



Provisional edition

Tuesday 28 January 2025, afternoon

Official report of debates

Opening of Sitting num 4

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): The sitting is open.

Dear colleagues, I want to remind you that if you want to take the floor you have to insert your badge before taking the floor. As you begin your speech, please, press the microphone button once only. Wait for a couple of seconds and then start your intervention.

This morning we held a ballot to elect a judge to the European Court of Human Rights in respect of Andorra, Armenia, and Slovenia.

I have now the honour to announce the results.

Elections of a judge to the European Court of Human Rights for Andorra:

Total number of members voting: 167

Number of spoiled or blank ballot papers: 2

Number of valid notes: 165

Absolute majority of the votes cast: 83

The votes were cast as follows:

Ms Saïda EL BOUDOUHI: 11

Ms Canòlic MINGORANCE CAIRAT: 144

Ms Patricia QUILLACQ: 10

So, Ms Canòlic MINGORANCE CAIRAT, having obtained the majority of votes cast, is elected judge of the European Court of Human Rights for a term of office of 9 years, which shall commence no later than 3 months after her election.

Elections of a judge to the European Court of Human Rights for Armenia:

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.

Total number of members voting: 168

Number of spoiled or blank ballot papers: 1

Number of valid notes: 167

Absolute majority of the votes cast: 84

The votes were cast as follows:

Mr Vahe GRIGORYAN: 133

Ms Nora KARAPETYAN: 16

Ms Anna MARGARYAN: 18

Mr Vahe GRIGORYAN, having obtained the majority of votes cast, is elected judge of the European Court of Human Rights for a term of office of 9 years, which shall commence no later than 3 months after his election.

Elections of a judge to the European Court of Human Rights for Slovenia:

Total number of members voting: 171

Number of spoiled or blank ballot papers: 1

Number of valid notes: 170

Absolute majority of the votes cast: 86

The votes were cast as follows:

Mr Aleš GALIČ: 40

Ms Vasilka SANCIN: 125

Mr Boštjan CALAR: 5

So, Ms Vasilka SANCIN, having obtained the majority of votes cast, is elected judge of the European Court of Human Rights for a term of office of 9 years, which shall commence on 30 May 2025.

Dear colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

We shall start this afternoon sitting with a communication from the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Mr Alain Berset.

Thank you, Mister Secretary General, for your presentation at the beginning of the year of your vision of the future of the Council of Europe and what is at stake.

Dear Alain, you started your mandate about five months ago, and you immediately showed a strong leadership with ambition to raise the profile of the Council of Europe's work to fight the democratic backsliding through a European Action Plan and to build closer relations between the Council of Europe and other international organisations.

Your priority is also to continue supporting our member state Ukraine, through the Council of Europe action plans and support mechanisms in order to ensure accountability for Russia's illegal action against Ukraine, without which there can be no sustainable peace.

You visited the country in December and met with President ZELENSKY.

We are looking forward to hearing your address to inform us about the major points that you think are of importance for us to know as an Assembly.

Then we'll take the question of our members.

Now I just want to tell you that we have an hour for this item on this agenda.

Now, dear Secretary General, I'm honoured to give you the floor.

Address: Communication from the Secretary General of the Council of Europe

Mr Alain BERSET (Secretary General of the Council of Europe): Mister President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe,

Madam Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly,

Mister Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe,

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen of the Parliamentary Assembly,

This week, we commemorate eighty years since the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. And we remember the darkest years of our shared European history.

But this year also marks the seventy-fifth anniversary of the European Convention on Human Rights. And so we commemorate one of Europe's greatest achievements.

These moments are a special opportunity to look at ourselves in the mirror of history, to see ourselves as we are, to see what we have been, and to see what we have become. This is how we can, together, decide where we want to go.

So, this afternoon, as we hold this meeting, I'd like to begin, if I may, by talking about those who live on our continent. I'd also like to tell you about their realities and, above all, their expectations. And to do that, you have to leave Strasbourg. You have to leave Strasbourg, often. You have to go out into the field. In Yahidne, for example, a village two hours north of Kiev, not far from Chernihiv.

And you know, I'll never forget that little staircase leading down to the basement of the village school. It was here, in March 2022, that Russian soldiers crammed 300 inhabitants - children, women, pregnant women and the elderly - into a cellar for twenty-seven days.

Taking this small staircase is like entering another world. The people who were there and who accompanied me - I admired their courage to go back - told us about their ordeal. No electricity, of course; no heating; not even room to sit, 300 people in a tiny space. No air - so much so that many died of asphyxiation, left on the floor among the living. Their names cover the basement walls of this small school. The survivors tell us that, although it was cold outside, it was terribly hot inside.

Appalling: there's no other word for it. There are no other words, Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen, to describe the suffering endured by Ukrainians for three long years. And today, this week, as I reminded you of the commemorations we are holding, we can think back to Oradour-sur-Glane, Srebrenica and Yahidne. These are names that force us to take a hard look at ourselves. And, knowing our shared history, they are all reasons for our commitment to Ukraine, to supporting the Ukrainian people.

So yes, ladies and gentlemen,

Expectations are very high in Ukraine. We know that. Indeed, they are everywhere on our continent. The lack of progress, the inability to come together, is leading to a loss of confidence in institutions and, consequently, in those who represent them. Under these conditions, democracy as a whole can be called into question.

Meeting in Reykjavik in 2023, the heads of state and government of our member states spoke of democracy and reminded us that, and I quote: "democracy is the only way to ensure that every person can live in a peaceful, prosperous and free society". Yet the facts are clear: democracy is in retreat everywhere.

What's worrying are the reasons for this retreat, this decline: less room for civil society and open public debate; because opponents are muzzled; there are independent courts and media under pressure; there's a rise in populist rhetoric.

And it's exactly in this context that we can place a few facts.

This one, for example: a fifth of Britons under 45 think that the best system for running a country effectively is, and I quote: "a strong leader who doesn't have to worry about elections". A strong leader who doesn't have to worry about elections. This, of course, goes beyond the UK and Europe. It concerns us all. This sentiment concerns us all. It should challenge us and encourage us to act.

In this context, it may seem that it's the younger generation who are the most disillusioned. And we must ask ourselves what it means for the future of our continent to know that the younger generations have this type of reflection, feeling and thought. But before we judge, we must also remember that for many of them, youth has been marked by a series of events: the climate catastrophe; then there was the covid-19 pandemic, with massive consequences for the younger generations; and now, for nearly three years, Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine.

Looking beyond the last few years, we need to remember that, if we take almost a generation, the last twenty years have been marked by the profound consequences of the 2008 financial crisis, all the consequences of the 2008 financial crisis in terms of rising inequality and feelings of powerlessness. These years have been marked by rising inequality and populist rhetoric; by the search for scapegoats in a world that no longer seems to be running smoothly. And by the somewhat diffuse but present feeling that a democratic framework is clearly not enough to provide all the prospects for fulfilling the expectations we may have for ourselves, for our family, for our friends, for our social environment.

For these younger generations, those who have not lived through the period of optimism, almost naivety, that dominated the 1990s and 2000s, the multiple crises that have followed one another for almost a generation now have imposed themselves as their world of reference. And it is precisely in this context, in this context made difficult to read because of this multitude of crises and their consequences, that we must also face up to the impressive speed of development of new technologies, and in particular artificial intelligence.

