



**Provisional edition**

Monday 27 January 2025, afternoon

## Official report of debates

### Opening of the sitting No 2

#### Communication from the Committee of Ministers

**Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly):** Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, it is a distinct honour to welcome Mr Xavier BETTEL, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Luxembourg and Chair of the Committee of Ministers to this Assembly.

Dear Minister, dear Xavier, you are no stranger to European institutions, we all know that, having visited Strasbourg on several occasions in 2018, as far as I remember, in your capacity as Prime Minister, a position that you served for a long time, for your country. You addressed the European Parliament, presenting your vision for the future of Europe in the presence of your compatriot Jean-Claude Juncker at that time who was president of the European Commission.

Today, you return to address our Assembly, as part of Luxembourg's presidency of the Committee of Ministers.

Minister, Luxembourg serves as a leading example of a state committed to fostering the concept of living together. You have made this commitment a cornerstone of your presidency and I commend your dedication to promoting a more equal and inclusive society.

This afternoon, you participated in a seminar on the responsibility of men and boys in combatting gender-based violence against women and girls.

It is crucial for opinion leaders like yourself to set the tone and act as role models for fostering positive behavioural change.

Under Luxembourg's presidency, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe needs to prioritise key issues central to the Assembly mission tool, ensuring the effectiveness of the European Court of Human Rights, strengthening the rule of law and advancing the rights of the most vulnerable, especially children and young people.

Since my election as President of the Assembly, I have had the opportunity to visit your country twice. I was able to witness and appreciate the strong partnership between the Council of Europe and Luxembourg. This partnership is vital in addressing Europe's most pressing challenges, defending democratic principles in the face of growing external – and internal – threats.

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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.

Luxembourg's leadership with the Committee of Ministers, rooted in a profound commitment to European solidarity, inspires confidence that our joint efforts will achieve meaningful outcomes.

The Assembly, dear Minister, looks forward to continuing its engagement with the Committee of Ministers as we work collectively to advance the core values that unite us.

Having said that, I thank you for joining us today, and I invite you to take the floor.

**Mr Xavier BETTEL (Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Luxembourg, Chair of the Committee of Ministers):** Mister Chairman, dear members of the Assembly, dear Secretary General,

Firstly, I would like to congratulate you, dear Chairman, because if I'm right you just have been reappointed as chairman of this Assembly.

And also to congratulate Mr Alain BERSET, because it's the first time I'm able to take the floor here to congratulate you also for your nomination and election as Secretary General also of the Council of Europe.

And the first thing is, I have to tell you... to be able to speak in front of you today, while we celebrate the 80th anniversary of liberation of Auschwitz, is a strong symbol.

Because.. I will come later on that, but let me start with a personal touch.. when we realised that in 1945 the Russian army liberated us... how the situation is today on our continent... and then we thought that peace was granted forever. How is the situation on our continent today? Just to remember that important date.

So firstly, I will do the job as a presidency, and I got speaking points written by my team, so as not to forget what I want to say, and allow me afterwards in a second term to speak also more personally about the political situation and also how I see how this Assembly can be useful for the Council of Ministers to try to avoid what I just spoke about a few seconds ago.

**Mr Xavier BETTEL (Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Luxembourg, Chair of the Committee of Ministers):** At our recent meetings, one of our key priorities was to adopt a declaration on the occasion of the thousandth day of the war, reiterating our condemnation of Russia's war of aggression in flagrant violation of international law, and reaffirming our determination to continue supporting Ukraine. We reiterated the importance of punishing the crimes of aggression committed by Russia against Ukraine.

And I myself, as a former Prime Minister, was in Reykjavik, where we also had an important moment, that of agreeing on the Register of Damage concerning Ukraine, to which 43 members have signed up, including the Union. This is the first step towards an international compensation mechanism for victims of Russian aggression, and I would also like to congratulate the progress made in setting up a Claims Commission and work on a special tribunal for the crime of aggression against Ukraine.

With regard to Georgia, the Committee of Ministers has been closely following political developments in Georgia following the elections of 26 October. The recent developments in Georgia are regrettable. The Secretary General, Mr Alain BERSET, reported to the Committee of Ministers on his visit to Tbilisi at the end of December, and the Committee of Ministers is following developments in Georgia on a regular basis, holding two in-depth debates on 11 December and 15 January. PACE's co-rapporteurs for Georgia also carried out a fact-finding mission from 14 to 16 January. All the bodies and entities of the Council of Europe are pursuing the same objective: to help Georgia fulfill its obligations as a member state of the organisation, so that human rights are respected and democratic institutions protected.

Moreover, on numerous occasions, the Committee of Ministers has expressed its unwavering support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders. And finally, on 27 November, the Committee of Ministers held an exchange of views on the human rights situation in the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, on the basis of the Secretary General's 30th consolidated report on the conflict in Georgia. The report attests to a situation on the ground that continues to deteriorate.

With regard to the Council of Europe's action plans in the field of co-operation, we have regularly adopted action plans to help member states harmonise their legislation, institutions and practice with Council of Europe standards in the field of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Thus, on 19 November, it adopted a new action plan for the Republic of Moldova covering the period 2025-2028; this action plan, worth a total of 30 million euros, was drawn up jointly with the Moldovan authorities and civil society organisations.

With regard to Azerbaijan, the Committee of Ministers was pleased to learn of the resumption of co-operation activities under the Azerbaijan action plan, the implementation of which had been suspended following the Assembly's decision not to ratify the credentials of the Azerbaijan delegation. We must remain a platform for dialogue, and we hope that the Assembly and Azerbaijan's parliamentary delegations will soon find common ground to renew ties.

We must also thank the Secretary General for the action plan to revitalise democracy in the face of the challenges of democratic backsliding. The Council of Europe is the organisation best placed to deal with these issues.

Next, finances: I have also been asked to tell you that at the end of November, the Committee of Ministers adopted by consensus the adjusted budget for 2025, which for the second time in succession includes a real increase in resources in excess of inflation. The member states are thus demonstrating their determination to give the organisation the means to continue fully implementing the commitments made in Reykjavík. Targeted increases have been granted in particular for the European Court of Human Rights, the execution of judgments, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, youth, the environment and artificial intelligence.

Finally, the last point I was asked to raise was the execution of judgments. From 3 to 5 December, the Committee of Ministers held its fourth quarterly meeting in human rights formation, devoted to supervision of the execution of European Court judgments. It adopted 42 decisions concerning 19 member states.

In *Kavala v. Türkiye*, the applicant remains detained despite repeated calls for his immediate release and the Court's finding of a violation of article 46 (4). The Committee welcomed the second high-level technical meeting held in Ankara in October 2024, to discuss the various possibilities for implementing the Kavala judgment. It is now up to the Turkish authorities to commit themselves to achieving results.

In another case against Türkiye, the Committee called for the immediate release of Selahattin Demirtaş and Yüksekdağ Şenoğlu. For the credibility of the Convention system and our Organisation as a whole, it is imperative that all member states fulfill their obligations and implement the Court's judgments. As far as inter-ministerial dialogue is concerned, the Joint Committee will be held on 30 January. And for me, it's also important to maintain a good exchange between the Assembly and the Committee of Ministers.

So, I've done what I was asked to do, to tell you the important messages as Chairman of the Committee of Ministers.

Allow me to add a personal touch: I'd be extremely remiss if I didn't tell you about them.

First of all: this is something you don't know, but your Assembly is one I've always wanted to be a member of. When I was elected to parliament in 1999, I wanted to be a member of the Assembly from a very early age. I never succeeded. It was always the preserve of two or three MPs who never wanted to make way for anyone else. But then I did something else, so I'm doubly proud to be able to speak to you today.

The Luxembourg Presidency is one that is very close to our hearts. Luxembourg is not the biggest country on the map, as we know, but it is a country whose success lies in working together, with others, with its neighbours. We started with Benelux: most of the time, we forget it, but Benelux was one of the first groups where we agreed with our colleagues from Belgium and the Netherlands to do something together.

We had the coal and steel agreement, or the High Authority. Most people don't know this, but in the beginning, nobody wanted the European Commission. Nobody wanted it. And it was in Luxembourg that we said, "If no one wants it, let's do it here." That's how the secretariat of the High Authority began in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, precisely because we believed in this multilateralism.

Today, when you see the number of countries that want to join Schengen, the others who criticise, the others who say it doesn't work, but when you see Schengen, it was signed on a boat, on a barge in Luxembourg, where there were no ministers. There were only secretaries of state. Nobody believed in it: no Head of State, no Prime Minister. We sent in the secretaries of state, thinking: "This is a little trick, it's not going to work." Look at the success we've had today.

So my country is one of those that believes in multilateralism. And today, whether in front of the Luxembourg parliamentarians whom I have seen here as members of this institution, or in front of the ambassadors, in front of you, dear elected representatives, I myself have the greatest respect, having myself been a parliamentarian for 14 years from 1999 to 2013, and to know that exchange, respect, listening, are among the things that, today, unfortunately, are increasingly rare.

The logo. I'd like to talk about this logo, the one you see here, which is the work of Lucien Wercollier, Lucien Wercollier who was deported. I spoke to you earlier about the Second World War. It happened here. It was men who did it. And Lucien Wercollier is someone who didn't accept anyone else telling him what was good for him and for others. We can't accept that some people, because they're bigger, because they're stronger, can decide what's right for others. I say this as a citizen of a small country, I say it as a representative of a sexual minority, I say it quite simply as a member of a party which is not the biggest party; I say it quite simply in relation to other people who, today, go into politics saying that "I am the strongest and that I am the one who imposes on you what is good for you". And it is your Assembly, Mr President, that must remind everyone of the rules.

For let's not forget that, at the outset, the European Convention on Human Rights was the basis - along with the European Court of Human Rights - of this Assembly, of wanting to build around human rights a place where we can discuss things together. And I remember, during the Committee of Ministers, my ambassador almost had a heart attack when I didn't stick to his speech, but simply because Austria separates Armenia and Azerbaijan alphabetically. Alphabetically! And that we're now in a situation where we're almost at risk of another conflict on the European continent. That we have Serbia around the table with, as we know today, a complicated situation with Kosovo! But we must have places where we can talk together.

And when we talk about conflict, I don't need to talk about the conflict in the Middle East right now. And yet, we should talk about it. And I'm not talking about the conflict that's likely to happen in the Congo and Rwanda if we don't intervene, if we're not careful and let the strongest there impose on the other what he must do.

And so, for me, it's really essential that we try today to get around a table and have these spaces for dialogue. And I'd like to thank, and I also trust the Secretary General, Mr President, for... and I'll take Georgia as an example. For me, Georgia was the biggest slap in the face I ever received.

I was Prime Minister when we decided that Georgia should be allowed to join the European Union. It didn't take 15 days, three weeks, for me to get this slap in the face where they pass anti-this, anti-that laws, journalists, lawyers...

Georgia, and I know, I've been asked: "But shouldn't you recognise or whatever?", I'm waiting to get a report where they finally tell me whether or not the results are good or not. But today, I don't have those results. And don't ask me to condemn an election because I'm not satisfied with the results: I won't do it for Georgia or anyone else. Either I have a report telling me that the results are not fair, in which case I'll be the first to say that we can't accept them, but simply because I don't like the result, I can't condemn them. At the moment, I have neither.

What is happening, however, is that the behaviour of this new Georgian government is reprehensible, notwithstanding the outcome of the elections. To go totally in the opposite direction to what it committed to before the elections is something we cannot accept. And I hope, Mr President, that you and your Secretary General will succeed, in the coming weeks and months, in setting out some conditions. And if I have understood correctly, if my information is correct, you have not thrown them out. You want to find a dialogue with them. But the Georgians, the Georgian elected representatives, need to know that they are responsible for the way they behave and for the future of Europe, pro-peace, pro-wanting to build something together, and it's in their hands. And nobody else. It's in their hands!

So we can recommend them, we can encourage them, but at some point, decisions will have to be made. And I trust the General Secretary, I know he's already been there, I really want to thank him, that he's going to continue to... And we have to give a conditionality, but not go in the wrong direction. That's what's really important.

So for us, the rule of law, living together and culture are among the three priorities of our presidency.

First of all, the rule of law. So, from time to time, people say to me: "But... Mr BETTEL, what do you think of the rule of law in China? What do you think of the rule of law in such-and-such a country?" I'm not going to give lessons to the other side of the world when I see how things are at home! Let's take a look at how things are going in some of our own countries before we start criticising the other side of the world. It's clear to us that the rule of law is something that can be interpreted a little like chewing gum, depending on how you live your life and how you look through your glasses. We have foundations, we have rules, we have values. Do you think it's normal today for journalists to have to ask themselves whether they can freely write something without being punished tomorrow? Do you think it's normal for a judge to ask himself a question? Can he take a decision that doesn't conform to the hopes or expectations of a power or a government and, in that case, risk losing his job? It's come to that, even here in Europe! So let's stop giving lessons to the other side of the world.

