to lead the world, are incapable of stopping the State of Israel. Or Europe, which never compromises on justice and human rights when it comes to its own citizens and claims to be the founder of universal human rights norms, does not prefer to stand against this massacre. This clearly shows a double standard and hypocrisy of the European governance.

Dear Colleagues,

Neutrality is no longer possible in Gaza. You are either for the genocide or against it. There is no third option. All the countries here have felt the social, economic, and political damage of the last century of war in the most painful way. The international organizations we are discussing here were established to prevent these wars from repeating.

If Israel is not stopped today, we will open the door to all massacres and instability in the world with the same aims and methods.

Here again, I salute all the people who are fighting for Palestine.

Long Live Free Palestine.

Ms Pelin YILIK (Türkiye, NR): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Dear President,

Dear Colleagues,

Ethnic cleansing, torture, and violence against civilians are on the rise all around the world. Unfortunately, eighty percent of the victims of armed conflicts are civilians. We are witnessing the most concrete example of this situation in Gaza.

Israel has been targeting civilians since the beginning of the war.

Since the war started, more than 40,000 Palestinians, including over 16,000 children and 11,000 women, have been killed and nearly 95,000 people have been injured in Israel's attacks on the Gaza Strip.

Furthermore, Israel uses forced displacement as a systematic weapon in Gaza as if there is any secure zone left in Gaza. Palestinians have been forced to migrate by Israel Defence Forces to the places where they don't even know what they will encounter.

The United Nations report titled "Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2024", highlighted that the Gaza Strip, where 80 percent of the population is internally displaced, is currently facing the most severe food crisis.

Israel's campaign against the Palestinian people has resulted in famine across all of Gaza. 2.2 million people are still in need of emergency food and livelihood assistance under Israeli attacks.

Israel is worsening this crisis by closing the border gate, targeting aid convoys and killing humanitarian aid workers, which is a crime against humanity.

Israel's been continuing its violations in Gaza, despite court decisions and the efforts of other international organizations Its actions are emboldened by the silence of states.

Israel's indiscriminate attacks have no boundary. Now it has spread to Lebanon. This attack must come to an end as it threatens the security and stability of the region and beyond.

The world should not remain silent on the Israeli government's oppression and should make more efforts to ensure the rapid and uninterrupted delivery of aid to Gaza. We should also hold the Israeli government accountable for its heinous actions.

Finally, every crime committed by Israel, which has observer status in the assembly, is also a blow to international law. This Assembly must uphold the international law and call for an unconditional immediate ceasefire.

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

Dear President,

Dear Colleagues,

Unfortunately, today we are here to discuss one of the most complex and horrible issues.

The Gaza Massacre is one of the most devastating humanitarian disasters in modern history.

As the Assembly, it is crucial for us to address this issue with empathy for innocent civilians and to develop a sustainable solution.

Since the start of hostilities on 7 October, more than 44,000 (forty-four thousand) people have been killed and this number is still rising.

Innocent civilians in Gaza are being subjected to unjustified and unlawful Israeli attacks. Moreover, the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip has condemned innocent civilians to ruins, hunger and thirst.

Most of those who have lost their lives are women and children who suffer from shortages of food and basic humanitarian needs. This situation reduces confidence in international organisations and threatens global peace.

It is clear that Israel is responsible for a disproportionate number of civilian casualties, yet nothing is being done despite international law.

Although the International Court of Justice has ruled that Israel must cease fire, stop killing civilians and allow humanitarian aid into the area, people are still suffering.

The Assembly should ask Israel to comply with and implement the ICJ judgement.

Even if this decision is not a permanent solution, it will at least reduce civilian deaths and provide temporary relief.

Finally, following its attacks on Gaza, Israel has now launched an unlawful attack on Lebanon.

Many countries of the world, especially Türkiye, have been warning about the risk of the war spreading to the region, but Israel is not listening to anyone. International organisations must stop this war.

I urge the Assembly to initiate a process to put pressure on Israel to achieve a lasting ceasefire and to allow the immediate delivery of aid to the Gaza Strip.

Thank you for your attention.

Debate: The situation in Iran and the protection of Iranian human rights defenders in Council of Europe member States

Mr David MORRIS (United Kingdom, EC/DA, President of the Assembly): The next debate is the "situation in Iran and the protection of Iranian human rights defenders in Council of Europe member states".

The next item of business this afternoon, this evening, is the debate on the report titled "the situation in Iran and the protection of Iranian human rights defenders in the Council of Europe member states", Document 16035, presented by Mr Max LUCKS on behalf of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy.

We will then hear from Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO who will present an opinion on behalf of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, Document 16048.

In order to finish by 8:30 p.m., I will interrupt the list of speakers at about 8:20 p.m. to allow time for reply to the above vote.

I call Mr Max LUCKS, rapporteur.

Mister Max LUCKS, you have 7 minutes now and 3 minutes at the end to reply to the debate. Thank you, Mister Max LUCKS.

Mr Max LUCKS (Germany, SOC, Rapporteur): Thank you very much, dear Mister President.

Dear colleagues,

In September 2022, two years ago, a young woman wanted to start her studies in Iran. Jina MAHSA AMINI has finally found a place to study. She travels from her Kurdish hometown of Saqqez to Tehran to prepare for her future in this city, but she makes a supposed mistake. She doesn't wear her headscarf in the subway as the regime wants her to. As a result, she is arrested by the morality police, abused, beaten and eventually dies as a result of this violence.

A young woman is killed because she does not wear her headscarf the way others want her to. This supposed strength of the regime very quickly turns into a weakness. Since then, the majority of people in Iran have rebelled against the regime more than ever. On 22 September 2022, just six days after Jina MAHSA AMINI's death, Iran experienced an unprecedented wave of protest. All cities, all regions, all ethnicities; they all unite behind the words "*Jin, Jiyan, Azadi*": women, life, freedom, and they are turning these words into a call for justice for Jina. But they are also turning the issue of women's human rights into an alternative to the mullahs, Sharia law, and police violence.