In Davos, where I was a few days ago, last week, the Secretary General of the United Nations, António GUTERRES, described this development as uncontrolled. And if we look at the cyberattacks, the *deepfakes*, the disinformation campaigns, we can all see the extent of the threat to democracy.

And then, in this bumpy evolution, almost anything becomes possible. For example, to claim in an open debate that Hitler was a communist, in blatant defiance of history. Orwell would have called it doublethink. The affront is compounded by dangerous revisionism. All the more so as this rewriting of history coincides with our commemoration, as I said at the beginning, of the eightieth anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp.

I think we can all see, ladies and gentlemen of the Parliamentary Assembly, that the challenges we face are immense.

They are probably unprecedented in the shared history of our continent, probably in the last few decades. But at the same time, we are not left to our own devices: we have the tools, the means to respond to all this. And we must remember that when we feel that landmarks are being lost in society, we must always return to the values that bring us together, those that form the bedrock of our organisation.

In this context, let us never forget why the Council of Europe exists. The Council of Europe exists because, in the wake of a world war that caused immense suffering and set humanity back, those who came before us took action. They acted to ensure that the world and the functioning of our societies were founded on democratic choices; that they were founded on predictable relationships based on law, and on the protection of human dignity and human rights.

These are the values that guide our actions. These values are our beacon in the night.

That's why I'm convinced that dialogue is essential. When I say dialogue, I mean real dialogue; dialogue that involves all the players. Because dialogue is exchange, it's the confrontation of arguments, it's debate. Basically, dialogue is the search, in the other's position, for what is right, for what can enable me to improve my vision of things and my own perception of reality. It's also what allows me to say that I disagree, and to say why I disagree. It's also what allows me, always, to try to convince - with arguments.

Difficulty and tension, or difficulties and tensions, should not hold us back or frighten us, at a time when we need to put dialogue at the heart of our thinking. Quite the contrary, because it's precisely when tensions rise, precisely when things are more difficult, that dialogue is most important. It's not just as necessary, it's not just as salutary when things are going well.

It's when things are difficult that dialogue is needed. It's when difficulties multiply that we need to intensify our contacts. Not by sending publications to each other's faces on social networks or in position papers published on the Internet, no: by first saying things, clearly, around a table. At the start of all wars, there is first of all, not only, but first of all a lack of dialogue. And then there's always the need to tell it like it is. To do so with honesty and objectivity.

It was in this spirit that I went to Georgia last December, with a large delegation from the Secretariat. It was also in this spirit that your rapporteurs went there last week. It was in this spirit that the Commissioner for Human Rights went there in the last few days.

My visit to Tbilisi in December achieved results. It led to the release of demonstrators who had been imprisoned. It secured a commitment to refrain from the disproportionate use of force. It secured the guarantee of independent, transparent and effective investigations into allegations of police violence. It enabled us to see, together, the creation of a joint working group, with experts from the Council of Europe, to substantially modify the so-called Foreign Influence Act.

This visit has therefore created the conditions that now enable us to have higher expectations, and to remind ourselves that being a member of the Council of Europe does not mean being a member of a feel-good club: being a member of the Council of Europe means obligations that must be respected. That's what it's all about.

So, ladies and gentlemen, members of the Parliamentary Assembly,

We are now beginning a new year. We know that 2025 will be a challenging year. And in 2025, Ukraine will be at the top of our priorities.

Our commitment is to do our utmost to establish the compensation commission and the comprehensive compensation mechanism, based on the success of the Ukrainian Register of Damage. The Council of Europe must play a leading role. We know that expectations are very high, and we must do so without delay.

It's much the same message I'd like to pass on to you concerning the establishment of the special tribunal for the crime of aggression against Ukraine. For while rebuilding the country requires financial resources to repair the damage, it also requires justice to rebuild people's spirits. The commitment and role of the Council of Europe - and this is at the heart of our role - is to ensure that impunity does not prevail.

For Ukraine, I have also set up a *task force* within the Council of Europe, to ensure that our action is as effective as possible. I have also announced the appointment of a Special Representative of the Secretary General for the Children of Ukraine. This appointment will be made very shortly.

In this context, ladies and gentlemen of the Parliamentary Assembly, I would like to remind you that in this highly turbulent multilateral context, in a world which unfortunately has an unprecedented level of impunity, the greatest challenges we face know no borders.

The only effective response is therefore a multilateral one. It's a response that requires collaboration with other international organisations. And it is obviously a response, in very concrete terms, that involves the creation of a Council of Europe office in New York. I mention this here because I know that it is an issue that has also been much discussed in your Assembly.

Our world is on the move, in perpetual motion. That's nothing new. But our vision, in this case, must go beyond the borders of our continent. Among recent events, we need only think of Syria. Beyond our borders, but very close to us. The fall of Bashar Al-Assad's regime has reshuffled the cards and redefined the geostrategic balance. This situation places Türkiye, a member of the Council of Europe, in a crucial strategic position. This is just one example.

I mention this example as a reminder of how important it is for us to look towards the Mediterranean and beyond, towards Africa, towards the members of the BRICS. At the same time, let's remember that a strong Europe is only strong if it is strong both internally, for the Council of Europe, among its 46 members, but also with an important outward vision and position.

To conclude, ladies and gentlemen,

Building the Europe of tomorrow means, last but not least, restoring democracy to its rightful place, by guaranteeing free and fair elections, protecting the separation of powers and the independence of the judiciary. It also means defending freedom of expression. It also means ensuring full and equal participation in public life for all.

And in saying that, I'd like to emphasise that it's in this context that we've devised an Action Plan for Democracy. So, we're only at the beginning of this work; it's going to be long, it's going to be demanding. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe will also have a key role to play. Just like the Reykjavik Principles, which underpin this reflection and this commitment, reminding us that democratic backsliding is not inevitable.

Ladies and gentlemen of the Parliamentary Assembly,

At the end of *The Plague*, Albert Camus, the great French author and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, reminds us that the plague bacillus never really disappears, and that we must always remain vigilant. So let's remain vigilant, because in less than a month, we'll be at the dawn of the fourth year of war in Ukraine.

We are at a time when we are witnessing a major retreat in democracy, a loss of bearings, a weakening or slowing down of dialogue and the will to engage in dialogue. We are witnessing a redefinition of geopolitical balances, a technological explosion - as I was just mentioning - and a proliferation of misinformation and disinformation. And so, in this context that demands so much of us, we must remain extremely vigilant in the face of these movements of tension, because they contribute to the atomisation and fragmentation of our societies.

And this collective oblivion of which Albert Camus spoke, this collective oblivion, must give way to a true collective sense. It is this collective sense that must guide every action, every decision we take at European level. This is our role, no more, no less. It is, I believe, our common duty at all times.

Thank you very much for your attention, and I look forward to our discussions.

[Applause]

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

I will start by giving the floor to the representatives of the five political groups.

The first is Ms Petra BAYR from the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group.

Petra, you have the floor.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Yes, thank you very much. Good afternoon, dear Alain.

You named it. We have to know where to go to. Also the people of Kosovo would like to know where to go to. They asked for membership at the Council of Europe and the Committee of Ministers asked us for an opinion. We gave a positive opinion and a recommendation. And now we are awaiting for a new reaction of the Committee of Ministers.