I think it's important that, firstly, we have this European Court of Human Rights, but secondly, that these judgments are also respected. If the judgments are not respected, it will be a dog without teeth. It barks and barks and barks, but it doesn't bite. And I think it's important to remember what that means for us. As I said, it's important to protect the players in our society, whether it's lawyers, even to be able to work freely, or journalists, and so we also support the convention for the protection of lawyers.

Living together and inclusion: I know that some people, including those in your Assembly, are talking today about "living together" and "inclusion"; they even have the wind in their sails to say that diversity is a weakness. So I'd just like to say, myself, with my origins or whatever, I could be the worst example to tell you that... and I wouldn't be credible to tell you that diversity is a weakness. I've already said it before the European Parliament, Mr President: I have a grandmother who was Russian, Orthodox, a grandfather who was Polish Jewish, a grandmother who was French, a grandfather who was Luxembourgish. I studied law in Nancy, I went on Erasmus to Greece where I studied Orthodox ecclesiastical law - I must tell you, I didn't practise it very often during my career as a lawyer, but quite simply to learn what the other does too, to learn from the other.

And for me, what's quite simply important is that today, this diversity is seen almost as a fear. I don't want to get into a debate because I know I have a presidency, but let me just say that answering people who are afraid that they're wrong will never be the solution. But to sit around a table, discuss, take away people's fears, and understand that the problem with a democrat, most of the time, is that to the shortest question, he'll have the most complicated answer; whereas the populist, to the most complicated question, he'll have the shortest answer. Especially if it's not feasible. And that's where we, as the European continent, need to realise the impact of social media. And I hope we'll also make progress on this, on the fact that today, one social media can influence the other. And that if *facts and checks*, verification and veracity, are no longer one of the sine qua non conditions, we risk having a problem too.

But for us, what's important is to continue to defend diversity in relation to the most vulnerable groups, and also to support the Human Rights Commissioner, whose 25th anniversary we also celebrated on 21 July.

And finally, we also have culture - culture, so I was... I'll confess something to you, I shouldn't say it in front of you, but I was also Minister of Culture in my political career. And the first time I arrived as Minister of Culture to see something, and that's where I met our Secretary General, who was also Minister of Culture for Switzerland at the time, I went to see an exhibition and I had the reflex to say: "Ah, that's really not beautiful". And I was told: "But Minister, you don't like it. But it's not your job to define what's beautiful and what's not beautiful. And today, what's terrible is that in culture - and this is what's important in the diversity of culture - there isn't a standard culture that has to please everyone, but that something I might like and someone else does not like." So, they explained to me afterwards that I had to say that it was complex, that it was interesting, that it was... that I had to think and whatever, and the week after I went to another vernissage, they said to me: "How do you like it?" I said, "It's complex." He said, "Ah, you don't like it?" I said, "No, I find it really complex.

But simply to tell you that this cement is this bond that exists in our society, and that this culture must be held high and strong, and that there's no one person who has the exclusivity of culture. There is no definition of what culture is. Because one person's culture is not necessarily another's culture. And the richness of the European Union is precisely this cultural diversity; it's precisely coming from different horizons, having different languages, having different cultures. And most of the time, when I'm always told about European capitals - and I'm in one, Strasbourg, or Brussels-Luxembourg - I say, "No! We have three administrative capitals, but we have 27 European capitals." Each capital has its own European capital, with its own tradition, its own culture, its own language, and let's stop trying to feed the arguments of those who are precisely trying to make people understand that everything is taken away from their capital to give this European capital *everything that represents* and in fact, what you like too.

So, Mr. Chairman, I'm sorry, I was told I had 5 minutes, I spoke for 15, but that's okay. I told you, I've been waiting 25 years to finally be able to speak before this Assembly.

The Luxembourg Presidency, I'm going to come... What does that mean, 46? Mr Ambassador, would you like me to say something? [What did I say? Just now, the European Union was 27 again; 46 is for here, but 27 for my place. What's going on... Well, it disturbs me every time. *[Laughter]*

What's happening, Mr President, is that we're going to have a meeting in Luxembourg. Over the next few weeks, I'm going to make contact, because the advantage of a small country is to have links with one another. So I'm going to call my Kosovar colleagues, my Serbian colleagues too. I'm also going to talk to my Azeri and

Armenian colleagues. I'm also planning to go to Ukraine, and I think it would also be important to go to Georgia, or even Moldova. The day only has 24 hours and the week only has seven days, but to see how we can really also have this dialogue with each other.

I believe in dialogue. I believe in assemblies, whether ministerial, diplomatic or parliamentary. Exchange, respect, listening. And let's not forget, as I told you today, on this day 80 years ago, that it was men and women who were the executioners of other men and women. They're not machines: they're people. It's people who pushed buttons, it's people who moved people. This is human beings at their most cruel. And at the time, we told ourselves we'd never do it again.

It's up to us to be responsible, to perhaps not always be popular in our measures, because from time to time nationalism is more successful than diplomacy and solidarity, but today we may be strong, tomorrow you may also be the weak, and at home too.

Thank you for your kind words.

**Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly):** Oh, so many things I could say.

Dear Xavier, you blew up my mind, but you know I have to stay neutral, I cannot express myself, but on my capacity I can assure you that we can fulfil your earliest dream. When we will create this association of alumni of this Assembly and friends, you will be an honorary member, I can reassure you.

So, thank you so much for your communication.

And now we will hear the questions on behalf of the 5 political groups.

Please, dear colleagues, limit your intervention to 30 seconds.

And I will start with Mr Stefan SCHENNACH on behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group.

Stefan.

**Mr Stefan SCHENNACH (Austria, SOC, Spokesperson for the group):** Dear Minister,

"Dear Xavier" [Spoken in German].

We've known each other for a long time in the Union for the Mediterranean.

You mentioned Serbia and Kosovo, this Assembly did its job. We prepared for Kosovo to be a member of this Assembly, but we are waiting for the Committee of Ministers to follow this step.

I heard that you invited Serbia and Kosovo to Luxembourg. I hope that the Committee of Ministers set up the next step so we can welcome Kosovo to our Assembly.

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

Dear Minister,

The procedure is that you reply after the representatives of the political groups. Then I will group all questions in three, and you will answer once three colleagues have already asked questions.

So, now you will reply to Mr Stefan SCHENNACH if you wish, and I will go on.

**Mr Xavier BETTEL (Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Luxembourg, Chair of the Committee of Ministers):** I have to tell you that it is a huge honour to see my friend, Mr Stefan SCHENNACH, again. We spoke together about dialogue, we sat together in the Euro-Mediterranean Parliament, where the North and the South discuss – not always easy – but we discuss.

About Kosovo, you have to know that for the moment, they have the election campaign. To be very frank with you, they don't move. Actually, when the question is about Serbian authorities, which was a precondition, in the right direction. So, I will make contact again with Mr Kurti to see exactly what he wants. I don't think I will get a formal statement before the elections to be very frank, again.

If there are faults, we will do everything we can to do it. If not, I know that in the Council of Ministers, I won't be able to get further. To be very frank.

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

On behalf of Group of the European People's Party Ms Ingjerd Schie SCHOU.

I'll come back; maybe, she is not in the room. But let's go to the European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance with Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO.

**Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA, Spokesperson for the group):** Thank you very much. My question is about Ukraine. Now the most important process of the last decades is starting: the peace negotiations and attempt to establish peace after the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

It's great that the US President Trump is leading the effort, but my question is: Where is Europe? Where is the European role? Will Europe be at the table or will Europe be on the table being divided like it was 80 years ago in Yalta?

We don't need a new Yalta, we need new Strasbourg. And we need Europe to be self-reliant. So what is the role of the Council of Ministers and our organization Council of Europe in general and security guarantees for Ukraine? That means security guarantees for Europe.

Your opinion on this and what will be done. Thank you.

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

Mister Minister, you have the floor.

**Mr Xavier BETTEL (Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Luxembourg, Chair of the Committee of Ministers):** So now, as a former Prime Minister, just again as this personal opinion, the fact was we had the discussion since some years now about the accession of Ukraine to NATO. As you know that for some of the countries the precondition of having a ceasefire would be one not to have Article 5 directly applying for Ukraine.

There is discussion and now I take my cap of Minister of Foreign affairs in the Council about also peace projects, peace and armies in Europe, as European Union, is on the agenda, which could be a guarantee for the moment.

I can tell you that the only way we could support a peace project with Ukraine, about Ukraine, is with Ukraine. If there is a will from President Trump to have discussions about peace in Ukraine without Ukraine, I think this would be not acceptable, nor for European countries, neither for Ukraine. You said it yourself, they fight for us. And so if there is a peace plan, there should be peace plan that is not about Ukraine, only with Ukraine and not without Ukraine. And that is a risk for the moment.

**Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly):** Minister, on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, Ms Sabina ČUDIĆ.

**Ms Sabina ČUDIĆ (Bosnia and Herzegovina, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group):** Dear Minister, thank you for your lively and inspiring introduction.

In one of your interviews, you said you want to say "Europe first". While considering that we are in the Council of Europe, we want to say, well, for us, "Council of Europe first".

In light of emboldened, we would say, extremist forces around the world and growing challenges to human rights, do you think that the Council of Europe should use this opportunity to take an even stauncher stand and more deliberate stand towards the perpetrators of those violations and use increasingly its mechanisms not only for dialogue but also for punishment of those member states who fail to meet the standards of the Council of Europe?

Thank you.

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

Dear Minister, would you like to respond?

**Mr Xavier BETTEL (Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Luxembourg, Chair of the Committee of Ministers):** I think that punishment should be the last.

Sometimes we have the feeling we start to punish and then we start to discuss, which is for me, personally, an error. We should always have goals. And if goals are not fulfilled, then to say that we cannot accept this and this and this. But very often we punish and then we start to discuss.

You spoke about Europe first. I just said that when I have the replica to America first, should be Europe first. But my replica of America first is not America alone. Because Trump's elector, when they voted for Trump, a lot of them voted for him because they were against inflation, because the prices rose in the United States. And believe me, if the answer to all the questions is new taxes for imports, at the end of the day, America will have big inflation. And this is, I think, not what Donald Trump wants either.

So we need discussions, we need negotiations. The fact is we just as the European Union, very often, and I see it as a member of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, we are 27 around the table. I wouldn't say we have 27 positions and we have 46 here, but very often we have blocks of four or five different positions. And at the end of the day, foreign affairs, it's just when we have unanimity.

And so at the end of the day, what comes out is the strict minimum. And that's the problem of the European Union. In the States for the moment or in other countries when one man is saying something, the world listens. And in Europe, we try to get. But I prefer, I'm honest, I prefer to have long discussions and trying to find compromises than having one person deciding everything for all the others.

But I think the answer of President Trump, is that we should see where we can find agreements. But believe me, America first doesn't mean America alone, because America wouldn't be able also to stay alone. We are partners and I still believe that we will be partners. We had already four years of Donald Trump's presidency. We were able to continue to work on and you see that Europe is still functioning.

So I'm confident that we will be able to. The only thing is, what I'm more afraid of is when I spoke before about social media, if now the regulations will be no regulations for social media, everybody can say what they want because as soon as you criticise, you criticise that you should have at least fact checks and you have the controls of what you publish and everything. If this has to be banished, then we have problems because we don't play with the same rules. And this will be very, very complicated. But at the end of the day, we should maybe also think that the question of educating people about what they read is something that should be more critical.

And I saw it during the Covid-19 period when I got threats from people who, because they saw on Instagram, on Facebook, that we were injecting poison into them, etc. I don't want to open the debate here about vaccines or not but I just to tell you that we see the influence of social media and I think this is something we should also, as Europe, regulate, but we should also innovate. Why are we also, as the European continent, always regulating? Because the other innovates. I would be proud once when we would innovate and some others would have to regulate, but for the moment, it's just the opposite.

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

On behalf of Group of the Unified European Left, Ms Laura CASTEL.

Laura.

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

Dear Minister, this year we celebrate the 75th anniversary of the European Convention of Human Rights. And two years ago, our member states committed to the Reykjavík Declaration, the Reykjavík Principles. But we are facing dark times littered by arrogance, oppression, cynicism instead of diplomacy, tolerance, dialogue, respect for rule of law and human rights.

We, the Council of Europe, are witnessing how apparent democracies, such as Trump's administration, are threatening the international law and multilateralism.

So taking into account the fragile balance of diplomacy, is the Committee of Ministers worried about these threats? How is the Committee of Ministers preparing for these challenges?