Since September 2022, people in Iran, whether religious or not, have been protesting for a genuine democratic alternative to their regime. They are showing unprecedented strength. But the regime has also recognised this strength, and it has struck back very brutally. Over 500 people have been killed, thousands injured, young people have been shot in the eye. This is nothing other than a war against its own people.

We must not look away, because it is happening before our eyes. After these two years, we must honestly admit it. When it mattered most to our European states, we did not do all that would have been necessary to stand by these people. I ask myself with great thoughtfulness:

What is our freedom actually worth, what is my freedom actually worth, if the representatives of the European Union, for example, prefer to shake hands with the representatives of the mullahs rather than shake hands with those who want to have the same values that we have here?

We must not look away, because freedom is not simply European or Persian, it is universal. Anyone who thinks that this regime is only a problem for Iran is very much mistaken. When we think of the arson attack on the synagogue in Bochum in Germany, when we think of attacks in Europe like the one in France, when we think of the kidnapping and murder of Iranian opposition members in the middle of Europe, then we see that this regime is a danger to us and that it is even holding citizens from our member states, such as Nahid TAGHAVI from Cologne, hostage.

We must finally understand that normal dealings with this regime will ultimately be paid for with the security of us all. That is why it is time to fundamentally change our Iran policy. We need to list the Revolutionary Guards as a terrorist organisation, we need concerted action in Europe to free our citizens who are being held hostage, and we must act together decisively against this regime.

Ladies and gentlemen, if we follow the latest news from the last few hours, we see a new dimension of escalation in the region. We see missile attacks by the Iranian regime on Israel. This report is not the right place to categorise all the geopolitical consequences and issues involved. But this report is the right place to make one thing clear. This war is not the war of the people of Iran. Think of the young people in Iran who have Israeli flags placed in front of their feet, in front of the door, in front of the university, so that they step on them, but who walk around them because, unlike their regime, they do not want war.

The people of Iran do not want war in the Middle East. They also don't want to finance the terrorist organisation. Nor do they want to support the war that the Kremlin is waging against Ukraine. But they also don't want a war that this regime is waging against its own people.

I was lucky enough to grow up in freedom in our Europe. Young people in Iran don't have that. Like Sepideh QOLIAN, for whom I have taken on a godparenthood. She recently turned 30 in Evin prison, and as I speak to you here as part of this Assembly, this young woman is behind bars. So, I appeal to you, dear colleagues, to become active too. Take on sponsorships for persecuted human rights defenders in Iran for their freedom and for our security.

The name Jina stands for life. Two years after the death of Jina MAHSA AMINI, her name and her legacy have not been forgotten. Her name stands for a life that will one day be free in Iran. I think it is important that we in Europe, therefore, set about campaigning more strongly than before for the human rights situation in Iran and for a different Iran policy from Europe.

Thank you very much for your attention. I look forward to the discussion.

Mr David MORRIS (United Kingdom, EC/DA, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister LUCKS, for such an impassioned speech.

May I now call Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO for the opinion from the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination.

You have 3 minutes, ma'am.

Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO (Ukraine, EPP/CD, Rapporteur for opinion): Thank you, dear President.

Honourable colleagues,

Everyone who is remaining in this important debate in this hall,

I have the huge privilege to present the opinion on the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, which is the aligned committee to this report.

I would like to say that we can't even call it a situation in Iran; it is a tragedy in Iran. This is a very blunt truth, because currently Mr Max LUCKS took up a very important role. This report has been prepared for longer than a year, but with recent events we understand the importance of it.

I would like stress that, indeed, numerous, pervasive and institutionalised violations of human rights are continuing in Iran, with of course, the ruling Mullah regime leading these policies. It bridges divides of the defenders, defenders of human rights, who reside in our Council of Europe member states, 46 permanent ones, and many more observer states.

This includes the attacks, threats, harassment, violence carried out by Iranian authorities, colleagues, NOT in Iran, but in the member states of the Council of Europe. These people are being tracked, they are being killed, they are under hostile policies, and we have to create the policies and a new international framework to protect them. That's why I think this document clearly sets a precedent to address our governments so we can create such policies.

I would like to refer to the UN International Fact-finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran, published in 2024, quite recently. It found that human rights violations in Iran had disproportionately impacted women, children, members of ethnic and religious minorities, while gender persecutions have intersected with discrimination on the basis of ethnicity and religion.

In our Amendments that were supported by the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy, we thank you for supporting our Amendments, and it enriches the text right now, recalling our resolution that we voted recently, like the one 2054 protecting women human rights defenders in Europe. There are several brave suggestions, for instance, for the ICC member states to amend the statute and refer to the very important suggestion for having the gender apartheid and religious apartheid in the ICC statute.

Colleagues,

Morality police should not exist. It should not tell you how you should look, how your hair should be covered or not, how you should walk and how you should talk, and whether you should actually have access to education. Therefore, Europe needs to stand up for those people who protect human rights in our member states, and Iran should be free.

We should see the footage from the 1960s as it was free and independent in the 21st century.

Thank you, President.

Mr David MORRIS (United Kingdom, EC/DA, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much, Ms MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO – a very strong speech from a very strong lady.

May I now call for the first group of speakers, Mr Joseph O'REILLY from Ireland.

Mr Joseph O'REILLY (Ireland, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, President.

It is my privilege on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party (EPP) to welcome the report as it both pertains to the internal situation in Iran and the external situation in Europe of exiled Iranians. And in my short few remarks, I propose to address both questions.

I congratulate both Max and Mariia, and there is a slight generational divide between myself and Max, but I think he has proposed the report very well.