And of course, I will also address this question tomorrow or on Thursday in the Joint Committee. But from your point of view, what is crucial, what is missing, what do you expect from Kosovo to do that they can access our organisation?

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Yes, Secretary General.

Mr Alain Berset (Secretary General of the Council of Europe): So thank you.

Thank you, Petra, for the question.

You know, I could have the tendency just to try to pass the question to the ambassadors but I think the question was addressed to me. I will try to bring an answer in this context.

Now you mentioned the actual situation with Kosovo. I think that is the main element I would mention after the report that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe published on this issue. It is now a decision in the hands of the Committee of Ministers. It was also a discussion yesterday with the President of, I would say the representative of the Presidency, Minister Xavier BETTEL from Luxembourg. He also answered this question yesterday.

For me, the most important thing is to have full transparency on what is happening and stability in the process. I think we will have a decision one day. You must – and we must – answer together in the Committee of Ministers when it will be the case. But there must be stable and clear results in one sense to know what's happening with this situation right now.

Just also now to add one more point about the new situation. I described before all the changes that we are witnessing right now and it's accelerating and we have a new administration also in the US. All of those elements are also playing a role and we have also very soon elections in Kosovo in February.

I think we should wait for this milestone, this step, and then see if we have conditions to have a discussion. I think it will be a discussion in the Committee of Ministers and then a decision. I know that you are waiting for these elements but I think while in such a complicated situation it is a good thing to be solid in the step that we are doing and to see if there is the possibility to see any developments with this issue.

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

On behalf of the Group of the European People's Party, Ms Marija PETRUSHEVSKA.

Ms Marija PETRUSHEVSKA (North Macedonia, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, respected President.

Thank you, distinguished General Secretary.

Human rights are the foundation of democracy.

How do you see that some member states of the Council of Europe do not respect the minority rights and they don't implement the judgments for minority rights from the European Court of Human Rights?

Thank you so much.

Mr Alain Berset (Secretary General of the Council of Europe): Thank you for the question.

I'm not sure about if you are addressing a specific case, but I think it is an obligation to execute the decision of the Court. We know this. It is, by the way, a very important, not to mention, a central element of all institutions that we have.

And that's why it is so important to follow this and to address all the execution of the decision of the Court we have. It is a role and a responsibility also for the Committee of Ministers.

As I mentioned before, you know, I participate also, I have this privilege to be invited to the Committee of Ministers regularly and to have the exchange with the Committee of Ministers. And I see how seriously these elements are always followed and seen.

Thus the construct is that we have 46 member states and the member states are in charge, are responsible to ensure that when there is a case, that it will be implemented and rightly implemented.

That's why we have all those discussions and I think we must remain very aware on this.

You know, just to compare maybe with other organisations, we know that other organisations also do have the same more or less construct that we have with the European Court on Human Rights, and if you don't have a very high level of execution then it is not really possible to remain legitimate on the long term.

That's why it's so important to continue on this. That's why also we have in the Secretariat, I think is the DGI is responsible for those issues and working very closely with the member states and also with the CM for the execution of the judgments of the court.

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

On behalf of the European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance, Mr Sorin-Titus MUNCACIU.

Mr Sorin-Titus MUNCACIU (Romania, EC/DA, Spokesperson for the group): Yeah. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I apologise.

My question to you is very, let's say, up to date, because in Romania we had a presidential election that was cancelled by the Court, the Constitutional Court. In other words, on 24 November, we had the first step, the Court certified the first step, and three days after that, while the second step was running in diaspora, 50 000 people already voted in the second step, they completely cancelled the presidential election.

Now, Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS was very kind, and I thank him for that, to ask the Venice Commission about this situation, and we saw yesterday the report. Now, if you look at the report and what the commission, I mean, the Constitutional Commission put up as a proof for what they say was Russian involvement in the election, that, I mean, in my opinion, does not meet the criteria that the Commission was talking about.

But then it was a shot from former Commissioner BRETON, who said: what we have done in Romania, we are going to do it again in Germany if we don't like....

My point is this decision of the Court is attacking all our values, it's attacking the human rights, it's attacking the rule of law and the democracy. So I would like to see what is the position of the Ministers in this particular case.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, dear Secretary General, would you like to respond?

Mr Alain BERSET (Secretary General of the Council of Europe): Yes, yes, thank you.

Thank you very much for addressing this issue, I think it is extra proof that we are witnessing a really quite complicated evolution and really accelerated evolution in all our member states and countries, also in all the discussion about democracy.

I think you mentioned the Venice Commission, and as the Venice Commission published, I think, yesterday, has been requested to prepare an urgent report on this question and it was officially released, I think, yesterday. And I saw, like you, that it is rather nuanced, I would say, this report.

To answer the question in a general way, but also underlining the limits to the cancellation of elections. I think the most important thing is always to recall that it is important not to make the switch or the mix between "do we agree or do we not agree with the results?" This is one question and it must be possible not to agree with the results of an election or a popular vote. And the other element is to be sure that all the conditions that you need to have a free and fair election have been fully implemented.

There are two questions, and to be honest, for me, it's quite difficult to really give you advice or give you a meaning concerning this situation because it is quite difficult to know on which elements this decision was taken.

While I was informed that it will be a new election, well, this year, in Romania I think the situation is like it is right now, but I'm pretty sure that we will need to structure a bit the discussion on those elements. It must be possible to disagree with a result and to recognise it is democratic – we cannot always have the result that we want and that we wish.

That's all I can say to this, but I think we should do the analysis of this Venice Commission report right now and see what it's possible to do to ensure, as I mentioned also in my intervention before, to have good conditions, to have a good expression of what the people want in elections.

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

On behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, Ms Franziska HOOP has the floor.

Ms Franziska HOOP (Liechtenstein, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): On behalf of the ALDE, I would like to thank the Secretary General for his comments and also for your efforts to set up an office in New York, as we have been increasingly calling for.

Since taking office as Secretary General, you have repeatedly referred to an action plan. How exactly do you plan to involve the Council of Europe in the creation of an action plan for democracy and what will be the concrete added value? Thank you very much.

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

Mr Alain BERSET (Secretary General of the Council of Europe): Yes, with pleasure.

First of all, thank you for the positive assessment of what we have done to develop our network, including in New York. I have been able to say this before: I think this is important because with the Council of Europe we really have an organisation that can bring something very concrete. For - how do we say this in German - *accountability*, against impunity. That is very important. And I believe that at the moment, when we see that many international organisations are blocked, it is important to help develop something with our work. So thank you very much for this element.

Second element, you once asked the question about the Action Plan for Democracy. Thank you very much for that. What I said before: My aim with this action plan is not to draw up a report or have one drawn up - 10 pages, 10 measures, we publish it and it's done - that would be too easy. We need much more. I believe it should be more of a process. It has to be a process that really lasts, with as much integration as possible from all possible stakeholders.

We have already started. Last year, I had the opportunity to hold consultations with all the ambassadors we have in Strasbourg at the Council of Europe. It was very interesting, yes, a kind of brainstorming session, if I can put it that way. It was very interesting and it allowed us to focus a bit on what we can do, what we can't do and how we will move forward.