Thank you, Minister.

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

Mister Minister?

**Mr Xavier BETTEL (Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Luxembourg, Chair of the Committee of Ministers):** This has not been discussed in the Committee of Ministers yet, but just to tell you one anecdote, but this is also now, as a Luxembourger.

Trump's first administrations want to put taxes on electrical cars from Europe. And at that time we had the president of the commission called Jean-Claude Juncker, he went there and he was able to discuss with Trump and to avoid taxes for European products. So, I believe we should always have dialogue on the agenda and sanction and reaction should not be out of the agenda, but should not be our priorities.

For the moment, there have been threats. I met also some Danish colleagues. I know that they don't know what is going to happen next. But for the moment there have been no decisions taken directly there where they have the information that would be directly harming us.

But we need to react.

We cannot... with Donald TRUMP personally, we will have to find the right balance between being strong enough not to be eaten, but to be ready to discuss not to be killed.

So you can choose.

But I prefer that he's hungry enough and that he doesn't want to eat us before killing us.

And the fact is, I'm sure through negotiation and discussions that we will be able to find solutions.

But it is a fact that he has been elected democratically. We won't change the things. We won't change the things. And I prefer to see how we can work together instead of just how we can fight against each other.

**Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly):** Europe is too hard to die or to be beaten, dear Xavier. But it's okay (laughs). I said Europe is too hard to die or to be beaten.

Now, on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party Group, Mr Pablo HISPÁN, the leader of the group.

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

In the last 75 years, this institution has seen a lot of different initiatives that have grown in Europe.

The last one, a couple of years ago, was launched by the French President: the European Political Community.

How do you see the coexistence between this institution and this new political initiative?

Thank you.

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

**Mr Xavier BETTEL (Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Luxembourg, Chair of the Committee of Ministers):** I'm a firm believer in discussion.

I was among those who thought that the meeting of the political community, where we have meetings twice a year, was something very important. And it was at one of these meetings, I remember, where we were able to try to organise a meeting between the Serbs and the Kosovars, between the Azeris and the Armenians. And I think it's very important to have every possible platform for dialogue.

I don't think that contradicts you. On the contrary, it's once parliamentarians and once governments get together. It's true that... for the confusion of people, people - don't take this the wrong way - but if you ask your populations now if they know the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, I think many will tell you about the European Parliament. If you talk about the European Community, many people will tell you about the Council of Ministers of Europe. So people get confused from time to time, and it's up to us to demonstrate the usefulness of such assemblies, such unions, such meetings where, around the table, we can discuss points that we can't tackle in other assemblies. For me, any platform for dialogue is important; and I remember, at the beginning, there were certain countries that weren't invited to the first meeting we had, and I was one of those who lobbied so that really, all countries, whether small, medium-sized or larger, could take part in this meeting to be able to have a discussion.

We share the same continent and, as we saw with Covid-19 and see again today with all the problems we have, problems are not national these days. Most of the time, the problems are cross-border, and the answers are not national, but common.

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

Now it's Ms Bisera KOSTADINOVSKA-STOJCHEVSKA's turn.

**Ms Bisera KOSTADINOVSKA-STOJCHEVSKA (North Macedonia, SOC):** Thank you.

Respected Minister,

The Democracy Reporting International report for 2024 for the EU member states says that the same failed to completely implement the verdicts from both the European Court of Human Rights and the EU Court of Justice. We have Romania and Bulgaria on top of the list and the oldest verdict to be implemented dates back to 2006. This seriously undermines democracy and the rule of law in the EU and casts a doubt and increases the Euroscepticism among our nation.

Do you have any mechanisms to influence national governments or maybe even a certain plan that will justify the existence of the European Court of Human Rights and that its decisions are not reached formally but their implementation is also expected and obligatory?

**Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly):** Thank you, Madam Bisera KOSTADINOVSKA-STOJCHEVSKA.

Mr Armen GEVORGYAN is next.

**Mr Armen GEVORGYAN (Armenia, EC/DA):** Mister Minister, two weeks ago a show trial of the Armenian leadership of Nagorno-Karabakh began in Baku. This is not only a disregard for international law, a bleeding tragedy for the Armenian people, but also a humiliation for the Council of Europe, whose member ignores the basic values of the organisation and remains unpunished.

The regime in Baku is isolating its own people from civilisation, building a medieval despotic regime rooted in national extremism.

There can be no fair trial for Armenians in a state where there is no justice even for its own citizens.

How can the Committee of Ministers stop this shameful process?

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

Ms Hajnalka JUHÁSZ is next.

**Ms Hajnalka JUHÁSZ (Hungary, EC/DA):** Thank you.

Dear Mister Minister,

It is a shameful and horrendous development that eight decades after the Holocaust we still need to encounter antisemitism.

For this very reason, it is commendable that the Presidency of Luxembourg chooses living together, fostering mutual respect and understanding in our diverse societies as one of its chair priorities.

My question, Mister Minister, is as follows. How would you feel [about] the work and the content of the resolutions of the Parliamentary Assembly on combating antisemitism as an added value during your presidency?

Thank you very much indeed.

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

**Mr Xavier BETTEL (Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Luxembourg, Chair of the Committee of Ministers):** Mister President,

The first question concerns judgments: indeed, this is one of the priorities of the Luxembourg Presidency of the Committee of Ministers, really, to underline the importance of the European Court of Human Rights and the duty of member states to be able to execute them in full.

As ministers, we have a unique role to play under Article 46 of the Convention, precisely in supervising the execution of European Court judgments. And we mustn't forget that the Convention is also our foundation. Roughly 80% of all judgments, after evaluation, handed down by the Court have also been enforced. This high rate is also due to our system, which has been one of the best in the world for the protection of human rights.

However, we must not rest on our laurels. There are still *challenges* ahead, especially in terms of quantity. I believe that the 2023 report clearly states that the enforcement of judgments is becoming increasingly complex, involving more than just one party in the decision. That's why the number of pending cases is high, but remains stable. But the challenge, as you can imagine, is enormous. And that's why we've also called for really swift and complete execution of the Court's judgments by all member states, and for this too to be a priority for the Council of Europe.

On the second question, people detained and tried in Azerbaijan must enjoy all the rights guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights, including the right to a fair trial. And if they consider that their rights are not being respected, they can always lodge an application with the European Court of Human Rights. Fortunately, I think we have that, even if it's often after the fact, once a judgment has been handed down; in that case, it's important to stress this point.

The third thing concerning anti-Semitism, as I said earlier, we held an exchange of views in November 2024 with Ms Deborah Lipstadt, who is also the US Ambassador for the fight against anti-Semitism, and on 9 April this year, the Grand Duke of Luxembourg will open the exhibition on stigmatisation, discrimination and also persecution in our societies at the Palais de l'Europe, and this exhibition will be on view from 9 to 18 April.

As I said earlier, I can only say to you once again in a personal capacity: intolerance is something that exists. Intolerance you can overcome it. But intolerance starts from time to time in a nucleus, a very small nucleus, which is the family, which are the friends, which are at the sports club, which are the entourage. It's not always in front of a crowd, but it starts small. And if you really want to beat intolerance, you have to beat it at that level too. If someone has a racist, xenophobic, anti-Semitic or homophobic joke, tell them it's not funny. No need to force yourself, no need to say nothing. If someone makes a racist remark, if someone criticises, tell them you don't agree with them. If you don't react yourself in the family nucleus, in the work nucleus, in the friends nucleus... do you validate them? So be intolerant of intolerance, but it doesn't start with speeches here, it often starts at home.

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

Mr Damien COTTIER is next.

**Mr Damien COTTIER (Switzerland, ALDE):** Thank you, Mister Chairman of the Committee of Ministers, dear Xavier.

First of all, I'd like to thank Luxembourg, because as you said and reminded us, it's a country that has always been very committed to multilateralism and to the values defended in this Assembly, and I'd like to thank you.

This may be the first time you've spoken before this Assembly, but I sincerely hope it won't be the last, because it does us a great deal of good to hear someone speak to us with as much verve and as much feeling, as frankly as you did just now.

I wanted to ask you a question about one of the mechanisms that is important to this Assembly, which is also one of the priorities of the Reykjavík Summit: the compensation mechanism for Ukraine and the special tribunal for the crime of aggression, which this Assembly has been pushing hard for. Where do we stand in international discussions at this level?

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

Olena Khomenko, you have the floor.

**Ms Olena KHOMENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA):** Dear Mister Bettel,

Thank you very much for your leadership and for promoting Ukraine's cause during Luxembourg's presidency.

As a follow up rapporteur on the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe's resolution on the situation of children of Ukraine, I'm closing following the progress of the recommendations of PACE.

I would like to ask you about the Committee of Ministers' view on the recommendation to create a joint registry of individuals involved in the deportation, forcible transfer or unjustifiable delay in repatriation of Ukrainian children and in the lawful adoption of the establishment of guardianship over Ukrainian children.

In the recent Committees of Ministers' reply to the recommendations, it was stated that it is difficult in the Committee of Ministers' view to determine what practical added value the proposed action would bring. How do you assess this reply?

Thank you very much.

**Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly):** Mr Peter FRICK is next.

**Mr Peter FRICK (Liechtenstein, ALDE):** Dear Mister Chairman,

Dear colleagues,

On behalf of the Liechtenstein delegation, I would like to thank Foreign Minister Xavier BETTEL, for his remarks.

In the context of Luxembourg's priority to involve young people in democratic processes at all levels, we consider the conference taking place in March to be valuable - especially at this time when social media and artificial intelligence are fundamental and controversial topics.

With the inauguration of the new American president and the change of direction already initiated by Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk, what do you think will be the biggest additional challenges for our youth in dealing with social media?

**Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly):** Mister Minister, would you like to respond now?

**Mr Xavier BETTEL (Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Luxembourg, Chair of the Committee of Ministers):** Thank you, Mister Chairman.

As far as the Register of Damage and compensation mechanisms are concerned, I think this was one of the great successes of the Reykjavík meeting.

The Council of Europe continues to take part in intense consultations within the Core Group and to provide concrete support in terms of expertise and technique, and the participants in this group also welcomed and appreciated the Council of Europe's willingness to support the creation, if necessary, and operation of a

Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine, and to serve as a platform for subsequent diplomatic efforts once the tribunal model has been adopted; the thirteenth meeting of the Core Group will take place in early February 2025. That's the answer I'm going to give you.

But now, on a personal level, I hope we'll all have the same position. If, one day, someone imposes a peace treaty on us where impunity and non-reparation of damage is part of the conditions, I hope that we will have the same courage, in that case, as today, to say that this is not acceptable.

My second question concerns Ukrainian children. This is of course a priority for the Committee of Ministers and for this Presidency, and is the subject of in-depth discussions within the Committee of Ministers, both as regards children living in alternative care structures in Council of Europe member states, and those who have been illegally transferred by Russian forces and deported to the Russian Federation or to Belarus or to areas temporarily controlled by the Russian Federation. All crimes committed against children must be independently investigated, and the perpetrators must not go unpunished, in accordance with the general principles of international law.

I would also point out that, in addition to the consultation group on Ukrainian children, the Council of Europe has joined the international coalition for the return of Ukrainian children, with which the Organisation was already co-operating closely. And last year, the Secretary General appointed a focal point for Ukrainian children, and more precisely also announced the creation of a post of special envoy for Ukrainian children, whose mission will be precisely to co-ordinate actions aimed at guaranteeing their fundamental rights, both in Ukraine and in our other member states.

Regarding the last question from our colleague, Mr Peter FRICK, the digital age has profoundly redefined the democratic participation of young people, and there are many dangers threatening the serene dissemination of information. That's what I said earlier. Whether it's hate speech, misinformation, cyberstalking or manipulation by algorithms, these are all different issues. The first thing, for example, is hate speech. But the *like*, as I said earlier, is quick to give, but the like is not to condemn; *like*, on the contrary, is to support the person who has made a post. Because today, there's almost a race for *likes*; and I know what I'm talking about, all of us politicians, if we get a lot of *likes*, it's because it's appreciated, whereas we're not aware of the harm that a post can do to someone else, especially among young people where there are occasional posts that are made without the person's consent. So that's the first thing, which is hate.

Cyber-bullying also exists. Then there's hate speech and misinformation. And let me turn to disinformation and manipulation, because they're very similar. Today, we live in a society, dear elected representatives, where most young people are not prepared to pay the 200 or 300 euros a year to subscribe to a newspaper. Because they have on the Internet, on Instagram, on Facebook, on *www.*, *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, *La Tribune*, *Click*, *Bild*, *Le Soir*, *Le Monde*, and so on. And I'm going to quote *Le Wort* because if I don't, people will tell me I didn't quote a Luxembourg newspaper. And most of the information is free. Today, professional journalism is something that is almost undue for some people.