Now, since the change of leadership in Iran, in the last short while, 214 prisoners have been executed in 21 days. In September 2024, there were two executions in public, as a public display. And, of course, the death penalty is an obscenity in any culture or situation. Iranian people who challenge the situation are immediately under threat of torture, imprisonment, and obviously assassination or death.

Resolution 167 of 2009 of our Council of Europe decries the situation in Iran. Of course, we condemn retrospectively again the death of Ms AMINI by the morality police in 2022.

So violence, torture and kidnapping and death sentences are a feature of the internal situation in Iran.

Women are suspended or expelled from university often, they're denied access to banking, they have compulsory veiling, they have to marry young – marriage rates are ridiculously young or criminally young – and they're not meant to work outside of the home in reality, or bring in money, or have a personal dignity in that respect.

I want to turn briefly now to the large population of exiled Iranians in Europe. They are the subject of violence too, and notably Ms RAJAVI's – the National Committee of Resistance in Iran have had a number of hits – other NGOs and individual Iranian objectors are affected on the continent of Europe, and that has to be condemned.

The support by Iran for the war and in Ukraine is an obscenity. Their logistical support of 7 October in Israel was an obscenity, as is their support of extremes in a number of ways.

Our diplomatic relations and pressure on Iran should not be exclusive to the nuclear threat. Of course, that's central. But we should also be, in all our dealings with Iran in terms of international pressure, diplomatic initiatives, sanctions, etc. We should be focusing on human rights. So on behalf of the EPP, I'm very happy to support the report, welcome it, and say that it properly addresses a criminal situation inside and outside Iran. And we have a moral duty as an Assembly, again, to be unequivocal on this one.

Thank you.

Mr David MORRIS (United Kingdom, EC/DA, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister O'REILLY on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party.

Now may I call Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO on behalf of the European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA, Spokesperson for the group): Dear friends, right now Iran is bombing Israel.

Right now hundreds of missiles are falling on the heads of Israeli people.

Today Russia is bombing Ukraine, Iran is bombing Israel. And we are sitting here discussing, oh, let us speak about what is happening in the Middle East.

I will tell you what's happening in the Middle East. Barbarians are attacking civilisation. Israel is human rights, democracy, rule of law. Women's right. Iran is a crazy dictatorship. A crazy dictatorship where they treat women like animals.

And we are sitting and deciding, we're discussing what we should do. There should be a solution. The solution is very clear. To destroy the evil. This is the solution. To destroy the evil.

Iran under the Mullah regime is evil.

Russia under PUTIN's regime is evil.

This is evil. Hamas is evil. Hezbollah is evil. Houthis is evil. All of this is evil. Evil should be destroyed. This is the solution. Not some blah, blah, blah, not some discussions. This is the solution. Evil should be destroyed.

We need to stand together with Israel right now, because right now they are attacked. They are the stronghold of civilisation there. This is the fact.

Maybe there will be a day, I am hoping this day will come soon, when Iranian people will be free of this awful regime because they hate this regime, too, but now they are not. And the whole hope is on Israel that they will defend, that they will protect these values which we are here fighting for. And we need to support them without any discussions, debates or anything else. That's so clear. That's so clear. Why are we not doing this? We all should be now with this. In these debates, Middle East, Iran, we need to support Israeli hostages.

You know, we all know about like Israelis are fighting for their hostages. I feel it with all my heart. We have in Ukraine more than 50 000 hostages, including more than 20 000 children, just imagine this. And I understand what people of Israel feel. We need all to say together "Am Yisrael Chai". That is our motto today.

And I address to all of you. You will come back to your countries, you will come back to your parliaments. Let's stand with Israel. Let's stop barbarians, because this is the war of barbarians against civilisation. And all this axis of chaos, North Korea, Iran, Russia, Hamas, Hezbollah, Houthis, and China, which are standing behind them, we should stop them or they will attack us and they will destroy us.

But I believe in us. I believe that we can do together and we can finish these awful dictatorships. And that will be a great moment for the world history.

Thank you very much.

Mr David MORRIS (United Kingdom, EC/DA, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Oleksii.

Now may I call Ms Lesia VASYLENKO on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe group.

Ms Lesia VASYLENKO (Ukraine, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Okay, thank you, Chair.

On behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), I would like to thank our rapporteur, Mr Max LUCKS, for an excellent report calling for concrete action.

Right now, as we speak, Iran is attacking Israel, covering the peaceful cities of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and many others with a shower of missiles. On behalf of the ALDE group and from me personally, deep, deep condolences to all the families in Israel who have to live through this nightmare right now.

Today's Iran has become a synonym of terrorism, aggression, and totalitarianism. The regime crushes dissent, brutalises women, and silences opposition. Today's Iran is a key link in the axis of evil formed by Russia, North Korea, and other authoritarian powers that threaten the existence of democracy, regional stability and world peace. Today's Iran is a supply of tools that kill people in the Middle East and in my own country, too.

Each month, 300 Iranian-made Shahed drones are launched over Ukrainian skies. These drones hit homes, schools, and hospitals. They target our energy infrastructure, they destroy, and they wound, and they kill. The death toll is not just among Ukrainians and Israelis. As we are witnessing now, it is the death of freedom that the Iran of today professes and brings with it. The darkness Iran exports abroad is mirrored by the brutality it inflicts on its own people. The Iranian regime has shown the world what it is willing to do to maintain its power: murder, imprisonment, torture, rape.

Just this year, over 500 Iranians have been executed, 500 lives extinguished in a campaign of terror. Only since August, 214 new murders. The oppression of the Iranian people, the aggression in the Middle East, the provision of weapons to Russia, the destruction of Ukraine. These are not isolated events. This is a planned, broad strategy, a co-ordinated effort to dismantle democracy to replace it with totalitarian control and to strip freedom from the people of the world, and this threat is growing by the day.

At this point, we must admit that the international community has failed to act firmly enough on aggressors. Both Iran and Russia are freely launching attack after attack. By acknowledging where and how we have failed in peaceful, democratic nations, we can move on to fixing things and making sure the same mistakes are not repeated again.