And as I said before: At the right moment - and it will soon be the right moment - it must be possible to really do this together, also with the Parliamentary Assembly in the Council of Europe, so that we can develop this together. I still need a little patience for this, and patience is generally not such a bad thing at the moment. We need time to really be able to do in-depth work. And that will come soon. And I can assure you that at this moment - I think in the first half of the year - we will be able to discuss it again with the relevant commissions and also with the authorities and also with the Council of Europe as an institution.

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

Dear colleagues, before I give the floor to our colleague from the Group of the Unified European Left, Mr Paul GAVAN, I would like to remind all of you, when you enter the hemicycle, please insert your badge. And before asking for the floor, press the button once, wait for a couple of seconds and then take the floor.

Dear Paul, you have the floor.

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

Secretary General, good afternoon.

After 16 months of relentless and indiscriminate attacks by the Israeli state on the people of Gaza, resulting in the direct slaughter of at least 46 000 men, women and children and another 120 000 indirect deaths, how do you explain the failure of any officeholder in this human rights organisation to condemn these acts of genocide or condemn those Council of Europe member states, namely Germany, Britain, and Italy, supplying the weapons that have enabled that genocide to take place?

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

Mr Alain BERSET (Secretary General of the Council of Europe): Thank you for this question.

First thing, I must say, I want to underline here on this place that we are seeing also that with the ceasefire we have for the first time since a very long time, maybe not degradation, but maybe the possible opportunity to have again more place for all the values and all the support for human beings in all the regions. That's the first one.

Second point, we have always been really strongly concerned about the situation in the Middle East and in Gaza, particularly, you know this. It is the history of the 16 and 18 last month.

We will need to take the time to make good analysis of what's happened because the thing where, the element where we can agree, is that it was a catastrophic development for human rights and for human dignity in general.

And I think we will need to have this discussion and to be ready to go deeper in those elements and to try to do the best with this.

The third point I can mention, I mean, I see not as my role, you know, to decide to make some critics and member states when they decide in the bilateral relations to do something.

We can assess the elements, we have also the instrument to discuss this, but we never must forget why we are here. We are here to ensure that, you know, human dignity, that democracy, and rule of law is working.

I saw like you that this one is not the case, at least we can say this, but we must remain concentrated on this and also what's happening on our continent.

And I was really concerned about the strong rise that we've seen in the last month.

And it is really bad for our continent with the anti-Semitism and also with the hatred, anti-Muslim hatred, in the Continent.

You know, this sense that we should have for the collective also to live together is really important. And that's why we have been as clear as possible about the situation that was happening there.

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

Dear Secretary General, dear colleagues,

Before I give the floor to other colleagues, I just want to announce that the time for amendments regarding the report on Georgia's credentials will be prolonged by 7 p.m. tonight due to the late publication of the document.

Now, dear Alain, I'm going to give the floor to three of my colleagues and you will answer to them as a group of three.

First in this group is Mr Armen GEVORGYAN. Armen, you have the floor.

Mr Armen GEVORGYAN (Armenia, EC/DA): Mister Secretary General,

According to the official statement about your meeting with President Ilham ALIYEV last November in Baku, you, I am quoting, "underlined the important contribution of Azerbaijan to inter-religious and intercultural dialogue".

If this is your sincere assessment, it can be perceived as encouragement to the authoritarian regime of Azerbaijan to continue the inhuman treatment of Armenian prisoners in Baku and the ongoing destruction of Armenian cultural and religious heritage in Artsakh, Nagorno-Karabakh.

What can you say in this regard to the victims of the genocide in Artsakh perpetrated by Azerbaijan?

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): The next speaker is Mr Alain MILON.

Alain, you have the floor.

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

Mister General Secretary,

I would like to ask you about violence against women.

You highlighted the Istanbul Convention and emphasized that in it, the definition of rape is based on the absence of free consent, as opposed to traditional definitions of rape based on the use of force.

In France, the Penal Code, which defines rape, does not include the notion of consent, which has given rise to numerous legal debates, heightened by a trial that recently rocked my country.

I would therefore like to know whether the Council of Europe has been consulted by the French authorities on this subject, and whether you envisage any specific measures for dialogue with member states on this central issue for women.

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

Next is Ms Hajnalka JUHÁSZ.

Ms Hajnalka JUHÁSZ (Hungary, EC/DA): Honourable Secretary General,

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe stated that protection of rights of persons belonging to national minorities is one of the most important prerequisites for peace and security in Europe, which became an essential element of the Reykjavík Declaration.

We have a strong view that strengthening the work of our organisation in this field would be central in the current geopolitical situation in Europe, as it significantly contributes to sustaining the peace in our continent.

In your opinion, what more should we do to achieve this together?

Thank you very much, indeed.

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

Dear Secretary General, would you like to respond to three questions?

Mr Alain Berset (Secretary General of the Council of Europe): Yes, thank you.

Maybe for the first question. Thank you very much for asking and for putting the question. You took a small part of the press release we made after the visit in Baku – I can just answer this element and then I will say a few words about the visit to Azerbaijan and Baku. This element was only dedicated to the fact that the Council of Europe has been invited to an international inter-religious conference in the context of the Conference of Parties (COP) and I understood that – well it is possible to mention this in another context or to ask some other questions, I see your point – but it was really – maybe we should write this differently – but it was really concentrated on this element.

The second element, as you are asking about Azerbaijan and the visit there, I just wanted to mention to you that it was an important possibility to visit Baku last year. I know all the difficulties that we have with Azerbaijan. For me, it was really important after the stop that we have seen in the last year, to have again some movement and it is not just to have movement. It was to have again the supervision of execution of judgments of the Court. It has been restarted. It is important also for the population living in the country. It was about the implementation of the action plan for Azerbaijan for 2025. It was stopped. It has been resumed. And it was also linked to the monitoring activities and the participation of experts in particular in the Lanzarote Committee and Civic Committee for Human Rights. That was the goal that we had. That's why we had this meeting there. But thank you for the question. I hope I addressed it.

And I'm ready to address all questions that you might have about the South Caucasus because I had a lot of contacts also there.

By the way, also with Prime Minister PASHINYAN before and after all those visits I made, we had regular contact about the visits that I made in the whole region and you know the support that we are also providing for Armenia in this situation.

Mr Alain Berset (Secretary General of the Council of Europe): For the question on women's rights: thank you for the question.

Yes, you're right. I've had the opportunity on many occasions to stress the importance of the Istanbul Convention and the fight against all forms of violence against women and girls. I think it's an extremely important element. It has been one of the Council of Europe's major, major successes in recent years.

It's regrettable that, in this area too, we're seeing a step backwards, with new problems emerging. We sense in public debate in general, and we saw it again in the debate that preceded elections in various countries recently, before or after, what it can mean not to pay full attention to equality between men and women, and not to pay full attention to the fight against violence against women.

As for your specific question on the definition of rape, I haven't yet had any discussions with the French authorities.