So, if we want to combat misinformation, there is first of all a question of education, as I said earlier, which is very important for me, but we also need to help professional journalism in the countries. Because if we don't invest in professional journalism, we also leave the door wide open to those who take advantage of it to broadcast whatever they want. So we have invested in promoting democratic participation and renewing young people's engagement in the process, locally, nationally and internationally - and not a week ago, on 22 January, at an informal meeting of the Committee of Ministers dedicated to youth participation in the digital age organised by our presidency. It's clear that we need to educate young people in digital literacy and artificial intelligence, and help them develop a critical and analytical approach to the information they receive.

These issues are regularly addressed at the high-level conference that our Presidency is organising in partnership with the University of Luxembourg from 19 to 21 March. I would also like to thank the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, Mr Michael O'Flaherty, for his statement on fact-checking.

I mentioned young people: but believe me, in my experience as a former Prime Minister, it's not just young people who need to be educated about social media. I have my mother who uses them too (*laughs*).

**Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly):** So, dear colleagues, it is time now to thank Mr Xavier BETTEL for his address to our Assembly and for the answers given to the questions.

Dear Xavier, thank you so much for being with us today.

We now come to the joint debate on the Progress Report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee.

With this, we will consider the report from the ad hoc Committee on Observation of the Parliamentary Elections in Georgia. We shall also consider the report from the Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe on Progress of the Assembly's Monitoring Procedure.

The Progress Report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee will be presented by Mr HISPÁN.

The second report is titled "Observation of the parliamentary elections in Georgia" presented by Mr Iulian BULAI.

The final report on "The progress of the Assembly's monitoring procedure" will be presented by Ms Zanda KALNIŅA-LUKAŠEVICA.

I call Mr Pablo HISPÁN, rapporteur, to present the first report.

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

You have the floor.

### **Joint debate: Progress report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee / Observation of the parliamentary elections in Georgia (26 October 2024) / The progress of the Assembly's monitoring procedure (January-December 2024)**

**Mr Pablo HISPÁN (Spain, EPP/CD, Rapporteur):** Okay, thank you. Mister President.

I'm honoured to present to you the latest progress report on the activities of the Bureau of the Parliamentary Assembly. This report covers the period from the Bureau's meeting on 4 October 2024 through to the pre-session meeting on 21 January 2025. It includes key decisions made by the Bureau during its meetings in Strasbourg, Luxembourg and Paris, as well as glimpses into upcoming plans and priorities. I will on purpose limit my intervention to only a few issues.

For obvious reasons, the Russian Federation's war on aggression against Ukraine remained our top priority. Our Assembly remains unwavering in its support for Ukraine, advocating for a just resolution and return of occupied territories and the restoration of peace through, as president Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS poignantly noted, as we marked the 1,000th day of Russian invasion, the countless lives lost will never return.

At the Third Parliamentary Summit of the International Crimea Platform in Riga, president Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS emphasised the importance of international Register of Damage as the vital tool in holding perpetrators accountable. Relying on the Assembly's position, he called for the establishment of an ad hoc tribunal specifically for the crime of aggression, urging the 42 countries and organisations involved to act swiftly.

In Luxembourg, the Standing Committee discussed its serious concern about Georgia, where the government's suspension of EU accession negotiations goes against early promise. The Assembly condemned the violent repression of protests and misuse of Russian laws against demonstrators. We continue to urge Georgia to uphold European values and commit to reforms that strengthen democracy, not to weaken it and to respect the human rights of all. In response to these concerns, the Assembly has tried to engage in a constructive dialogue with Georgia, its authorities, democratic forces and civil society, especially the youth. The recent visit by the Assembly's monitoring co-rapporteur has provided a vital opportunity to continue this conversation and see how the situation has worsened in an unacceptable situation.

The issue will be discussed further by our Assembly during this part-session and Mr Iulian BULAI will present in a few minutes of the report on the observation's high contested elections.

The issue of foreign interference also took centre stage with a discussion on this threat to democracy. We must balance efforts to counter foreign influence while respecting human rights and democratic principles.

Another key issue discussed was the growing repression in Azerbaijan, particularly the imprisonment of journalists and activists. The situation remains concerning. We must continue to hold Azerbaijan accountable for its human rights violations.

Let me continue outlining some of the Bureau's significant decisions.

In terms of election observations, several reports have been reviewed, including those from elections in Moldova, Bulgaria and Georgia. The Bureau has actively engaged in ensuring that the Parliamentary Assembly's observations remain transparent and credible, with an ad hoc committee formed to oversee key elections.

Our Assembly will also observe the upcoming elections in Kosovo in February 2025.

A particularly notable decision in this period is the approval of the creation of the Human Rights in Motion Award, which will be awarded quarterly in cooperation with four international documentary film festivals. This new prize is designed to honour filmmakers who create works that advance human rights and democratic values, a testament to the Assembly's commitment to using culture and the arts as tools for social change.

The Bureau has also taken steps to ensure the functioning of the Assembly remains smooth, approving the schedules of meetings for the upcoming year and addressing key institutional matters. Looking ahead, the Bureau has set the stage for several important meetings, including the European Conference of Presidents of Parliament in March 2025, and has authorised various international visits and fact finding missions in support of ongoing reports and resolutions. Notably, an ad hoc committee will soon travel to New York to participate in the Commission of the Status of Women, and there are also plans for Committee meetings in Latvia and Norway later in the year.

In conclusion, these reports illustrate the ongoing efforts of the Bureau and of the Standing Committee to ensure that the Parliamentary Assembly remains active and responsive to the pressing issues of our time. From election observation to human rights advocacy, from gender equality initiatives to the planning of major international conferences, the Bureau is laying the groundwork for continued progress in 2025.

Thank you for your attention.

**Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much, Mister Hispán.

Now I call Mr Iulian BULAI, who is rapporteur on the report on Observation of the parliamentary elections in Georgia.

You have 5 minutes, Iulian.

**Mr Iulian BULAI (Romania, ALDE, Rapporteur):** Dear President, dear colleagues,

The report on the observation of the 26 October parliamentary elections, which I have the honour to present, was published last November. As such, it does not address the broader post-election political landscape but provides an assessment of the electoral process.

Our delegation consisted of 31 PACE members, eminent representatives of the Venice Commission and our monitoring rapporteurs, Ms Edite ESTRELA and Mr Claude KERN.

We co-operated with the delegations of both the OSCE and NATO Parliamentary Assemblies, with the European Parliament, and also with ODIHR.

These elections were the first held under a full proportional system, with a large-scale use of electronic devices ensuring voter registration, vote counting, and the transmission of preliminary results. Georgian Dream secured 53.93% of the votes, and four coalitions overcame the 5% threshold to enter parliament.

What did we observe during these elections? The elections were marked by high polarisation of the political and media landscape, as well as deep antagonism between the ruling party and the opposition on the one hand and the ruling party and the then President Ms Zourabichvili on the other hand.

We were concerned about hate speech against civil society and dissenting opinions triggered by the controversial Law on Transparency and Foreign Influence.

There were cases of vote-buying and double voting, especially in rural areas, and breach of voter secrecy noted in almost a quarter of polling stations visited by international observers.

The presence of cameras of the ruling party Georgian Dream in the polling stations and intimidating people in front of polling stations tracking and possibly controlling voters triggered a feeling of "Big Brother is watching you" in Georgia.

Overall, our delegation was concerned about the widespread climate of pressure and party-organised intimidation, before and during the elections, especially in rural areas, and breach of voter secrecy.

There were also questions about the impartiality and independence of certain state agencies responsible for implementing the law, which contributed to an uneven playing field.

We concluded that these issues had significantly undermined the fairness of the electoral process and trust in its outcome and had challenged the legitimacy of its results.

There were serious doubts about whether the electoral environment provided the necessary conditions for a fair election, free from intimidation and undue pressure. In addition, credible and consistent reports from domestic observers following the elections further raised concerns about the correctness of the election results, that means whether the election results truly reflected the will of the Georgian voters.

In response, the opposition and civil society expressed deep mistrust in both the results and the institutions and has, since then, continuously challenged the outcome of these elections.

Since the publication of our report, we have witnessed a series of alarming developments. Georgian Dream has broken its electoral promise of a swift European integration. The massive demonstrations have been marred by violence and police brutality against protesters as well as opposition and civil personalities and journalists, and their arrest for simply expressing their dissent against the shifting European course. The presidential election took place without true competition, and its legitimacy is also questioned by society.

Regrettably, these events only serve to confirm and reinforce the concerns raised by our delegation. The conclusions and recommendations in our report are now more relevant and urgent than ever. They are crucial for paving the way toward future elections in which voters can genuinely express themselves freely. We strongly urge the Georgian authorities to give these recommendations serious consideration, and that includes to revise the electoral framework following Venice Commission recommendations, improve voter secrecy and restore credibility and impartiality of the Central election commission and Anti-Corruption Bureau, highly politicised, by the way; ensure swift, credible, and transparent investigations into all allegations of vote manipulation; and restore a climate conducive to genuinely competitive electoral campaigns, repeal the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, and to refrain from any rhetoric or actions that would undermine pluralistic democracy and risk violating the country's obligations as a Council of Europe member State.

Dear President, dear all,

My mandate ended on the election day. I've observed in the pre-electoral period, within the election day, and the coming days right after the election. But my mandate stopped then and this is the report out of that observation mission. Now, the situation of the post electoral environment in Georgia is very much worrying. The country goes towards an autocracy and is not going better after this election. And I want to use this opportunity to make two calls.

First of them is to release those 53 political prisoners now being held in Georgia, out of which one is now under a hunger strike for 16 days. A journalist.

Secondly, everything that we have experienced since November and since the publication of this report is putting a big question mark on the legitimacy of this election, then paving the way of this Assembly and of this House to encourage the Georgian authorities in dialogue with all the forces to create and to work for new elections in Georgia in order to have a greater legitimacy of the governance and a parliament that is functioning with also its MPs being present here. Both power, but also opposition.

Thank you.

**Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you, Mister Bulai.

And now I will call Ms Zanda KALNIŅA-LUKAŠEVICA, who is a rapporteur on the progress of the Assembly's monitoring procedure to present the third report.

You have 7 minutes and 3 minutes at the end to reply to the debate. The floor is yours.

**Ms Zanda KALNIŅA-LUKAŠEVICA (Latvia, EPP/CD, Rapporteur):** Thank you, Mister Chair. Dear colleagues,

Indeed, I have the honour and pleasure to present on behalf of the Monitoring Committee the report and draft resolution on the progress of the monitoring procedure over the last year.

It has been an intense year during which many important developments that have affected the work of the Committee took place. This week, our attention is dedicated to the events in Georgia. Indeed, the situation has deteriorated dramatically over the last year.

The Monitoring Committee was following the situation closely, and the rapporteurs visited the country twice during the year. The Committee submitted the report on the urgent procedure during the October session.

This morning, the Assembly challenged the mandates of the Georgian delegation. The Monitoring Committee will prepare its opinion over the next 24 hours and present a report and resolution to the plenary this Wednesday.

Last year, January's session actually started with the challenge of the credentials of the Azeri parliamentary delegation and the Monitoring Committee prepared the report where it highlighted serious concerns about the further deterioration of the state of emergency of democracy, the rule of law and human rights in the country.

In the report, the Committee stressed the unfortunate situation regarding continuing crackdown on political and civil society as well as deplored the authorities' refusal to co-operate with the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment.

The Assembly, following the Committee's recommendation, did not ratify the credentials of Azerbaijan. Unfortunately, the situation has not improved since then and instead, the Azeri authorities decided to declare the 76 members of this Assembly *personae non gratae*.

The next very important issue is the Republic of Moldova. Last year, elections took place at a crucial stage for the country's democratic consolidation and Euro integration process. In the pre-electoral period, we have seen Russia's unprecedented interference in Moldova's domestic politics and electoral process. Russia used a wide range of methods, including a large-scale voter fraud scheme, disinformation campaigns, training disruptive agents, and economic coercion. Moldova's authorities withstood the pressure, nevertheless. It shows all the dangers awaiting the electoral process in the upcoming parliamentary elections this year.

Bulgaria has reached unquestionable progress in terms of the crucial reforms and legislative framework in the areas of the judiciary, the fight against corruption, the media, the human rights of minorities and combating hate speech and violence against women. Last year, the Monitoring Committee adopted a draft resolution proposing the termination of post-monitoring dialogue. However, the debate had to be postponed because of the political dynamics and unexpected early parliamentary actions in 2024 again, but the last year has also been marked by many positive developments and progress in the fulfilment of obligations in many of the countries monitored by the Committee.