So, what are the concrete actions we must urge our governments to take? Our governments must finally blacklist the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IGRC) and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) as a terrorist organisation. The support networks of these structures must be banned across Europe, and on the other hand, there must be full support to Iran's opposition forces. We can start by at least recognising the legitimacy of the Iranian defence resistance units. Canada and the US have already done so. It is now time for Europe to follow suit. As always, the solution to the totalitarian terrorist problem before us will come only if we stand together against the anti-democratic axis of evil. And we must act now before it is too late.

Mr David MORRIS (United Kingdom, EC/DA, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Lesia.

And may I now call on behalf of the Group of the Unified European Left, Mr Emmanuel FERNANDES.

Mr Emmanuel FERNANDES (France, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister President.

On September 16, 2022, the death of Jina Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish Iranian woman, at the hands of the morality police for wearing a headscarf improperly, triggered an unprecedented wave of protests in Iran. This heinous femicide is the symbol of a powerful revolutionary movement to which the regime has responded and continues to respond with unprecedented brutality and violence, which my group strongly denounces. The slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom" contains within itself the ardent aspiration, particularly of young people, for profound transformations in Iranian society to achieve the ideal of a social democracy respectful of equal rights for women, sexual and gender minorities, ethnic and religious minorities.

Yes, we firmly denounce the exactions of the Mullahs' regime, the unacceptable violence and brutality towards those who demonstrate and protest. At this moment, I am also thinking of the hostages held in Iran. I'm thinking in particular of Cécile KOHLER who, for 879 days now, has been held in one of the regime's prisons in appalling conditions. We call for her immediate release, as well as that of all hostages in Iran and around the world.

So, in the face of these events, the question we must ask ourselves is always the same: what can we do to promote peace and the universality of human rights? As an institution defending these universal human rights, we can only be fully heard if we are consistent and coherent.

Yes, we must denounce, and we do denounce, the ultra-religious, fundamentalist regime in Iran, whose crimes we condemn. And so we denounce all States, sometimes themselves governed by ultra-religious fanatics, which do not respect international law, using terrorist networks or methods, discriminating or persecuting part of their population according to gender or origin, even practicing apartheid and flouting the territorial integrity of neighbouring countries. We also believe that we must not contribute to feeding the simplistic vision of the world according to which an entirely virtuous Western democratic bloc is engaged in a war of civilisation against a group of barbaric or demonic states.

Yes, we firmly denounce the use of terrorist methods and the regimes that support them. And we are also aware of the dangers inherent in the notion of a war against terrorism, which is semantic nonsense, since terrorism is not an entity but a mode of action.

We call for an end to the dramatic escalation of war in the Middle East, and, what's more, as we receive the latest news this evening, our thoughts are obviously with the Israeli, Palestinian and Lebanese populations who are under the bombs. We call on all parties involved to cease fire and respect the territorial integrity of neighbouring states.

"Women, life, freedom": we ardently support all those who bear this cry in Iran and throughout the world. This cry has a universal vocation, because all women and all human beings have an inalienable right to life and freedom, everywhere and in all circumstances.

Thank you for your support.

Mr David MORRIS (United Kingdom, EC/DA, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Emmanuel.

Now may I call Ms Derya TÜRK-NACHBAUR from the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group.

Ms Derya TÜRK-NACHBAUR (Germany, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Dear Mister President,

Dear colleagues,

The actions of the unjust state of Iran do not only affect the people living in Iran. The people of Iranian origin who live here in the member states of the Council of Europe, who stand up for human rights, democracy and the rule of law, who also demonstrate in our streets against the oppression of women, are not safe from the long arms of the Iranian regime. We must talk about this.

I would therefore like to thank my colleague Mr Max LUCKS for his report and the intensive work he has put into it, which provides us with a good basis for reconsidering our dealings with Iran. Thanks also to Maria for her statement.

Protests have not only been suppressed since Jina MAHSA AMINI's death, but we have only been taking a closer look since her death. She has become the symbolic figure of Iran's protest movement. Her name, her face, and her fate stand for many thousands of people killed, for thousands of people persecuted, for many thousands imprisoned, for many thousands sentenced to death in this terror state that does not shy away from oppressing, torturing and killing its own citizens.

What kind of regime is it that is so afraid of women's hair coming out? What kind of system is this in which hatred is paid for with gold and honour and the longing for freedom is paid for with life? What kind of state is this, whose foundations are built on intimidation, surveillance, and repression?

The report of the Fact Finding Mission of the UN Human Rights Council and this report confirm what we have long known here. For the first time, the term "crimes against humanity" is being used in official reports on the situation in Iran. Now it is in black and white in the UN report. The regime is carrying out widespread and persistent human rights violations against its own people, violating international laws, and targeting women in particular. Murder, imprisonment, torture, rape and other forms of sexual violence, persecution, enforced disappearances, and other inhumane acts. A regime that terrorises its own citizens will not shy away from terrorising other countries.

We have all looked the other way for too long. We, too, have allowed torture, abuse, arbitrariness, and corruption to characterise this country. It's not just us; all democratic countries must take a stand. In this case, taking a stand also means imposing sanctions. The judges, the executioners, the Revolutionary Guards must be sanctioned, and the people who rebel against this injustice must be protected from transnational repression.

Iran may have the more frightening weapons, but we have the strength of the law on our side.

Together we can do this.

Thank you for your attention.

Mr David MORRIS (United Kingdom, EC/DA, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Derya.

I now call Ms Petra BAYR.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC): Thank you very much.

I also would like to congratulate Max and Mariia for the report and the opinion. I think both are very well done.

I would like to focus on two aspects or two amendments that came from the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, namely, on the one hand, it was originally Amendment 11 and Amendment 14.