On the other hand, you will have noticed that there was a recent ruling by the European Court of Human Rights which deals precisely with this issue and which, I believe - but at this point I'll just have to keep an eye out to make sure I'm not talking nonsense, otherwise I'll correct it straight away - condemned France in this matter. That is the case. Right, then. I think it's part of the game with the European Court of Human Rights that all member countries are condemned one time or another for things that don't comply with the Court's case law or rulings on the defence of human rights. This has been the case for many countries, but now it's the case for France, and we can only hope that this will have a positive effect on the appreciation of these issues, which are, socially, societally, extremely important.

Mr Alain Berset (Secretary General of the Council of Europe): For the last question, I thank you very much.

I'm not sure I really understood the question, but I think the question was what we can do to ensure good collaboration, participation on the European level, to be as strong as possible together, despite all the differences we can have and despite that diversity, or with the diversity that we have on the continent.

We can remember in this context that I was addressing you, I think, last time, and also with the Committee of Ministers saying that, I mean, the European family is a quite interesting family with 46 member states, a huge diversity that we have. The most important thing is not just to consider the differences that we have, but it is to have some movement working in the convergence.

That's the concern that we have now since, and I was mentioning this in my intervention before, since I would say 15-20 years, and all this list of crises that we've had since more than 15 years. Then we are witnessing right now a phase where we are diverging more than converging. Our role must be to do what we can with dialogue, with mutual discussions around the values to have more convergence.

Again, the Council of Europe can play a very important role in this. I think it is our role, you know, but not alone. We do this in a strong, very strong collaboration with the European Union.

I just want to mention here how important it is to have this very strong support from the European Union for the Council of Europe. Also, I mean, what we can bring to this sense for the European continent and for the values that we have together being a member of the European Union or not, by the way, because we have the same continents. We care about the same continent altogether.

The next point I can explore in this context is about the EPC, you know, the European Political Community. It is a very important network working for many years now, well, not that much, but three or four years. I had the privilege to participate in different capacities several times, by the way, and I was in Budapest for the EPC last time. It was a very interesting and very important meeting with the 27 members of the EU, plus 19 members who are members of the Council of Europe, but not being members of the EU. I think this context, this framework will probably be very important in the future, also to address together all the concern and the challenges that we are facing together in Europe.

That means working together on the continent with the EU, with the EPC. We also have the OSCE. I could mention other organisations, but never forget that it is also important to engage the combats outside of the continent. That's why in Davos last week I had the possibility to meet with the Secretary General of ASEAN, the Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council, and I had before previous meetings also with the African Union, also with the Organization of American States, and obviously also with the United Nations.

I think it is important to have all these contacts together transparently and to see what we can achieve together.

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

The next question is from Mr Damien COTTIER.

Damien, you have the floor.

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

First of all, you quoted the Secretary-General of the United Nations at Davos, and I'd like to quote him too.

A participant asked him whether, in the current world context, one should be optimistic or pessimistic. He replied: "It's not about that, it's about being resolute. And I'd like to thank you, because we can see that you've been resolutely tackling issues since you took office: you're trying to move the lines and promote the dialogue you mentioned earlier, and I'd like to thank you for that.

My question is about multilateralism: as you said, you want to promote dialogue between multilateral organisations. Many of them, particularly global ones, have their headquarters in Europe, in Geneva, Vienna, The Hague, Paris or elsewhere. How do you plan to strengthen collaboration with these organisations, in particular the United Nations?

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Next is Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK.

Yevheniia.

Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK (Ukraine, ALDE): Thank you, Mister Secretary General.

Thank you for coming to Kyiv. It was great to see you in December.

My question is regarding the Special Representative on Ukrainian Children. When exactly will there be an appointment? Will it be a person in a high position on a political level? And what would be the duties of this person?

I would also like to mention that you were addressing not just the members of the Parliamentary Assembly today, but also the representatives of youth from different member states. They're here listening to you.

Thank you for mentioning youth perspectives in your speech.

Thank you.

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

Mr Stéphane BERGERON, you have the floor.

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

Mister Secretary General,

You mentioned it in your opening address: since the start of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, this Assembly has adopted several resolutions calling on member and observer states to use frozen Russian assets to rebuild destroyed Ukrainian infrastructure. It did so first in April 2022, then again in October 2023, and again in April 2024, with the aim first of rapidly agreeing measures to do so, and subsequently of an international compensation mechanism.

To date, what follow-up has been carried out with member and observer states to ensure the effective implementation of these resolutions?

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

Dear Secretary General, would you like to respond?

Mr Alain Berset (Secretary General of the Council of Europe): You're welcome. Thank you, Mister Chairman.

I'll start with the question on multilateralism, and also on the United Nations.

We can start with the United Nations, because of course we've made great strides there recently, notably with the New York office. We also have an office in Geneva, as you know as well as I do, and one in Vienna. These are offices in leading multilateral organisations, in cities that are strongly committed to multilateralism. That's the first point.

I think that if we want to deepen our relationship, we need to do so on elements that are as concrete as possible. And that's why the Council of Europe's contribution to the fight against impunity, for the crime of aggression and Russia's aggression against Ukraine, is in fact exemplary. And I have to tell you - I think I've already said this here, but I'd like to say it again - that during the meeting I had with António Guterres in New York last September, as part of the United Nations General Assembly, we realised that the Council of Europe was indeed capable of providing tools ; They're not global - there aren't all 200 countries on board, there are far fewer - but they do have a higher level of commitment. That's what we've done with the Register of Damage, which was a masterly invention of the Council of Europe, supported by the Heads of State and Government in Reykjavik in 2023.

And then, with the next steps, and I'll come later to the question asked about what has happened since, we now need to take the next steps with a complete compensation mechanism. At that point, we'll have a very concrete tool, which will also be of great interest to other multilateral organisations.

So, because this Organisation was able to take strong, courageous decisions at the right time, we are now in a position to deliver - we don't say that in French - to deliver something which, in essence, advances our ideals, advances our values and reminds us that we don't want to live in a world dominated by fear, violence and force, but we do want to live in a world dominated by relationships based on law, predictable and respectful, with the principle of equality at the heart of these reflections. And so we are capable, in a very concrete way, of going beyond just a polite dialogue and doing something strong together.

That was for the United Nations.

I'm happy to answer now about other multilateral, regional or thematic organisations. There are many, as you said: I'm not going to go through the whole list, but I can tell you that I've already had contacts. I omitted the Commonwealth earlier on, which is a very interesting organisation based in London.

We have the African Union, which is on the African continent. With Nairobi, we have a region, a city that is also strongly dedicated to multilateralism. In fact, I'll probably be going to Nairobi soon, for a conference on *cybercrime*, which is also supported by the Council of Europe. This will be an opportunity to make these contacts.

And here, I think we need to start - there's no such thing today - by deepening our dialogue, to see what we can do, because we're regional or thematic. That's quite a big difference from an organisation that wants to cover everything, or that has to cover everything with everyone.

And so there are these two elements: with the United Nations on the elements I mentioned, and with other organisations.

For some time now, I've had on my agenda, I must tell you, the idea of having a meeting with the Secretaries General of several organisations, together. I've already seen them separately, but that's not enough: we really need to take the initiative of seeing them together to move this dialogue forward.

Mr Alain Berset (Secretary General of the Council of Europe): About the second question, about the special representative for children. Thank you very much for the question. I think it's a very important element, and yet I can confirm that it will be announced soon. My goal was to be able to announce it during this week, but it's not possible, you know, for organisational reasons, and it will be, I hope, very soon.