The Assembly followed the Committee's recommendation to terminate the full monitoring in respect of Albania and engage the country in the post-monitoring dialogue. The country should be congratulated on the progress made, and we expect that the positive path will continue.

Dear colleagues, the Committee's annual report focuses on key developments in the accession obligations and commitments of the countries for which the Committee is preparing a report. It highlights progress made concerns that remain or have emerged and provides relevant and timely recommendations. I would like to stress that all the information I have provided on the various countries, all the findings and concerns are based on the conclusions of their respective rapporteurs following their visits and reports of the Committee, as well as the discussions within the Committee.

Let me make this very clear. I have not included any information in this section that was not raised by the rapporteurs and discussed in the Committee. In addition, I have consulted each section with the relevant rapporteurs.

Dear colleagues, at present, 10 countries are undergoing a full monitoring procedure: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia–Herzegovina, Georgia, Hungary, the Republic of Moldova, Poland, Serbia, Türkiye, and Ukraine. Four countries are involved in the post-monitoring dialogue: Albania, Bulgaria, Montenegro, and Northern Macedonia. As well, last year, we had countries subject to periodic reporting: Greece, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Spain.

The Committee submitted to the Assembly four country reports during the reporting period on Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Georgia and adopted and declassified two information notes on two other countries: the Republic of Moldova and Türkiye. It organised a number of hearings and continued remarkable co-operation with the Venice Commission, which, at the request of the Committee, prepared nine opinions on legislative acts in the countries under the monitoring procedure in the last year.

I have to mention, however, that the rotation of rapporteurs and sometimes restricted availability of rapporteurs have an effect on the Committee's work. As a result, the preparation of several reports has been slowed down. We have to do our best to improve the situation.

Last year, the Committee continued its reflection on the possible ways to increase its efficiency and impact in line with the important role it plays in the follow-up to the Reykjavik Summit. To increase the impact of the monitoring procedure in the member states, I also propose to introduce a new practice of systematically translating monitoring resolutions and reports into the language of the country concerned.

Dear colleagues, I took with high responsibility my time chairing this important Committee during the first year of my mandate. I would like to thank all the members of the Committee and especially the rapporteurs for their co-operation and support.

I know this will be a very challenging year ahead of us. I am convinced that the Committee will work with the highest feeling of responsibility to safeguard our values and protect democracy.

Dear colleagues, I look forward to your comments on the Committee's activities during the debate. Thank you.

**Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much, Miss Kalniņa-Lukaševica.

And we'll now hear the speeches from the political groups.

And I remind the members that the speaking time is 2 minutes.

The first is Mr Frank SCHWABE.

You have the floor, Frank.

**Mr Frank SCHWABE (Germany, SOC, Spokesperson for the group):** Thank you very much, Mister President.

First of all, congratulations to President Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS for his re-election after one very successful year.

The world is in a very difficult and dangerous situation. I don't know where we will be in a few years. What I know is that there's a loss of trust in our organisation. In the Council of Europe. My impression is that many more people know our organisation. And we saw the figures the President presented to us. And I think this has to do with something that people are a little bit hopeless in parts of Europe and maybe the last hope is the Council of Europe, and the last hope at the end is the Parliamentary Assembly.

We could speak about a lot of countries mentioned and thank you for the rapporteurs, for the reports here. I just want to mention one country that is not presenting the credentials this time, which is Azerbaijan. We didn't speak about it. Maybe this was on purpose. I just want to say we have to speak about it because they should come as soon as possible. But their conditions – release political prisoners, follow the values and rules of this organisation.

We spoke about Georgia today. I hope they will not follow Azerbaijan very soon in the developments in the country. But it looks like they will. It looks like everything is going in the wrong direction.

And we heard Mr Iulian BULAI's report. Unfortunately, there were really systematically widespread manipulations in these elections and everything after the election is going in the wrong direction, so it's correct to challenge the credentials. And I want to say one word about Kosovo, because we here, with 82% majority, decide that this country should come on board this organisation. We give our opinion to the Committee of Ministers. You know, we are accused that we maybe exclude countries from this organisation. No, we want to invite new members and Kosovo is one of them. And we really ask the Committee of Ministers to give an answer to our opinion.

Thank you very much.

**Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much, Frank.

The next speaker is Mr Zsolt NÉMETH.

**Mr Zsolt NÉMETH (Hungary, EC/DA):** Thank you very much for the floor, Mister President.

I would like to congratulate the rapporteurs concerning Georgia.

Dear colleagues,

Yes, I think we need to talk about Azerbaijan as well. Last year we have experienced a decision which we are still following. I think a theoretical decision on our side is we need to consider very seriously if challenging the credentials is an appropriate instrument or not to divert into the right direction countries which we intend to divert.

I think it is a nuclear solution, and I believe that it is not in the interest of the Council of Europe to lose one country every year.

So, I would like to urge ourselves to find more sophisticated instruments to influence member states.

I don't think that challenging the credentials of Georgia is the right direction. I believe we need to maintain the communication with our member states. I don't have any doubt that Georgia is under very difficult geopolitical circumstances. They have not been living so close to Russia. We have our territory, 25% has not been occupied by the Russians. They don't have diplomatic relations. There still is an accusation against the Georgians that they are Putin's puppets.

Dear colleagues, I think we need to be a bit more understanding of geopolitical realities.

Secondly, concerning the 80th anniversary of the Auschwitz camp liberation, I would like to underline that now in the Middle East, the security of Israel should be the starting point, how we approach the questions.

I think throughout the week we will have the opportunity, and obviously also the question of antisemitism in Europe and the possibility to create appropriate conditions for Jewish life on the continent is our obligation.

Thank you very much for your attention.

**Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you, Zsolt. The next speaker is Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK. You have the floor.

**Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK (Ukraine, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group):** Thank you.

Dear colleagues,

We are in a very important moment in this Assembly. Many countries are watching us, many people are watching us. And I truly believe we cannot do business as usual. We, the organisation and the Parliamentary Assembly of the organisation that has human rights among its core values, cannot tolerate the gross violation of human rights in member states.

About Georgia, we did have a great speech and report from Mr Iulian BULAI and he mentioned that his mandate ended on election day. Just ask yourself truly, did the situation get better after the election day? No, it got worse. Should we react to that? What should we say to these people who are protesting right now on the streets? Do we legitimise the violation of their rights when they are being taken to prison or arbitrarily arrested or beaten on the street by unknown armed guys?

Yesterday, we had so-called elections in Belarus. Well, guess what, if Georgia loses the freedom of media and the opposition forces it can eventually turn to Belarus. So we should be firm on that.

Also, I would like to refer to Mr Xavier BETTEL's words about the situation with Ukraine and the aid to Ukraine that the peace form and that the peace negotiations should include the Ukrainian interest. Well, I want to add to that, it has to include the European interest, it is a war on the European continent and Europe has to be united on just peace for Ukraine.

Thank you so much.

**Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much, Yevheniia.

And the last speaker from the political groups is Mr Andrej HUNKO.

You have the floor.

**Mr Andrej HUNKO (Germany, UEL, Spokesperson for the group):** Thank you very much, Mister President, A lot has indeed happened in the last three months. We have had many controversial elections.

We have had elections in Georgia, and I will say something about that in a moment.

We also had an election in Romania, a presidential election that was cancelled by the Constitutional Court. As the Presidential Committee, we decided in December that there would be a statement from the Venice Commission, which is now also available online. I think this is very important, because the question is always - when something like this happens, when an election is annulled, or even when *credentials* are called into question - the question is always on what basis this happens. And the basis, at least in Romania, was very unclear in my view.

We had elections in Moldova, and I think there were problems there, too. We talk less about that today.

But the big issue we have here is how we deal with the elections in Georgia. I was also an election observer there, and I have observed many elections in Georgia. I have to say, the difference was not that great compared to the previous elections. There were irregularities there, too. We also named them, I also led an election observation mission, as Mr Iulian BULAI is doing now.

The difference is, or let me put it this way. We must not give the impression that, because we don't like the Georgian Dream politically, we then say we don't recognise this election, we question the *credentials*. In my opinion, that would damage the credibility of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. The ballot papers have been counted four times. All four counts resulted in 54%. So, I would ask you to be a little more careful.

I also agree with what Mr Zsolt NÉMETH said when it comes to such fundamental issues as the recognition of *credentials*. Otherwise, I'm afraid we'll end up in a dead end and have other countries. In the end we will destroy this Organisation.

Thank you very much,

**Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much, Andrej.

And we missed one speaker from the political groups from the Group of the European People's Party. It's Mr Tekke PANMAN. You have the floor.

**Mr Tekke PANMAN (Netherlands, EPP/CD):** Thank you.

Yeah, all of the three contributors.

Thank you very much for your status update. And I would like to express the support as a member of the EPP family, regarding the following topics.

1st: the Russian federation's war of aggression against Ukraine:

Good that the Assembly remains unwavering in its support for Ukraine. In a time of many uncertainties with information that does not always seem objective or reliable causing polarisation in our society, there is a lot going on. We have to make sure that national boundaries, world order, the sovereignty of countries, and the democratic constitutional state and processes are respected. This also in order to ensure that human rights are not further challenged.

2nd: Concerning the Georgia elections you mentioned:

Regarding the election last October and the suspension of EU accession renegotiations, it's good that the Assembly condemns the repression of protests, election intimidation, and the disregard for a fully open, transparent, and fair democratic process with equal opportunities for all participants in this process.

And as you mentioned, that also counts for Azerbaijan.

Thank you, Chairman.

**Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much, Mister Panman.

Now we'll go to the Speakers list.

The first here is Lord David BLENCATHRA.

You have the floor, please, David.

Just wait, David, we need to have you on speakers.

**Lord David BLENCATHRA (United Kingdom, EC/DA):** Thank you, Mister Chairman. Sorry about that; technology defeated me.

I am speaking to you today as the Chair of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) Network of Election Observers.

Over the past year, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe carried out 10 pre-election and election observation missions in four member states: North Macedonia, Bulgaria, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia, with 64 Assembly members from 28 countries taking part. Our longstanding partnership with the Venice Commission once again proved invaluable.

Our election observation missions last year revealed rising political polarisation. Democratic standards are declining in parts of Europe, with new legal and logistical barriers that obstruct transparent voting and monitoring. Foreign malign interference, from campaign financing to cyberattacks, adds another layer of complexity, while new voting technologies introduce both efficiencies and vulnerabilities.

To meet those evolving challenges, I believe we need to broaden the scope of our election observation. We shall extend election observation to any member state experiencing instability and not just those under monitoring.

Another crucial step is to address out-of-country voting and develop clear guidelines enabling Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe delegations to observe those procedures and to ensure that out-of-country votes are cast and counted with the same integrity of those at home.

In addition, longer pre-electoral observation period could play a pivotal role in detecting early signs of manipulation or interference.

That, I suggest, has to be a top priority, to assess irregularities in the run-up to polling day which impact the freeness and fairness of the election. We have detailed objective criteria to assess all behaviour on polling day. As we have all seen on many occasions, polling day operations may have been free and fair. But in the run-up to the election, the government or president may have imprisoned their opponents, taken over the media, commandeered government resources, amended election law to disadvantage opponents, and packed the Central Election Committee with their supporters. We need to take that into account as well as polling day behaviour.

Of course, Mister Chairman, all of this requires resources. We need to guarantee adequate human and financial resources so that our brilliant Parliamentary Assembly teams on the ground have the training and the tools to do our observation duties.

Mister Chairman, I don't have the time to explain more about the report we are presenting here today. I would commend colleagues to read it. If you don't want to read the whole thing, read paragraphs 54 to 62, which set out our challenges and our conclusions.

Thank you, Sir.

**Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much, Lord Blencathra.

The next speaker is Mr Didier MARIE. You have the floor.

**Mr Didier MARIE (France, SOC):** Mister Chairman,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Having taken part in the observation of the October elections in Georgia, I fully share the conclusions of our colleague Mr Iulian BULAI on the legitimacy of the results.

By manipulating information, multiplying pressure and distorting the results, the current government's sole objective was to retain power illegitimately, under Russian influence, in order to prolong its attempt to distance Georgia from the European Union, even though it had just been granted candidate country status.

Thousands of Georgians, in favour of EU membership and the democratic values of the Council of Europe, demonstrate daily despite threats, arrests, and pre-trial detentions.

Instead of seeking a solution to this major crisis, the authorities are plunging into increasingly violent repression.

In these conditions, it seems to me particularly difficult, on Wednesday, to validate the credentials of the Georgian delegation for this part-session. We need to send a message of firmness.

At the same time, I don't think we should cut our ties. We must continue the dialogue and call on our Georgian colleagues to reason, to put pressure on their government to re-establish the rule of law and launch an inclusive process with the opposition and civil society to create an environment conducive to the holding of new, free and undistorted elections as soon as possible.