Amendment 11 calls for considering a Vienna process-type dialogue with all relevant human rights interlocutors in Iran and abroad.

So what is the Vienna process? That's a coming together of Afghan, not Iranian, Afghan democrats and democratic representatives from different organisations who have met two or three times a year in Vienna now for about three years. They speak about what a democratic Afghanistan could look like after the Taliban leaves, [because] even if we know that this regime is still in force, we also know that the time will come that the democratic ones will have their say.

It's so important that they are already now getting themselves ready and considering what their common grounds are, what their values are, what they are really working and fighting for, and how it is possible to enshrine all those democratic forces which would like to work on such a modern democratic Afghanistan. We suggest that this also could be a model for Iran.

The very first thing that they agreed on was to call for, and that's reflected in Amendment 14, the Rome statute to enshrine a so-called paragraph on gender apartheid, because it's so important also to see that apartheid is not only against ethnic groups. It is also in this case, both of Iran and Afghanistan and also of the Iranian diaspora who asked for this inclusion of the gender apartheid in the Rome statute, which is the legal basis for the International Criminal Court.

With that you can see it as a criminal offence and address the institutionalisation of gender-based discrimination, exclusion of women and girls from all public spheres, from everything, from learning, from working, from driving cars, from whatever you can think about.

So, I'm really happy that both, all, the suggestions from the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination were accepted unanimously.

I really think that the opinion brings added value when it comes to women, minorities, and those who are especially suppressed.

So, thank you very much for this brilliant work.

Mr David MORRIS (United Kingdom, EC/DA, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Petra.

And now may I call Ms Deborah BERGAMINI.

Ms Deborah BERGAMINI (Italy, EPP/CD): I think this debate is very important, and this report is very important. I regret that it has been calendared so late in the day when many colleagues are not present.

I say that because I think that in our mission there is just an extreme focus and an extreme resolve to keep the focus on what is happening in Iran.

For years now, especially in the last few years, the free world has been horrified to see an unprecedented wave of repression, of violence, directed especially against Iranian women. We recalled the recent anniversary of the death of Jina MAHSA AMINI. That anniversary should constantly remind us of the sacrifice of so many women and so many men who have taken to the streets over the years to demand respect for basic freedoms. They have done so with their bare hands, and they have done so because they have not lost hope.

If we look at the pictures of what Tehran was like before 1979, there are pictures that are everywhere, in all the social media. We understand that it is possible to preserve individual freedoms even in Iran, because it was so. We also, therefore, must not lose hope. Of course, the world's attention today is focused on the conflict. Just in these hours, you mentioned it, hundreds of ballistic missiles have been dumped on Israel by Iran. But they are two sides of the same coin, the violent attack outside and inside repression, because it is on repression that this giant octopus has been building its power for years. Taking down Iran's proxies, taking down terrorism means severing perhaps the most important tentacle on which this octopus' power is based.

Just on 26 September, a new law was passed in Iran on protecting the family through chastity, through the culture of chastity and the hijab.

Do you see how this is being done? Do you see how every day, every week the crackdowns are increasing? Perhaps precisely by taking advantage of the fact that the focus of the free world is all about conflict. But this is also a conflict, a very violent conflict. I wish what this regime, the Mullah regime, as well as the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, is doing would never find some form of intellectualistic justification in public debate.

That's why our attention and our voice have to be loud, not blah-blah-blah. But we, as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, have a duty to keep our voice high, because this voice is the voice that they have taken away from Afghan women, that they are taking away from Iranian women, and that we, praise be, men and women of the free world, can still use to defend those who are fighting for freedoms, not only in their country, but for the freedoms of all of us.

Mr David MORRIS (United Kingdom, EC/DA, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Deborah, for such an excellent speech.

Sadly, 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 text can be submitted electronically if possible no later than 4 hours after the list of speakers is interrupted.

I call Mr Max LUCKS, rapporteur, to reply. You have 3 minutes, Mister LUCKS.

Mr Max LUCKS (Germany, SOC, Rapporteur): Thank you, Mister President.

Dear colleagues,

I would particularly like to thank you for your many specific comments and suggestions, for example on the dialogue process in Vienna. I believe it is extremely important that we take more action than Europe in our Iran policy, and I would like to pick up on one thing again.

We have all analysed the situation very well here. We all agree that the people of Iran deserve our support against this regime. We know that this regime is a danger to us. We know that this regime is a problem for the Middle East, because it needs strategic destabilisation in the region.

Yet, after two years of the most courageous wave of protests in Iran, our governments have not managed to list the Revolutionary Guards as a terrorist organisation. The same Revolutionary Guards who two years ago were partly responsible for young people being shot in the eyes. Those Revolutionary Guards who were partly responsible for the attack on the synagogue in my constituency in Germany two years ago. Those Revolutionary Guards who tonight are largely responsible for rockets being fired at Israel. Our governments in Europe have not yet managed to do that. I believe that these are areas where it is up to us as a parliamentary assembly to push this forward and to fight for this to finally happen so that a different policy can be implemented there.

We have so many areas where we not only need to analyse but also work on. That has also been addressed here: with the question of an effective documentation mechanism for human rights violations; with the question of how we can also bring together the different people from the Iranian diaspora in Europe and ensure that they can talk to each other about what their future should look like; and, of course, with the question of how we can counter this destabilisation in the region.

We have people in our Iranian-speaking diaspora in our member states who have been warning us not just since yesterday, and not just since 2022, but for years about what we are experiencing this evening and tonight.

I believe that there is a lesson for us. The diaspora of Iranian origin in Europe not only needs our protection. We must also take them seriously. We must also include them. I am very pleased that there is broad support for this here.

Thank you very much.

Mr David MORRIS (United Kingdom, EC/DA, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister LUCKS.

Does the Vice-Chairperson of the Committee wish to speak? Miss GARDINI, you have 3 minutes.