And, well, my goal is also to have a high profile to do this, knowing how complicated it is just to sort out all the questions that we have on this issue. And I had the occasion, by the last visit I made to Kiev, to have also all those discussions with different partners, and we had also the occasion to briefly meet there. And I think, for me, the goal is to address the issue on the human level. I mean, that's the first element. But we would also have to address the issue on the legal level and to see what we can do to achieve the maximum possible in this context, knowing that it is really difficult. And the discussion that I had in Kiev, they underlined the importance of this.

And thank you very much for mentioning youth. Well, welcome to everybody. It's a pleasure to have you with us today. And also I wanted to mention this, in my speech before, because I think it is really important, if we are witnessing that the youngest generation is, well, asking themselves what means this world for us and what perspectives could we have on the horizon in 10 or 20 years?

It is important, it is our job, to deliver for them the possibility to have perspectives and good perspectives. And I'm sure it is the key. If we are able to have a stable world, a peaceful world, with a good perspective for the youngest generation, then we will have also a bright future for democracy. I'm absolutely convinced of this.

Mr Alain BERSET (Secretary General of the Council of Europe): As for the question about frozen assets, thank you for the question.

I think the first thing that was important was to set up the Register of Damage. And we needed strong, solid support for the Register of Damage, once it had been set up in Reykjavik. We have some very important players on board, who are making sure that the Register is up and running smoothly.

In fact, I was able to see for myself when I visited our office in Kiev that we also have a team on site who are doing a very good job; there's also the team in The Hague, who are naturally doing a very good job, and things are progressing well.

And Ukraine is also very interested in this: I have to tell you here that I have sensed a great deal of interest on the part of the Ukrainian authorities, a great deal of interest in the Registry, because the Registry is also going to be of interest on a national level and not just in terms of the support that comes from the international support group for Ukraine.

As for the next stage, it's obviously rather difficult to know what's going to happen now. The situation I saw in Kiev in December - and it was the third time I'd visited the country in a year - is naturally very worrying on the ground. We can see that there is a lot of crime and destruction. It's very brutal, of course, and we need to think about reparations.

Nothing can be done without a full compensation mechanism.

So yes, there's the question of funds, financing and how we're going to finance it. But first, if we're really going to do anything other than wish lists on this issue, we need a mechanism that can take it into account. And that's why my message, for two months now, has been that we're going far too slowly with the fundamental decisions that need to be taken to set up this compensation mechanism, this full compensation mechanism.

There will be a very important meeting on this subject shortly - in fact, this week, tomorrow - and we very much hope that this can move forward quickly. And what I can say here publicly, before you all, is that the Council of Europe is ready. We have the resources, the skills and the experience. We've got to go for it!

We have shown what this Organisation - well, you have shown, with the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly, the Heads of State - what this Organisation has been capable of doing, whereas many Cassandras were telling you: "It's never going to work, we're never going to get out of this...". It did! And it works, and it's a successful model.

So why not use this successful model to make the next step? Because it's going to be even harder. That's why we need to move forward resolutely now. We need to move forward now to have a full compensation mechanism, and I sincerely hope that strong, courageous decisions can be taken, with States saying to us: "Go ahead. Yes, we recognise your competence. Yes, we recognise that you've done a great job with the Registry. Yes, we recognise that you have the resources and the experience. We're ready. We're ready."

If I get this message, we can start this afternoon. It'll be late in the afternoon because it's already 5 p.m., but we can still start this afternoon.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Dear Secretary General, dear colleagues, at that point we have reached the end of asking questions to Mr BERSET.

Dear Alain, I want to most warmly thank you for being with us today and answering the questions of my colleagues.

Now, dear colleagues, I'll ask the rapporteur and colleagues related to the next debate to take their seats.

In 2 minutes we start.

Debate: The absolute and urgent need to end the humanitarian crisis for women, children and the hostages in Gaza

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Dear colleagues, let's be seated.

The next item of business this afternoon is the debate on the report titled "The absolute and urgent need to end the humanitarian crisis for women, children and the hostages in Gaza" (Doc. 16093) presented by Ms Saskia KLUIT on behalf of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development.

In order to finish..

Please, order! Please, order, colleagues.

In order to finish by 7:20 p.m., I will interrupt the list of speakers at about 6:10 p.m. to allow time for the reply and the vote.

I call now the rapporteur Ms Saskia KLUIT.

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

You have the floor.

Ms Saskia KLUIT (Netherlands, SOC, Rapporteur): Thank you very much, Chair.

I am always confused with the buttons.

When we convened in October, I talked about the children who are losing at an alarming rate their arms and their legs in Gaza. And since then, we must realise that had we filled a chair, every chair in this room is a child that has lost either an arm or a leg or both.

So we should not be silent when the children die. We should act and protect. And that is what this report is about.

Yesterday I spoke to Abed AL ATTAR, and he's a Dutch national and he's not allowed to leave Gaza. He has been there involuntarily for 15 months and he's getting all the things that the war has done. He has lost family, he has lost friends, and he has lost his trust. And all he wants is to get home.

16-15 months of war have resulted in 47 000 people dying, 109 000 seriously injured, many women and children, and 265 humanitarian aid workers that have lost their lives, and 150 journalists have also lost their lives.

It shows this war is going nowhere.

The hostages are still not home, and they should be.

So I am very, very happy that we are having a ceasefire now and that will bring a better situation for the people in the region. But the ceasefire is not a reason why we should not debate this report. Because the humanitarian crisis is still going on. There are no schools, there are far too little hospitals. The healthcare system is still collapsed and people are still dying as a result of it.

So although I want to really and deeply thank the people who have worked on peace, we also have to keep working here on the humanitarian crisis.

One of the basis in this report is the humanitarian law. Humanitarian law was invented after World War II and it was there to protect innocent civilians in times of conflict. Humanitarian law is the most fundamental protection against unjust situations and unsafety. And we must really protect it here. Humanitarian law is also non reciprocal. It means it doesn't matter what the other party does, you still have to do everything in your means to protect the innocent people, in this case in Gaza.

This report calls therefore on Israel to retract the ban on UNRWA. UNRWA has a very important role in supplying humanitarian aid to the people in Gaza. And there is not a good alternative and also there should not be a good alternative. And the reason why is that UNRWA is a UN body. And if we accept that conflicting parties in UN bodies can be discussed in the UN... I have to rephrase that.

If we accept that UN bodies are being banned during times of conflict, the UN will be disputed in times of conflict, which means people will not get fed, they will not get medical help, and that is why they are so highly protected in our international law.

So that is an important part, although it's not easy.

Then the role of the press, which is also an important part of this role. We struggled with the numbers in Gaza, what is going on. And one of the main reasons for that is that there are no independent journalists in Gaza. They are not allowed to enter. And so we do not really know what is going on.

So we tried in this report to be as factual as we could, and we used numbers from the Health Ministry. And why did we use them? Because they are dependable, they have been proven so in the past. But also because they are the lowest that we are there. So if we would have taken other numbers, there would be more discussion about it, but also they would have been much higher. I think we have to realise that.

So, today, President, I hope that we will have a very civilised debate on the topic.

I think we should unite at least on the importance of humanitarian law in the situation of Gaza. And I think we should stand for it. And I hope you will stand for it when we vote for the report.