Once these conditions have been met, we can work together to ensure that Georgians live in a full democracy.

Thank you for your attention.

**Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much.

And the next speaker is Mr Marko PAVIĆ. You have the floor. We still need your microphone to work.

**Mr Marko PAVIĆ (Croatia, EPP/CD):** Thank you very much. Yes, it's better.

First, I would like to congratulate our President. And I would also like to thank Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS who reminded us today about the 80th anniversary of Auschwitz – the Croatian prime minister was with world leaders today in Auschwitz.

It was a pleasure to participate in Luxembourg on the standing committee and meet Her Royal Highness, the Grand Duchess of Luxembourg. It was also a pleasure to exchange views with the ministers and to have a debate on security and raising democratic standards in member states.

I know that Georgia is the focus today, but we showed in Group of the European People's Party by standing our view today but I would like to concentrate on the Western Balkan countries and give them support on their European path. Following the meeting of Ursula von der Leyen that was initiated by Croatia in March last year, Prime Minister Rutte and Prime Minister Plenkovic, Bosnia and Herzegovina opened negotiations on EU sessions. We support the European path of Western Balkan countries and the rule of all reports are connected with the reports of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

There was, in December last year, an EU–Western Balkans high-level summit with support of from the highest level of leaders. And I'm glad the European Union established €6 billion worth of instruments called Growth Plan for Western Balkans, which we also use for reforms.

Finally, we must not forget our Ukrainian friends and their fight for democracy. President Zelenskyy was in Dubrovnik last autumn for the Southeast Europe summit. And we are grateful to host Prime Minister Schmeichel this Wednesday in Croatia, who will address the Croatian parliament.

So let's work together for peace and democracy. Thank you very much.

**Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you so much.

And now I call Mr Claude KERN to the floor.

You have the floor, Mister Kern.

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

Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank our colleague Mr Iulian BULAI for his report as head of our delegation during the election observation mission to Georgia, in which I took part last October.

I had already expressed my views in June on a draft resolution on the challenges to democracy in Georgia. In my capacity as co-rapporteur on Georgia for the Monitoring Committee, I expressed my concern at the adoption of the law on foreign agents, which is incompatible with European standards of democracy and human rights. This concern, which I had also expressed with regard to the campaign of intimidation against demonstrators and journalists, has only been reinforced by what I was able to see and observe during the election observation mission, and again just recently, from 14 to 16 January.

These parliamentary elections, the first since Georgia's accession to the EU, served as a *de facto* referendum on Georgia's democratic trajectory and its alignment with the outside world. The results mark a further halt in Georgia's path towards the European *acquis* even though its accession process has been frozen since June 2024, following the adoption of the law on transparency in matters of foreign influence. Our colleague's report also shows that the law had a proven negative effect on the conduct of the elections.

I regret the current move away from democratic conventions, which could go even further. In its campaign rhetoric, the Georgian Dream threatened to ban opposition parties in the event of victory. If such a measure were implemented, it would once again greatly compromise Georgia's commitment to respecting its duties as a member of the Council of Europe.

The Council of Europe must therefore intensify political dialogue with the Georgian authorities, in the hope of returning the country to the path of democratisation and strengthening the rule of law.

Thank you for your attention.

**Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much, Claude.

And now I call Ms Edite ESTRELA to the floor.

**Ms Edite ESTRELA (Portugal, SOC):** Thank you, Mister President,

The recent elections in Georgia, which should have been a reaffirmation of the Georgian people trust in democratic processes, have instead cast a shadow over the country's future.

These elections are the first elections since Georgia gained its independence from the Soviet Union that take place under a fully proportional election system.

Most opposition parties, as well as those in the ruling majority, presented joint election lists to avoid losing the votes of parties that do not pass the 5% threshold.

The elections took place in a contest of deep political polarisation in a completely divided society, as well as widespread social discontent due to the adoption of controversial legislation.

Reports from independent observers, civil society, and opposition parties in Georgia have raised serious questions about the integrity of these elections. Allegations of electoral manipulation, voter intimidation, and irregularities have shaken public trust in the democratic process. However, some PACE teams reported that they did not observe any irregularities on election day. In my opinion the election day was well organised, which does not mean that all the electoral process took place in accordance with the democratic parameters defended by our Assembly.

I urge this Assembly to take a clear stance and to send a message to the Georgian government, the opposition, and most importantly, the Georgian people: that we stand with those who fight for democracy, for the rule of law, and for fundamental rights.

The people of Georgia deserve a peaceful and democratic future. We must remain committed to supporting Georgia on its path to deepening democracy and joining the European Union.

Thank you very much.

**Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much, Edite.

Now I call for Mr Jan Filip LIBICKI to take the floor. Maybe Mr Jan Filip LIBICKI is not present.

Then we go to the next one, who is...

**Mr Jan Filip LIBICKI (Poland, EPP/CD):** Excuse me. I am Mr Jan Filip LIBICKI from Poland. Is it the time for me or not?

**Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Yes, it is. It is.

**Mr Jan Filip LIBICKI (Poland, EPP/CD):** Okay. Thank you very much, Mister President. Dear colleagues, First of all, I would like to thank all the participants of this debate about Georgia, this very important debate. Why is this debate so important?

First, because we have to fulfil the role for which, among other things, our Assembly was established. Our discussion clearly indicates a significant violation of the impartiality of the electoral process in Georgia on 26 October last year. Our Assembly was established especially for looking at electoral processes in the member states if this electoral process is justified and transparent.

These are the most serious accusations that we can bring against the organiser of the electoral process in democratic countries, and they justify these accusations about the Georgian government.

But our discussion is important also for another reason.

Mr Lulian BULAI talks, among other things, about the deep social division in Georgia. Where does the division come from for citizens of all countries that emerge from communism? That is obvious. This division comes from differences of opinion or which direction citizens want their country to go. Should it move towards the countries represented in this Assembly, towards the countries whose authorities are democratically elected and values such as the rule of law which are the essence of this Assembly are respected all, let's put it clearly, towards the countries that are in Russia's zone of influence where democracy and the rule of law are simply out of the question.

We saw this trend yesterday in Belarus and in 2004 in Ukraine. We should support all the wishes of the Georgian people. We must support...we must and should support it.

Thank you very much.

**Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much, Mister Libicki.

And the next speaker is Ms Tea TSULUKIANI. I hope I was right there.

You have the floor.

**Ms Tea TSULUKIANI (Georgia, NR):** Thank you, Mister Chairman.

There can be no fraud when, between our party, which won the election, and the party that came second, there is a difference of 800 000 votes. Such fraud does not exist in nature.

There can be no fraud when voting is carried out using electronic machines, a technology which, incidentally, was introduced in Georgia by Western companies. An audit was recently carried out by a Western company, not a Russian one, which confirmed that no fraud was possible using these technologies. If there are irregularities, if there have been irregularities, they have been investigated in eight different cases.

So, what's going on? What happens is that it's the election results that don't please, that you don't like. Since 2022, we in Georgia – and I'm not the only one – have had the impression that Georgia must be punished at all costs, even though 20% of our territory continues to be occupied by Russia. We have to treat Georgia as pro-Russian at all costs. We have to push it down instead of talking to it and helping it.

Brussels already carried out such a punishment in 2022, when they closed the door on us by opening it wide to Ukraine, on the grounds that there was a war going on there. No other official reason has been given to date. We've never had accession negotiations with the EU, so we couldn't close the door on something that didn't exist. So, when some people say that we have suspended negotiations, it's not true. These negotiations never existed.

As for the opposition, four opposition parties have won seats with us that they refuse to take. They recently submitted massive resignation requests to Parliament, which should have been approved in December. But we postponed the vote until February in the hope that they would start working and thereby fill the vacancies in our delegation in this hemicycle. In the end, by the way, the opposition parties refuse their mandate, but they have already received and cashed in on the funding proportional to the mandate received, about two million.

Allow me to thank the Secretary General for his visit to Georgia. It was a breath of fresh air for us and a promising visit. All we ask of you is dialogue.

There is no debate at the moment, unfortunately.

Thank you, Mister Chairman.

**Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you so much.

And now the next speaker is Mr Armen GEVORGYAN.

You have the floor, please.

**Mr Armen GEVORGYAN (Armenia, EC/DA):** It is already evident that the signing of the so-called peace treaty does not align with Ilham Aliyev's motivations. His motivations are far from peaceful.

The foundation of Azerbaijan's post-Soviet period is rooted in an anti-Armenian paradigm.

In its confrontation with Armenians, the Azerbaijani dictatorships began the search for their own national identity.

National chauvinism and xenophobia remain defining drivers of the authoritarian Azerbaijan authorities actions even today.

Aliyev's believes they are fulfilling a historical mission to build an Azerbaijani nation state.

The establishment of a ruling dynasty is an integral part of this process.

A formal peace with Armenia would hinder this state-building effort by removing a key factor for internal mobilisation behind the dictatorship.

Dynastic ambitions drive Aliyev and his Turkic allies towards new expansionist plan, including the so called Zangezur corridor for Armenia, as well as the main narrative about western Azerbaijan, as the basis for these expansion needs.

This Assembly shall very clearly realise that these are very concrete strategic plans for the further annexation of Armenian territories.

The multi-billion dollar purchases of offensive weapons continue unabated.

Why persist in militarising the country if Mr Aliyev's claims to have restored territorial integrity? All of this points to the Turkic coalition's intent to constantly undermine regional stability and security.

Dear colleagues, representatives of many European countries are gladly buying Azeri natural gas and instil in Azerbaijan a sense of impunity and thereby encourage its dismissive tone in relations with the West.

I believe it's time for clear realisation of the illusionary nature of any peace process with Ilham Aliyev, unless the international community enforces a fair and lasting peace in the region.

Thank you.

**Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much. Now the next and, unfortunately, last speaker will be Mr Christophe BRICO.

You have the floor.

**Mr Christophe BRICO (Monaco, EPP/CD):** Thank you, Mister Chairman.

First of all, thank you to the three rapporteurs. I'm going to speak more on the subject of Georgia, but we do have three rapporteurs who have presented their work and, as we often say, "criticism is easy but art is difficult". So thank you.

Now, concerning Georgia, since I was also one of the observers, I heard some of our colleagues talking about the situation in Belarus - or Belarus, I don't know what the official name is here - but it's very different because in the case of Georgia, first of all, it would be a caricature not to say that, without doubt, the Georgians themselves are divided. Clearly so. There's a real division within the Georgian people as to the trajectory, and it's a diametrically opposed trajectory.

But the Georgian Dream party has been a little more subtle, using the weapons of democracy against democracy and the weapons of law against fair play. I'm referring, of course, to the law on transparency and foreign influence, which was used to put pressure on NGOs, particularly those in charge of observing elections, but also to the change in the way electoral commissions operate, which is an unmentionable but very important element, ensuring that commissions always arbitrate fairly easily in the desired direction. Of course, as has been said, we all saw this on election day: groups of people lobbying outside polling stations, cameras installed inside polling stations and procedures that were put in place in a bit of a hurry when the observers arrived, where it was clear that not all of them were necessarily followed.

The fact remains that, over the last sixty days - I think - of demonstrations, a series of laws has been introduced that reprimand demonstrators more and more severely, that make it easier to dismiss civil servants and that allow political appointments to be made. This is the hegemonic exercise of a party that, admittedly, won the elections, but in a way that casts doubt on the way in which these elections were won. And the question we must ask is: does this result reflect the diversity of opinion of the Georgian people? Personally, I doubt it.

**Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much, Mister Birco.

I'm sorry that I now have to interrupt the list of speakers.

The speeches of members on the Speakers list who have been present during the debate but have not been able to speak may give their speech to the Table Office for publication in the official report. I remind colleagues that the typewritten text can be submitted electronically, if possible, no later than 4 hours after the list of speakers is interrupted.

I now call on Mr Pablo HISPÁN to reply.

You have three minutes, Pablo.

**Mr Pablo HISPÁN (Spain, EPP/CD, Rapporteur)\*:** Thank you very much indeed. Thank you very much for all of those comments. Thank you very much indeed for all of your speeches.

Obviously, one of the most complex issues that we have had to deal with recently is Georgia. It's something that has been going on for some time. We were already looking at it last year. We realised this morning of course that this is something which is set to occupy us for some time to come. So, the challenges are what they are.

We have got the issue of Ukraine as well. There again, the Bureau of the Assembly has of course taken note of recent developments and all of the different factors of course that we have mentioned in the course of this debate. All of these are likely to concern the Bureau for some time to come.

**Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much, Mister Pablo Hispán.

Then it's Ms Zanda KALNIŅA-LUKAŠEVICA, who has 3 minutes also. Zanda.