Ms Elisabetta GARDINI (Italy, EC/DA, Vice-chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): Thank you, Mister President.

Dear colleagues,

On behalf of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy, I wish to thank the rapporteur, Mr Max LUCKS, for the excellent work that he did when preparing the report.

Let me also thank the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, and in particular, the Chairperson Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO, for a very substantive opinion and helpful amendments that our Committee fully supports.

I also thank all members of the Assembly for their valuable contributions to our debate in this hemicycle today.

Dear colleagues, as the rapporteur has clearly shown in his report, the regime in the Islamic Republic of Iran threatens our stability and security in many ways.

First of all, Iran is contributing to the destabilisation of the Middle East. Iran also provides weapons to Russia and has strategic ambitions in the Mediterranean. The Iranian regime is also a threat to its own citizens. Facing a large-scale protest movement, it has reacted with extreme atrocity and violence. And last but not least, the Iranian regime is directly targeting those Iranians who have found refuge in our member states and seeks to intimidate and silence dissenting voices. This is a major threat to all Europeans. However, as the rapporteur rightly points out, European states have so far failed to design a co-ordinated strategy to counter Iranian policy.

The draft resolution which is before us today calls for designing such a co-ordinated policy.

Dear colleagues, the Committee has unanimously agreed to the approach of our rapporteur. Therefore, I encourage you to support this report.

Thank you.

Mr Markus WIECHEL (Sweden, EC/DA): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Mr President,

The situation in Iran is, to put it mildly, really bad. Individual freedoms have suffered badly, not least for women. Desperate popular protests are being crushed with extreme violence by the ruthless servants of the illegitimate Islamic dictatorship.

The country's theocratic leadership uses the Islamic Revolutionary Guard to attack the broader population when they protest against runaway inflation and the regime's apparent inability to grow and reform the economy toward more openness. And of course, when the brave Iranian people speak the truth about the lack of fundamental freedoms and state sponsored oppression.

Meanwhile, a rapid build-up of an Iranian nuclear weapons force is thought to take place. At the same time, international efforts to revive a nuclear limitation agreement have on the whole been abandoned.

Dear colleagues – right now Israel is getting pounded by Iranian missiles.

Several military groupings largely controlled by Iran are increasingly active in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and the Gaza territory. They have strengthened the regional role of the country, they have also made Iran more economically and politically isolated at world level. The same can be said for Iran's more recent close alignment with other notable dictatorships such as Russia, China and North Korea.

A final word on the protection of Iranian human rights defenders in Europe. I agree with the Rapporteur on the need for a measure of firm reaction in the face of Iranian threats or intimidations against this vulnerable group.

At the same time, we must do our utmost to keep human defenders' out of harm's way. The report has numerous proposals in this regard, I commend the rapporteur.

Mr President. I wish to conclude with an appeal to the honorable colleagues in this assembly:

Please do what you can to maximize the pressure against the ruthless Islamic dictatorship in Iran. We need to sanction this regime, their representatives and the relatives of oppressors that live in our home countries.

We need to designate the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, IRGC, as a terrorist organisation.

We need to end eventual collaborations, which includes cooperation between universities and ending the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, also known as the JCPOA.

Last but not least, we need to bring those responsible for the Iranian regime's crimes against humanity to justice in appropriate international or national courts.

One day, the Iranian people will be freed from the occupants.

Thank you, Mr President

Mr Reinhold LOPATKA (Austria, EPP/CD): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Iran is the biggest sponsor of terrorism. Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Huthis in Yemen are directly linked with Iran. As my Swiss colleague Heer said, it is like a cancer in the region!

Iran is a close ally of Russia. Iran assists Russia with its drone technology and other military equipments as our Ukrainian colleagues mentioned often her in the hemicycle.

Iran is a very brutal regime, killing and torturing its own citizens.

The regime in Iran has been trying by all means to suppress the protests triggered by the death of 22-year-old Masha Amini in September 2022. In addition to arrests of numerous demonstrators, death sentences were carried out in connection with the nationwide protests in Iran.

The way the Iranian authorities are dealing with the protesters is shocking and unacceptable.

The Iranian regime is obviously counting on the fact that executions of participants in the protests could have a deterrent effect.

Although Iran, as a UN member, has formally recognized the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Iran is unfortunately among the five states in the world that most frequently apply the death penalty.

Therefore it is so important, that we keep Iran on the top of our agenda to strengthen solidarity with Iranian civil society and to protect Iranians in Europe.

The Nobel Peace Prize given to Narges Mohammadi in 2023 for her fight against oppression of women in Iran and her fight to promote human rights, the 2023 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought of the European Parliament to "Women, Life, Freedom" movement in Iran and our report and discussion today show that there is a coherent European point of view. The Iranian human rights defenders deserve our full support!

Ms Saara-Sofia SIRÉN (Finland, EPP/CD): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

I am deeply alarmed by the human rights situation in Iran. Most executions worldwide occur in Iran. According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, hundreds of people have been executed in Iran since the beginning of August this year.

The Iranian regime uses violence and the death penalty as a means of political oppression, fostering fear and suppressing opposition. This is a terrifying abuse of power. It is concerning that executions have continued even during the presidency of Pezeshkian.

I want to take a moment to especially acknowledge and express support for the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement, which has continued to defend human rights despite the violence and injustices, the continuous violations of international law, they have faced from the Iranian authorities. Let us not forget either the brave voices of Iranian political prisoners who join the "No to Executions" campaign from behind bars.

This is happening in Iran now. Unfortunately, the situation is not new. The recent fact-finding mission on Iran denounced these proceedings. The UN Special Rapporteur also called for the prosecution of those responsible for the mass execution of political prisoners in the 1980s, labeling them both a crime against humanity and genocide. These executions included women, some reportedly raped before being executed, and even children.

Iran must be pressured to immediately stop death sentences and executions. Human rights violations must be investigated.