And last of all, I hope, I so much hope that the people who are now in Gaza, the children, the women, the elderly, the men, and the hostages, I hope so much that we can bring them all home, to a safe situation and to a situation where they can again build up their lives and thrive. And therefore, we need really strong humanitarian structures.

So let's keep talking about this, and let's talk now about this report.

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

[Applause]

Dear colleagues,

We're now going to the speakers on behalf of political groups.

I call first Mr Paweł JABŁOŃSKI from the European Conservative Party. Mister Jabłoński, you have the floor. Mister Jabłoński...

So I'm going now to the next, who is on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, Mr Gusty GRAAS. Gusty.

Mr Gusty GRAAS (Luxembourg, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister Chairman.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me to begin by welcoming, on behalf of my group, what could be a glimmer of hope: the agreement of a ceasefire, the fruit of diplomacy led by the authorities of Egypt, Qatar and the former and new American administrations.

The human toll is overwhelming: more than 1 000 Israeli soldiers killed in action and tens of thousands of Palestinians mowed down by this relentless war.

Even more heartbreaking is the fact that it is mostly women and children who have paid the heaviest price.

Against this dramatic backdrop, I welcome the first phase of this agreement, which aims to free all women and children under the age of 19.

While the parameters have changed since this report was first drafted, its recommendations resonate with renewed acuity today.

Between hope and apprehension, we are walking a tightrope.

After the progress made in Lebanon, this second ceasefire agreement in the region represents an opportunity, even if the geopolitical fragility remains.

On the one hand, the advocates of "total victory" in Israel have not laid down the weapons of their ambitions. On the other, the threat of Hamas compromising the return of the hostages hangs like a shadow over every phase of the agreement.

Faced with this dramatic situation, our position is uncompromising: the agreement must be applied in its entirety, without exception or condition. This is not just a diplomatic option, but an absolute moral necessity.

The release of all hostages and prisoners must be fully guaranteed, as an essential and inalienable priority.

The progressive withdrawal of Israeli troops from the occupied Palestinian territories and the safe return of displaced persons are indisputable elements of this.

And humanitarian aid must be able to circulate without hindrance. UNRWA, despite the attempts to destabilise it, remains the key player in this vital mission, thanks to its unique expertise and knowledge of the field.

Ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of my group, I would like to reaffirm that the two-state solution is an essential and indispensable step towards lasting peace in the region.

The immediate need is to put an end to the macabre toll of victims - children, women, civilians, hostages.

In the humble measure of our parliamentary diplomacy, let's work to ensure that this ceasefire, still temporary today, goes down in the history of this battered region.

Finally, with regard to the report, I must confess that some of my colleagues have expressed reservations about the positions taken, which could be perceived as lacking balance.

Our vote will obviously depend on the outcome of the various amendments.

Thank you for your attention.

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

On behalf of the Group of the Unified European Left, the co-chair of the party, Ms Anne STAMBACH-TERRENOIR.

Anne, you have the floor.

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

Thank you very much, Madam rapporteur.

Since October 2023, more than 47 000 people have been killed in Gaza according to UNICEF, including more than 14 500 children.

More than 111 000 have been wounded, including more than 24 940 children.

Hundreds of babies have died for lack of electricity to power their incubators.

In all, 70% of victims were women and children.

Thousands of innocent civilians. And for the survivors: hunger, thirst, dust, cold and disease.

For months now, Israel has been violating international law with impunity, and international organisations have been alerting the world. But until now, the cries of the people of Gaza have found little echo in this hemicycle.

I believe, dear colleagues, that our Assembly, by its silence, has failed to live up to its aspiration to be the guardian of human rights.

With this important resolution, we are finally raising our voices.

The current ceasefire is fragile and temporary: we call for it to be permanent, for hostages to be returned on both sides, for bombs and guns to be silenced for good, while dozens more Palestinians have been killed in recent days, while a vast offensive is raining down on the occupied West Bank, following murderous operations in Lebanon and Syria, in defiance of international law.

Together, our countries must uphold their obligations under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Yes, a genocidal enterprise is unfolding before our very eyes.

A United Nations Special Committee has stated that the methods of warfare used by Israel in Gaza amount to genocide, in particular the use of starvation as a weapon of war. And Mr NETANYAHOU is now the subject of an arrest warrant from the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity and war crimes. We demand justice.

Sixty-six percent of Gaza has been destroyed, 95% of schools have been razed to the ground, and just a month ago the last major hospital in operation was burnt to the ground. So, what does the future hold for Gaza's children? Many have seen the unbearable: they have lost their parents and siblings, they suffer from mental disorders and malnutrition, even polio has returned, and medicines are in short supply.

And yet, as the report reminds us, children are the object of special protection. And with good reason: they are our collective future. Even in the midst of war, they are entitled to ongoing access to education, nutrition and care appropriate to their age. Here, everything is swept away.

Gaza is the country with the most amputee children in the world. So many of them could have been treated! So many of them have suffered the horror of amputation without anaesthetic! And today, they have no rehabilitation, no prostheses, no means of rebuilding their lives.

Humanitarian aid is hampered, and worse, Israel is now banning UNRWA on spurious pretexts: this is unacceptable. This UN agency is the only lifeline for the devastated population of Gaza, and they want to take it away tomorrow?

We must not let this happen. Our member countries must exert pressure and commit themselves to funding UNRWA as a matter of urgency. Access to humanitarian aid must be total, safe and rapid.

With the children of Gaza, it is our deepest humanity that has been bombarded. It is our humanity that has been mutilated.

Time is running out for them, so let's be the determined tools of long-overdue international pressure.

We are all children of Gaza.

Thank you for your support.

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

On behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group, the leader of the party, Mr Frank SCHWABE.

Mr Frank SCHWABE (Germany, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Mister President,

In a world full of conflicts, we are talking about probably the most difficult conflict of all conflicts in the world - the conflict between Israel and Palestine, where, if you look at the history of both actors, you can actually understand why they are laying claim to a certain piece of land. We have to understand that Israel is the only real democracy in the region surrounded by autocracy and dictators.

I want to thank Ms Saskia KLUIT for the report. Saskia did not try to solve this conflict, which we cannot solve, but she put the humanitarian situation at the center of her report. And that is the task of our organisation and of the report. And whether we believe Hamas' figures or Israel's figures - we are talking about tens of thousands of dead, tens of thousands of wounded, tens of thousands of people who have been badly wounded and hundreds of thousands who have been displaced. And of course all those who say that October 7, 2023 had a prehistory are right. And all those are right who say that what is happening now in Gaza had the prehistory of the terrible terrorist attack by Hamas on October 7, 2023. The Assembly has also taken a clear position on this.

However, the task of the report is to focus on the humanitarian situation in Gaza. Of course, I think we all welcome the ceasefire, the release of hostages and the exchange of prisoners and the improvement in the situation. We now have around 600 trucks that now can get through every day. But they have not been able to drive in the past weeks and months. And of course Hamas is also responsible for this by stealing food and hiding behind civilians. But in the end, Israel must be held responsible. And that is also the position of many United Nations institutions for the fact that humanitarian aid has not ended up where it should have. And that is why we are calling on Israel to change this.