**Ms Zanda KALNIŅA-LUKAŠEVICA (Latvia, EPP/CD, Rapporteur):** Thank you, Mister President.

First of all, I would like to thank all the speakers who contributed to this very valuable debate.

Dear colleagues, this is the first time the monitoring progress report is debated in this format of the joint debate, together with the progress report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee and the election observation report.

I think we all agree that it proved to be relevant and logic, and indeed, very relevant to the present challenges we are facing.

The fairness of the elections in each country constitutes a basic starting point for the functioning of democratic institutions which are assessed then in the framework of the monitoring procedure, with the ultimate decision on the possible follow-up proposed by the Bureau to the Assembly.

So, the case of Georgia well illustrates this procedure. The election observation mission established by the Bureau presented the conclusions on the elections, taking into account not only the voting day, but the whole process in the run-up to the elections, which had then be followed by the Monitoring Committee.

I would like to use this opportunity to thank also Mr Iulian BULAI and the whole election observation team for the incredible work.

The most recent visit carried out by the monitoring rapporteurs, two weeks ago, contributed to the further evaluation of the situation and perspectives for the political dialogue, and now, as a result of the challenges of the credentials of the Georgian delegation, the Monitoring Committee will prepare a report also based on the conclusions of the election observation mission and monitoring rapporteur's visit.

So, we will debate that debate here on Wednesday afternoon.

But that shows how each and every piece of the work is interconnected and leads from one step to another.

So, dear colleagues, the past year, once again, I think clearly demonstrated the usefulness of the parliamentary monitoring procedures, which also luckily has contributed to the progress in some countries.

In some countries we see a worsening of the situation, but we can also see improvements in some countries.

Therefore, I would like to take this opportunity once again to thank all members of the Monitoring Committee, and in particular the rapporteurs, for their valuable work. Thank you for your support in this work.

Thank you.

**Mr Tekke PANMAN (Netherlands, EPP/CD): *Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2***

Dear distinguished colleagues,

I had the opportunity to take part in a mission to observe the parliamentary elections in Georgia on 26th October 2024 on behalf of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). We formed a joint international elections observation team, of long and short term observers, together with members of this Assembly and other international organisations. All elections observers were well-prepared, including a crash course on the political situation of the country Georgia, its electoral system and the historical context.

I can report that this was a important moment for Georgia's democratic future. These elections represented a critical juncture in the country's path towards European integration.

The campaign environment was highly polarised, with the ruling Georgian Dream party framing the election as a choice between "peace and war," while the opposition presented it as a decision between the "democratic West and authoritarian Russia".

On the day of the elections, my observation team visited 14 polling stations in the western part of Georgia.

Although we found no procedure or process irregularities, there was certainly an atmosphere of intimidation. We observed instances of pressure on voters, misuse of administrative resources, and widespread disinformation campaigns. So, challenges remain in ensuring a fully free and fair electoral environment, making further reform essential.

Together with other developments in Georgia, we can experience it as a democratic backsliding what is very concerning.

I wish Georgia all ambition and strength to implement necessary reforms on its way to a future with becoming more integrated in Europe. Let's call on all parties to respect the will of the Georgian people, keep the dialogue open both within Georgia and in our assemble and work together to address the identified shortcomings.

It was an honor and privilege to serve as an election observer in Georgia and share my experience with you today.

Thank you.

**Ms Biljana PANTIĆ PILJA (Serbia, EPP/CD):** *Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2*

Distinguished colleagues, the Republic of Serbia will continue its work towards reaching the Council of Europe's high standards and values. In the upcoming period, we are going to fulfil all the Venice Commission's recommendations and we are actively engaged in implementing the remaining recommendations from the report in order to reach high democratic standards.

Here, I must point out my disagreement with certain unilateral assessments made in the report regarding the conduct of the latest elections and current situation in Serbia. Unfortunately, we have not had the second rapporteur for a long time now and the Monitoring Committee's rapporteur has not visited Serbia in a long time, and the latest report and resolution were adopted in January 2012. This is probably the reason why there are some wrong and unilateral assessments in the report, having in mind that information is obtained indirectly, through unverified and illegitimate channels. Hopefully, we will soon have the visit by the Monitoring Committee's rapporteur to Serbia in its full capacity and the new resolution will finally provide the recommendation for Serbia to transition to post-monitoring dialogue.

What I must oppose in the resolution before us is the fact that it contains references to Opinion 302, which I have spoken about in numerous debates, listing the reasons why I believe this Opinion to be detrimental and bad for our Organisation. Mr. Schwabe mentioned Kosovo and Metohija, but he forget to mention that the so-called Kosovo did not fulfill any off three conditions, especially community of Serbian municipalities, yet. Thank you.

**Ms Anna-Kristiina MIKKONEN (Finland, SOC):** *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in French.*

**Mr Harald WEYEL (Germany, EC/DA):** *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in German.*

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

Dear colleagues,

Today we are discussing the situation in Georgia. Elections in Georgia are not just a political process, but an important step toward its democratic future.

Ukrainians went through the Revolution of Dignity when millions of people rose to defend their rights. Georgian people have also shown their determination. Georgians have participated in protest actions: during the Rose Revolution in 2003, as well in recent years and months, as the country continues its struggle for democratic values.

Ukraine deeply supports Georgia's aspirations for democracy and freedom. But we also strongly condemn any attempts to falsify the results of the will of Georgians and the use of force against peaceful protesters.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine has repeatedly expressed its concern about the elections in Georgia. In particular, it has emphasized that the escalation of the internal political situation in Georgia is the result of numerous violations during the parliamentary elections. All violations recorded by international observers must be investigated, and those responsible should be held accountable.

We have a common enemy with Georgia — the Russian Federation. Russia has constantly interfered in the internal affairs of our countries and violated international law. Russia annexed Crimea, invaded Donbas, and later launched a full-scale aggression against Ukraine. Russia violated Georgia's territorial integrity by annexing Abkhazia and South Ossetia. For decades, Russia has been breaching the fundamental principles of international law and continues to do so today.

As a citizen of Ukraine, I am convinced that both Ukraine and Georgia have the right to be part of the European Union. We aspire to European values, and to see our countries become part of the great family of democratic and free nations. This aspiration unites us, and I believe that together we can achieve this goal.

Both our countries deserve peace, freedom, and prosperity, and both our nations have the right to freely choose their destiny without external threats.

However, I would also emphasize the necessity of holding Russia accountable for its aggression and violations of international law. Russia's imperialistic aggression and interference into the affairs of sovereign states must have real consequences — sanctions and isolation from the civilized world.

Thank you for your attention.

**Ms Lise CHRISTOFFERSEN (Norway, SOC):** *Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2*

Mister President, dear colleagues.

I would like to start with thanking our rapporteur for this annual report on the progress of the Assembly's monitoring procedure. Unfortunately, the report demonstrates how democratic values and human rights are under great pressure, even in many of our Council of Europe's member states.

As co-rapporteur for Azerbaijan, I am especially worried about the negative development in that specific country. During last October session, the Assembly held a current affairs debate, showing our concerns about the deteriorating situation of human rights, rule of law and democracy in Azerbaijan. Since then, the authorities have continuously neglected our worries. On the contrary, the crackdown on political and civil activists, media representatives and other government critics continues to increase.

On 16 January, Sunna Ævarsdóttir and I published a press release expressing our deep concern at the sentencing of Bakhtiar Hajiyev. One and half a week ago, Mr. Hajiyev was sentenced to 10 years' of imprisonment under arbitrary charges of hooliganism and contempt of court, later extended to include accusations of financial crime. No doubt, these charges are fabricated and follow a troubled pattern of arbitrary arrests and detentions, as well as ill-treatment and torture of government critics.

Unfortunately, despite the protests from this assembly, the list of victims of this government brutality is growing. I could also mention Mr. Gubad Ibadoghlu, a prominent anti-corruption activist, now under house arrest, denied of necessary vital medical treatment. The list contains a winner of our Vaclav Havel Prize, as well as one of the shortlisted candidates for the 2024 prize.

Amnesty International, as well as other international recognized human rights organizations estimate that approximately 300 people remain in pre-trial detention or are imprisoned on politically motivated charges. Confronted with these unacceptable violations of human rights, the authorities only continue to confront our values and refuse to cooperate with the Council of Europe bodies, such as this assembly and the CPT. They don't even care about judgments from the European Court of Human Rights.

This unacceptable behavior needs to come to an end. I urge this assembly, the Secretary General and the Committee of Ministers to try to establish a dialogue with Azerbaijan before it is too late.

**Ms Natalia DAVIDOVICI (Republic of Moldova, EPP/CD):** *Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2*

Thank you, Mister President.

I would also like to thank the monitoring mission for the work done and the conclusions drawn.

For over three years, Russia and its proxies have been stepping up their aggressive efforts to undermine Moldova.

As Mrs. Kalniņa-Lukaševica already noted in her report, the Kremlin's interference in Moldova's presidential election was unprecedented. Investigations revealed a vote-buying scheme involving 10% of voters, with 39 million dollars being funneled via a sanctioned Russian bank.

Moscow's tactics extended to diaspora voting disruptions, involving false bomb threats at polling stations abroad. Additionally, rampant disinformation, sabotage, and cyberattacks on public services were used to destabilise Moldova's electoral environment. Law enforcement estimates that Russia invested at least 100 million dollars in this effort to interfere with the election.

Despite such interference, Moldovans chose Maia Sandu and, with a narrow margin, supported the referendum on EU accession. Without the large-scale interference, the pro-European mandate would likely have been even stronger. Therefore, we must make even greater efforts to consolidate our democracy. Addressing Russian influence begins with a rapid overhaul of Moldova's judiciary. Justice reform demands urgent and bold solutions—moving decisively beyond the slow peacetime pace.

While Russian efforts to influence the reform process not only persist but escalate, they have not altered Moldova's course. This resilience, however, will be tested again and at a much bigger scale during parliamentary elections this year.

And Russia has already begun preparing for them. Part of its plan is the energy crisis it provoked on the left bank of the Nistru River. Three hundred thousand people – hostages of the Russian regime – became bargaining chips in the hybrid war against Moldova. And they learned the hard way how exactly “Russia does not abandon its own people” (Россия своих не бросает). In the middle of winter, Putin left them without gas, electricity and heating, only to raise electricity prices in the main part of Moldova, sow chaos and cause discontent among people on both banks.

The Kremlin's goal is to generate a political crisis, change the pro-European government and consolidate the military presence on the left bank of the Nistru River. But its plans will not succeed. This winter must become the last time when Moscow can blackmail us with energy.

Moldova is stepping up its resilience efforts and relies on partners to stand with us. Our country is now at the frontline of the fight for democracy, but we know we aren't alone. Together, we will win. Thank you.

**Mr Toshko YORDANOV (Bulgaria, EC/DA): *Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2***

Mister President, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to start by congratulating our rapporteur, Ms Zanda Kalnina, for the report presented today.

I would like to focus on point 5.4 of the draft resolution. We strongly support the recommendation to the political forces of North Macedonia to finally make changes to the constitution in order to start the EU accession process. This amendment should include Bulgarians in the Constitution. It is important to note that the resolution correctly points out the need for more democratic reforms for the rule of law and human rights in the country.

There are many cases of discrimination, hate speech and violence against Bulgarians in North Macedonia, which is absolutely unacceptable.

Regarding point 117 of the Memorandum, I must note that the reason for the delay in the start of EU accession negotiations is not some historical disputes with Bulgaria, but the refusal of the North Macedonian government to amend its constitution, as required by the EU. They propose that this should only be done after Bulgaria approves North Macedonia's EU membership. This is absolutely impossible! We insist on full respect for the rights of Bulgarians in North Macedonia now, not at some point in the future.

Let me be clear: Bulgaria will not discuss the already agreed framework for North Macedonia's accession to the EU.

Our position has been, remains and will never change.

Pacta sunt servanda, dear North Macedonia!

**Mr Clement SHOPOV (Bulgaria, NR): *Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2***

Mister Chairman, Madam Chairperson,

I am astounded by the Committee's report on the parliamentary elections in Georgia, held on 26th October of last year. What confounded me was the association between the adoption of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence and election results. I am layperson in these matters. I do not see the correlation between foreign funded civil society groups and social change, the correlation between foreign funded independent media and the formation of public opinion, and the correlation between foreign funded dissenting voices and coloured revolutions.

Unfortunately, there was not an ad hoc committee constituted to observe the parliamentary elections in France because it would be interesting to see if the report would have denounced the French Law on Foreign Influence. Would the case be “One rule for me, another for thee.”?

The committee has an issue with these elections. And the issue is, that the Georgians did not allow foreign meddling in their elections. The committee does not care how fair the elections were, no. If they did, then the observatory report on the Bulgarian elections would have used much stronger language in regards to elections fraud because in Bulgaria there was widespread vote buying. However, since the majority that won the elections is servile to the lords in The West, there were no issues with the elections.