When following the disturbing human rights situation in Iran, it is important to keep in mind also the role and interests of the Iranian regime regarding other current international conflicts and wars, as we can see for example in the Middle East as we speak, as well as in Ukraine.

The Iranian human rights defenders need and deserve our support in their fight for freedom, dignity, and justice. Thank you for this report.

Ms Valérie PILLER CARRARD (Switzerland, SOC): *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in French.*

Mr Gonzalo ROBLES (Spain, EPP/CD): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

We are deeply concerned about the increasing number of executions in Iran. Since the inauguration of the new president of the Iranian regime, Mr Pezeshkian, more than 200 prisoners have been executed, including at least eight women. In recent days, several political prisoners have also been sentenced to death. The regime has even begun executing young protesters who took part in the 2022 national uprising.

In July this year, the UN Special Rapporteur for Iran, Mr Javaid Rehman, presented a landmark 66-page report which, for the first time, states that the massacre of political prisoners in Iran in 1988 - in which most of the victims belonged to the People's Mujahedin Organisation of Iran (PMOI) - constitutes a clear example of crimes against humanity and genocide.

The Iranian regime's response to this report has been to launch a campaign of demonisation and threats against the UN Special Rapporteur. We strongly condemn these attacks by Iran and its allies against Professor Rehman.

We in the Council of Europe urge our European governments to make their relations with Iran conditional on a moratorium on executions. With the mullahs oppressing their people in Iran and creating chaos in the Middle East, we cannot continue with business as usual.

It is time for decisive action. Regime officials must be held accountable for committing genocide. We must impose sanctions for human rights violations on this regime. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which is the main instrument of repression in Iran and a source of instability in the region, must be designated as a terrorist organisation.

We must send a clear message to the people of Iran: we are with you in your struggle for a democratic and secular republic.

Ms Maria SYRENGELA (Greece, EPP/CD): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Honourable colleagues,

It is time to voice our deep concerns regarding the ongoing human rights violations in Iran and the critical need for the protection of Iranian human rights defenders, particularly those seeking refuge in Council of Europe member states.

In recent years, we have witnessed an intensification of repression against women, journalists, activists and all those who dare to challenge the oppressive regime in Tehran.

These individuals—especially women—demand fundamental freedoms, equality, and justice. Their courage is nothing short of remarkable.

Women like Mahsa Amini have become global symbols of resistance, paying the ultimate price for standing up against tyranny.

Their bravery compels us to act.

Moreover, as the report states, Iran's influence as a destabilizing force across the Middle East cannot be ignored.

With its support for Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen and the Assad regime in Syria, Tehran plays a central role in prolonging conflict and instability in the region.

As defenders of democratic values, we must remain vigilant in countering Iran's destabilizing actions and protect those who stand up to its oppressive policies.

As members of the Council of Europe, we have a moral obligation.

We need to ensure the safety and protection of Iranian human rights defenders who seek refuge within our borders.

They come to us not only because they are fleeing persecution but because they believe in the values we hold dear: democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

These are not mere words, but promises we must uphold.

We must ensure that Iranian asylum seekers are not subjected to further threats, harassment, or surveillance from agents of the Iranian regime within Europe.

Furthermore, we must strengthen legal frameworks that grant them swift and effective protection.

Last but not least, we must work collectively to hold the Iranian authorities accountable for their continued human rights abuses.

Dear colleagues, let us send a clear message: the Council of Europe stands in solidarity with the people of Iran and their fight for freedom, justice, and equality.

We will not turn a blind eye to their suffering.

We will be a voice for the voiceless and a refuge for the oppressed.

Thank you.

Ms Christiana EROTKRITOU (Cyprus, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Dear Colleagues,

I wish to sincerely congratulate our Rapporteur Mr. Max Lucks for his unambiguous stance as regards Iran and for underlying the explicit danger we face in attempting to mitigate the effects or soften the image of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Not only is Iran sponsoring global terrorism it is also massively violating the fundamental rights and freedoms of its own people both within and outside its borders and blackmailing the West because of its nuclear capacity. It is time we call a spade a spade.

The situation in Lebanon as we have all witnessed is untenable. The country, which lies only 200km away from my own county Cyprus, has in essence been hijacked, politically, socially, economically and militarily by Iran and its proxy Hezbollah in the past decades.

I need of course not elaborate on the executions in Iran, unprecedented violence, systemic prosecution, torture and humiliation the civil society is subjected to as well as the continuous fear and threats Iranian human rights defenders living outside the country are faced with. Taking this opportunity, I would like to pay tribute to the civil society's continued strength and determination in demanding the most fundamental commodity. Freedom and democracy. Let us not forget the continued fight from prison of Narges Mohammadi, Nobel prize winner of 2023, against the oppression of women in Iran and in favour of human rights and freedom for all and of course let us not forget the sacrifice of Jina Amini, the embodiment of "Women, Life, Freedom" movement.

I wish to focus on one key element. What have we done to halt Iran in its quest to establish its hegemony in the region? What have we done to effectively support democratic forces in Lebanon in order to counterbalance the growing influence of Hezbollah, of Hamas in Gaza, and the Houthis in Yemen? What have we done to stop entire countries, indeed member states of the Council of Europe, that have been explicitly aiding and abetting Iran in its war mongering ambitions, circumventing among others sanctions imposed on the Islamic Republic?

The answer of course very little, if not nothing at all. What we are witnessing today in Iran, its proxies and its allies, is directly related to our own disengagement from the region. Unfortunately, we have been confined to dealing solely with things happening within our own borders and have not understood the massive impact in terms of security and stability, of developments just outside our borders.

Dear Colleagues,

We need to rethink our policy towards Iran and make a clear shift. The Rapporteur is right in proposing a long term, more robust and coherent policy vis-à-vis Iran, going beyond the nuclear question. We need to look at the sanction regime and how Iran has been aided in circumventing it by its allies. We need to target individuals and entities connected to the regime, many of whom have lived in Europe and maintain financial assets there. We need to eliminate the tools the Iranian authorities have been using to finance their subversive activities in and outside Iran.