I want to clearly state that the direction in which Europe is heading in regards to election meddling is extremely dangerous. As the world order is changing, we are seeing the last whims of a dying political elite. An elite that is openly stating, that they have pressured the Romanian Constitutional Court to annul the country's presidential elections, following the first-round victory of candidate Calin Georgescu. And that "The EU has mechanisms to nullify a potential election victory of Alternative for Germany." This elite is saying, when democracy is in our favour we accept it, when it is not, we discredit it and label it "democratic backsliding".

Lastly, I want to declare full support to the ruling party in Georgia, Georgian Dream. I congratulate them on their election results, the adoption of the Law on Foreign Influence and the abolishment of the gender quota law. And I denounce the western attempts to meddle in their election results through the consequently attempted coloured revolution in which many paid provocateurs engaged in, having been flown in from foreign countries.

**Ms Denitsa SACHEVA (Bulgaria, EPP/CD): *Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2***

Mister President,

Distinguished colleagues,

Ms Zanda Kalnina has presented before us today an excellent report.

I would like to express my admiration for her profound work which has contributed a lot to the strengthening of the Democracy of the European Continent.

First of all, I am grateful indeed for the high appreciation of the efficient organisation of the last parliamentary elections in Bulgaria.

The recommendation to overcome the absence of political breakthrough in the political impasse and to put an end of the long-lasting political crisis in Bulgaria was fulfilled.

Bulgaria now has a Government and a clear parliamentary majority. It was achieved through a cycle of negotiations, avoiding the partisan divisions and approximating the different political views around a common agenda for reforms. The Government was formed by three political factions and was backed in the Parliament by a fourth one.

The amendments to the Electoral Code have been tabled and already adopted on the first reading in the Chamber. The second adoption in the Chamber is foreseen for February this year.

I dare to believe that the final assessment of the Monitoring Committee on the last developments in Bulgaria will meet the expectations of the Committee' members and it will be reflected by the Report on Bulgaria. In January this year we are celebrating 25th anniversary of the beginning of the Post-Monitoring Dialogue with the Assembly.

During this long period the views expressed by the Assembly on Bulgarian reforms had played a very positive role and were very supportive which we highly appreciate.

Now, when not only Bulgaria, but the whole Europe passes a period of political turbulences, we manage to find way to stabilise our political climate. Each of our political parties made its concession in order to achieve this goal.

Once again, thank you dear Zanda for your report and I am certainly convinced that we will continue to work together keeping the spirit of the Council of Europe and its high standards as a priority in our Agenda.

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

The elections in Georgia were taking place at a critical juncture in Georgia's European integration process. The big question was: Will the will of the people be respected?

I was one of the observers from PACE and we observed a strong level of political polarization. When we heard statement from the ruling party who called for banning the opposition, the level of political polarization became visible and concrete.

Legislation restricting freedom of expression and freedom of association, particularly before and during the elections, along with the negative impact of abolishing the gender quota law, have further contributed to the country's democratic backsliding.

Although the election were well organized and the electronic voting devices worked, the electoral environment was heavily influenced by party-based intimidation and voter control. There were several attempts from the ruling party to control the activity inside the polling stations.

There is all reason to doubt the correctness of the election results, namely whether the election results truly reflect the will of the voters. Additionally, serious doubts persist regarding whether the electoral environment provided the necessary conditions for a fair election, enabling voters to make an informed choice free from intimidation and undue pressure.

It's not a human right to be a member of the European Council – member states must show that they respect The European Council's standards and values.

There are many reasons to speak out and not recognize the election in Georgia and the Assembly must react accordingly.

**Ms Nadejda IORDANOVA (Bulgaria, NR):** *Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2*

Honourable chair, distinguished colleagues,

As a representative of one of the countries engaged in a post-monitoring dialogue, I will support the resolution on Progress of the Assembly's monitoring procedure (January – December 2024) and welcome the Assembly's commitment to assist us in fulfilling our membership obligations.

In regards to the latest developments in Bulgaria, just 10 days ago the Bulgarian parliament elected the 3rd regular government for the past 3 years. Despite the opposition stance of the political force I represent, I hope the cycle of successive snap elections has been broken.

I note paragraph 5.2 of the draft Resolution. I do agree that amendments to the election rules in Bulgaria are needed. They should be focused on making the election process more transparent and fair, generating trust and better political representation. In the last snap elections in Bulgaria we had 39 % voter turnout, which is too far below the average. We do need a system which is more conducive to stable government but such could not be achieved by imposing unproportionate barriers or formal obstacles before political representation. All and any legislative changes should be made after a wide public debate and on the basis of wide political consensus. Fostering popular trust in the election process will be the key for the stabilization of the political system in Bulgaria.

The last regular government has largely contributed to the substantial progress noted in the report from March 2024 - especially in the fields of judicial reform and the fight against high-level corruption and violence against women. There were some subsequent, temporary I hope, setbacks in legislation regarding human rights of minorities. However, I believe that as the political deadlock has come to an end, Bulgaria should demonstrate its readiness to deepen all relevant reforms and welcome the co-rapporteurs' planned visit as a step towards ending the post-monitoring dialogue.

**Ms Aurora FLORIDIA (Italy, SOC):** *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in Italian*

**Mr Givi MIKANADZE (Georgia, NR):** *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Thank you Mister President.

Today we are discussing the parliamentary elections held in October in Georgia. Four opposition parties who succeeded in having seats in the Georgian parliament refused to enter the Parliament and stating about the rigged elections, while 3 out of 4 parties have accepted state funding based on the results of the elections and receive in total monthly up to 120 thousand euros.

Let me highlight some important facts. The difference between the election winner and second runner opposition party is almost 43%, around 800 thousand votes. The opposition parties had in total in all precinct polling stations up to 25 thousand members versus 3 thousand members of the ruling party and another 25 thousand party representatives as observers. Almost all opposition commission members have signed summary protocols of the election results. Only 12 hundred complaints were filed, which is two times less compared to the previous parliamentary elections. Only 13 incidents of violence were documented by the Ombudsman across more than 3 thousand polling stations. The OSCE/ODIHR described these incidents as isolated cases.

Based on the final Report of the OSCE/ODIHR the parliamentary elections in Georgia were competitive and well-administered and provided voters with a wide array of choices, and political parties were able to campaign freely, while the legal framework in place offered adequate basis for democratic elections.

After five days from election the opposition started blaming on ballot-marking leakage and number of votes casted with one ID. According to the OSCE/ODIHR report, no cases of marking leakage were recorded in 94 percent of their observations. In only 6 percent of their observations they note instances of such leakage, however, the mission concluded that the leakage could only potentially compromise the secrecy of the vote. As for the votes cast with one ID the possibility of voter list duplication was ruled out both by the independent audit conducted by the American company and by the OSCE/ODIHR report.

Georgian Ombudsman stated that three months have passed since the elections and there are no basic evidences behind the statements on rigged elections.

No matter whether anyone likes it or dislikes, it is a principle of democracy to respect the choice of people, therefore, the will of 54% of Georgian voters who voted for the Georgian Dream deserves to be heard and respected.

Thank you!

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

Dear ladies and gentlemen, esteemed colleagues,

Once again, I call for an independent international mission to mediate dialogue between the authorities and opposition on electoral conditions, ensuring we do not face another election in Serbia with no real change. My party did not participate in the June 2 Belgrade elections due to electoral fraud, including voter manipulation, fake residences, blackmail, and media bias, all documented by the Council of Europe and the European Parliament.

Electoral fraud began on December 18, 2023, and continues. From January 1, 2024, to December 14, 2024, Serbia's president, Aleksandar Vučić, addressed the public 350 times via national TV, while the opposition had zero appearances. This trend continued in 2025.

On November 1, 2024, a canopy in Novi Sad collapsed, killing 15 people due to corruption. The president initially denied the canopy was reconstructed, only for it to be revealed later that it had been. Following this, protests were sparked in Novi Sad and Belgrade, with citizens honoring the victims for 15 minutes at 11:52, the time the canopy fell. A violent attack on students at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts by Serbian Progressive Party officials led to a major student protest.

Currently, nearly all universities in Serbia are blocked—Belgrade, Novi Sad, Kragujevac, Niš, Subotica—and the protest has expanded to high school students, teachers, theatre groups, farmers, and many citizens. Serbia is in crisis, and it is evident the ruling majority cannot control the situation. Immediate changes to the electoral process and fulfillment of all ODIHR recommendations are necessary, with EU mediators and experts involved.

Children and youth are being run over in the streets, and students are labeled foreign mercenaries. The rebellion has spread across the country, and Serbia is in urgent need of change. We also believe Kosovo's potential membership in the Council of Europe should be considered in line with UN Security Council resolutions, which makes it unacceptable for us.

Everything happening in Serbia is the direct result of electoral fraud, where the ruling party has used vote manipulation to secure its power, fostering corruption. In Serbia today, no one is safe. Everyone is living under the canopy.

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

Today's politics of the current parliamentary majority in the Republic of Serbia and the Government it supports, are centered around the most ambitious goal that has been set: that at the end of 2026, Serbia fulfills all the reforms necessary to become a full member of the European Union.

The fact that majority is dedicated to its proclaimed reform task, is shown by the results of which I mention only a few. During 2023, a new set of judicial laws was adopted. New members of the Council of Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media will be elected in few weeks; the new Law on Public Media Service is in the stage of public debate. The National Strategy for the fight against corruption for the period 2024-28 was adopted as well. In order to implement all the recommendations of the ODIHR regarding electoral conditions, the National Assembly formed a working group for the improvement of electoral conditions, which already came out with two draft versions, both positively evaluated by the ODIHR, of the amendments to the Law on the Unified Voter Register. Regarding the negotiations with the temporary institutions in Pristina, Belgrade enabled the free movement of vehicles with license plates issued by those temporary institutions, as well as the smooth process of charging electricity bills in four municipalities with an ethnic Serbian majority.

Unfortunately, instead of continuing planned reforms, today we are witnessing the paralysis of our parliament, due to the actions of the opposition parties. This example of the parliamentary opposition encouraged the radicalism of methods of other groups, so today we witness daily blockades not only of institutions, but also of a large part of the educational system, from faculties to primary schools, questioning even such a basic human right as the right to education.

It is obvious that parts of the text are just copied from earlier reports, and that most of the issues mentioned in the above paragraph are no longer current topics. Bearing this in mind, I think it would be advisable for the rapporteurs working on the new report to visit the Republic of Serbia, to talk with all relevant interlocutors and to refresh and adapt the text of their reports to the current state of affairs.

### **Vote: Progress report of the Bureau and the Standing Committee / Observation of the parliamentary elections in Georgia (26 October 2024) / The progress of the Assembly's monitoring procedure (January-December 2024)**

**Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Thank you very much, Zanda. Now the debate is closed.

The Bureau has proposed a number of references to committees for ratification by the Assembly. They are set out in Document 16096 and Addendum 1. And I want to know is there any objection to the proposed references to committees?

It doesn't seem to be the case. So the references are approved.

And I now propose that the other decisions in the progress report be ratified. Are there any objections to that?

There is not. So the progress report is approved.

The Monitoring Committee has presented a draft resolution to which seven amendments have been tabled and they will be taken in the order in which they appear in the compendium. And I remind you that the speeches on amendments are limited to 30 seconds.

Any amendment which has been rejected by the Committee seized for report by a two-thirds majority of the votes cast shall not be put to a vote in plenary and shall be declared as definitively rejected, unless 10 or more members of the Assembly object to that.

I understand that the Chairperson of the Committee wishes to propose to the Assembly that amendments 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7 and 6 to the draft resolution, which were rejected by the Committee with the two-thirds majority, be declared as rejected.

Is that so, Ms Zanda KALNIŅA-LUKAŠEVICA? You are nodding.

**Ms Zanda KALNIŅA-LUKAŠEVICA (Latvia, EPP/CD, Rapporteur):** All 7 amendments were rejected.

**Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly):** Okay. So if no one objects, I'll consider the amendments to be rejected.

Is there any objection?

There is an objection. But we need 10.

Are there any more than one objections? Please.

We need 10 persons, but there is only 1.

*Amendments 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 6 of the draft resolution are therefore rejected and will not be called.*

Thank you.

We will now proceed to vote on the draft resolution contained in Document [16086] [as amended]. A simple majority is required for that, so now you are going to vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

*The draft resolution is adopted.*

Thank you very much.

This was it for today.

The Assembly will hold its next public sitting tomorrow morning at 10.00am with the Agenda which was approved earlier today.

Thank you very much. The sitting is adjourned.