Mr Georgios STAMATIS (Greece, EPP/CD): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

The human rights situation in Iran has been a topic of global concern, particularly after the tragic death of Jina Mahsa Amini in September 2022, a young woman whose life was taken by Iran's so-called "morality police." Her death sparked a nationwide uprising under the powerful motto "Woman, Life, Freedom." This movement reflects a profound call for change, a cry for human dignity that has reverberated far beyond Iran's borders.

However, the Iranian regime responded with unrelenting brutality. Violence, torture, unjust prosecution, imprisonment and death sentences were used to suppress the legitimate demands of the people. In the aftermath of this movement, authorities further suppressed the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, and intensified their crackdown on women and girls defying compulsory veiling laws.

It is our duty to stand in solidarity with the courageous Iranian citizens who continue to fight for the promotion of these values in Iran under such oppressive circumstances.

The Iranian regime's persecution of dissenting voices—both within Iran and beyond its borders—poses a serious human rights crisis and a security threat to European societies.

The draft resolution calls upon the national governments and parliaments to raise awareness of the human rights situation in Iran and to strengthen solidarity with Iranian civil society, activists and defenders, who stand up to promote democracy, human rights and rule of law. This should involve not only targeted sanctions against the Iranian regime and initiating international legal prosecution of Iranian human rights violators but also ensuring international protection for those who have fled Iran in fear of persecution.

Furthermore, the report proposes to provide Iranian citizens with free internet access during regime-imposed blackouts, ensuring that the flow of information and the fight for freedom cannot be silenced. It is also essential to promote international exchanges with Iranian civil society and its constituent women's, student and labor movements.

In addition, the report suggests the development of dialogue with civil society groups and Iranian opposition, so as their voices to be heard.

Finally, a joint strategy should be established among the member and observer States of the Council of Europe to push for the release of citizens held as hostages.

This is not just a struggle for the people of Iran. This is a global struggle for human dignity, for justice, and for the values that we hold as the Council of Europe.

Vote: The situation in Iran and the protection of Iranian human rights defenders in Council of Europe member States

Mr David MORRIS (United Kingdom, EC/DA, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Miss GARDINI.

The debate is now closed.

Considerations of Amendments [Document 16035] to the draft resolution.

The Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy presented a draft resolution to which 15 Amendments have been tabled.

I remind you that speeches on amendments are limited to 30 seconds.

Any amendment which has been unanimously approved by the Committee seized for report shall not be put to the vote in plenary and shall be declared as definitively approved, unless 10 or more members of the Assembly object.

I understand that the Chairperson of the Committee wishes to propose to the Assembly that Amendments 1-13 and 15 to the draft resolution, which were unanimously approved, be declared as approved.

Is that so, Miss GARDINI?

Ms Elisabetta GARDINI (Italy, EC/DA, Vice-chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): Yes.

Mr David MORRIS (United Kingdom, EC/DA, President of the Assembly): Thank you. Thank you.

If nobody objects, I will consider the amendments to be approved.

Is there an objection? If there is, we will need to verify that that objection has the required support of 10 people. Please, could those who object raise their hand?

There are no objections. Amendments 1 to 13 and 15 to the draft resolution are therefore approved and will not be called.

I call Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO on behalf of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination to support Amendment 14. You have 30 seconds, Mariia.

Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO (Ukraine, EPP/CD, Rapporteur for opinion): Thank you, President.

I will save our time. I spoke about Amendment 14 and amendments possible to the International Criminal Court (ICC)'s Rome Statute in my initial speech.

I would like to use the remaining time to say that our condolences go to all the victims today. Also in my home city, Kharkiv, which is targeted by Iranian drones in Ukraine.

This amendment supports international law and the amendment to the ICC.

Mr David MORRIS (United Kingdom, EC/DA, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Does anyone else... Sorry.

I call Mr Claude KERN to support the sub-amendment.

Does anybody else wish to support this sub-amendment? Thank you, Mister LUCKS.

Mr Max LUCKS (Germany, SOC): We had this sub-amendment because some members wanted to make the picture broader and also to include the religious aspect. I think this is also very important, because religious minorities are treated very badly in Iran, such as the Sunni Kurds or the Bahá'í or the remaining Jewish community of Iran. Still, 10 000 Jews remain in Iran. I think it's also important to mention their situation and that they face discrimination by law.

That is why I would like to ask you for support for the sub-amendment.

Mr David MORRIS (United Kingdom, EC/DA, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mister LUCKS.

Does anyone wish to speak against the sub-amendment?

No.

What is the opinion of the mover of the main amendment?

Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO (Ukraine, EPP/CD, Rapporteur for opinion): Totally in favour, President.

Mr David MORRIS (United Kingdom, EC/DA, President of the Assembly): What is the Committee's position on this sub-amendment?

Ms Elisabetta GARDINI (Italy, EC/DA, Vice-chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): In favour.

Mr David MORRIS (United Kingdom, EC/DA, President of the Assembly): I shall now put the sub-amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is now closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The sub-amendment is agreed to.

Now we come to the main Amendment 14, as amended.

Does anyone wish to speak against the amendment as amended?

What is the Committee's position on this amendment?

Ms Elisabetta GARDINI (Italy, EC/DA, Vice-chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): In favour.

Mr David MORRIS (United Kingdom, EC/DA, President of the Assembly): I shall now put the amendment as amended to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

Amendment 14 is agreed.

We will now proceed to vote on the draft resolution contained in Document 16035. A simple majority is required.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The draft resolution is adopted.

(Applause)

The Assembly will hold its next public sitting tomorrow at 10:00 a.m. with the Agenda approved on Monday.

The sitting is adjourned. Thank you.