We have heard about the catastrophic medical situation. About the fact that people are dying from simple illnesses, about the amputation of children without anaesthetic - a very terrible idea. We also have a clear call in the report to appreciate and respect the United Nations for what it is. In any case, despite all the problems

that exist at UNRWA, as with other UN organisations, I am grateful that they have come to terms with their problems. I thank them for their work on the ground. There are a number of amendments and I believe that the ones presented by Mr Piero FASSINO are also suitable for balancing this report accordingly. Once again, our task is to take care of the humanitarian situation of the people. We will not resolve the conflict. We want a future for the people of Gaza so that they can stay there. We have to rebuild the country and Ms Saskia KLUIT's report makes an important contribution to this, which is why I would like to thank her once again on behalf of my group.

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

On behalf of the Group of the European People's Party, Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS.

Emanuelis, you have the floor.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, dear friends.

It is good that we are coming back to issues related to the Middle East. It will be good to have a report about Aleppo too. It will be good to have reports about the Syrian government's crimes and other issues. But probably it will follow.

From my point of view, this matter is related to the essence of what happened on 7 October. After 2005, when Prime Minister Sharon ordered to withdraw all Israelis from the Gaza Strip, we have the following development that the group – that is declared in many of your distinguished countries as a terrorist group and that is worse than LUKASHENKO or PUTIN's regime – took over the power in Gaza.

So in the Gaza Strip, we have a regime that is using its population in attacks on their neighbouring countries – in this case, Israel.

No one settler is inside of Gaza. We're not talking about the West Bank, we're talking about the same Israel as in 1948 that declared statehood territory.

In this case, I was there after my country did a resolution on 10 October, I was there, and I saw those people from the small towns established in pre-war times, the towns of a mostly socialist, Madam rapporteur, a mostly socialist approach and the mayors who were integrating Gazan people into their internal life, celebrating their birthdays together – together Israelis from Sderot – and family events together with Gazans. It was the most advanced, peaceful camp and the simple students who assembled in huge numbers during this Woodstock-type music festival were from the peaceful camp, who were always making huge demonstrations in Tel Aviv, against the war, in favour of peace with Palestinians.

So this very peaceful camp was attacked by those fanatics who took over Gaza over the years, and terrorised Gazans and put innocent civilians in front of their military headquarters.

That is not extremely reflected.

From my point of view, looking at the fact that we have really heavy casualties, I would like to say that facts cannot be based on Hamas' health ministry. And sorry to say, not one of the amendments that was proposed by our good friends in the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development from my side was accepted including the first amendment related to the current peace agreement.

So, in this case, I would like to say that such a report is important; it's about the profile of our organisation but the facts on the ground. And the methodology was absolutely wrong. If Italy were under attack, or Great Britain – I am ending, dear Chairman. So if Italy were under attack, or Great Britain or Germany, we would have the same measures to defend our people.

Thank you.

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

And I want to thank all colleagues who have had heard patiently the oldest member of our Assembly.

Now, Mister Jabłoński, would you like to take the floor on behalf of the European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance?

Mr Paweł JABŁOŃSKI (Poland, EC/DA, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister President.

Thank you, Madam rapporteur.

Dear colleagues, the tragedy of Gaza is a stark reminder that horrors of the past genocides may always be repeated if the word stays silent. And it is also a reminder of the importance of the institution safeguarding international humanitarian law. A reminder that nothing in this regard should be taken for granted. And a reminder of the urgency with which we must act now to protect even the most basic human rights.

The deliberate indiscriminate attacks by Hamas and other terrorist organisations must be denounced in the strongest possible terms.

These acts of terror not only inflict unimaginable suffering on men, women, and children, and communities who yearn for peace, but also destabilise entire regions.

At the same time, we must recognise that the cycle of violence cannot be broken through military means alone. Israel has the right to defend itself. And Israel also has a duty to always observe international law. And, just as any other country, it must be also held accountable if there are any crimes committed by its military personnel or otherwise targeting innocent civilians.

Unpunished killings of humanitarian workers, including Polish national Damian SOBOL, murdered by IDF on 1 April last year. Families of victims still demand justice.

Disproportionate responses. Destruction of infrastructure essential to human life. This has been the reality in Gaza for over a year. And this reality perpetuates despair and deepens humanitarian crisis.

Let me say it very clearly. There is no justification for limiting humanitarian aid. There are no arguments for depriving civilians from water, food, medicine, electricity, basic amenities, and, in fact, basic human rights.

While we may welcome cessation of hostilities, ceasefire, a lasting and just solution is still very far away. A two-state solution is something we should strive for. And this includes addressing the legitimate aspirations of Palestinians for dignity, self-determination, and equal rights with the rights of Israelis, alongside Israel's right to self-defence, to security, and peace.

But most of all, in these urgent situations the people of Gaza and people of Palestine are facing, we must act with urgency to address the basic needs. The basic needs to sustain human life, the basic human right.

Thank you very much.

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

Next on the Speaker's list is Mr Bernard SABELLA.

Go on. Have you put your badge in? Have you inserted the badge? You have to insert the badge.

Press the button once and wait for a couple of seconds.

You have to insert the badge and leave the badge in. Leave the badge in.

Mr Bernard SABELLA (Palestine): Yeah. Thank you. Thank you. I'm sorry for this.

We, the Palestinian delegation, commend the report of Ms Saskia KLUIT of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development.

I think this has been a labor of seriousness to consider the effects of war and destruction, since 7 October 2023, on the people of Gaza.

At the same time, allow me to say, we in the Palestinian delegation are very pleased with the ceasefire, and we hope for the release of all hostages and for our people, for our Palestinian people to really have all the amenities that normal people want and desire to have.

Certainly, 7 October 2023 has driven a big wedge between Israelis and Palestinians. But I think that the 7 October attack, which is not acceptable by many of us in Palestine, and also the non-acceptable, disproportionate war by Israel on Gaza, means that we need to think of ways out of this polarisation between Israelis and Palestinians. Otherwise, we are stuck, and we will go back to war, and we'll go back to confrontations.

We cannot politicise the humanitarian situation. And I think it is very clear that unless we tend to the wounds of Palestinians as well as to the wounds of Israelis, we cannot make progress forward.

And I commend the Council of Europe finally to at least have come up with a report that speaks to the wounds of the people who have suffered this war.

I would like also to say that there is a responsibility to the Council of Europe not only to tend to the humanitarian situation, but also to work very hard on the political side of things in order to bring peace to Palestine and Israel.

And I do hope that what is happening today in the West Bank, in the cities of Jenin and Tulkarm, will not be a repeat of what happened in Gaza during more than 16 months.

Finally, I would say there is no way forward except the way of peace. No return to war would guarantee peace to Israelis. No return to war and hostilities would guarantee peace to us Palestinians.

We have to look forward and work together for the future of peace and stability in our region, and you have a role to play in this.

Thank you very much.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): I would now like Ms Meirav BEN ARI to take the floor.

Ms Meirav BEN ARI (Israel): Thank you, Mister President.

Distinguished Member of the Parliamentary Assembly, tomorrow this Council will mark 80 years from the liberation of Auschwitz. Its base is an international day for remembering the victim, but education the next generation against hate and against terrorism and against dehumanisation.

For the people in Israel, 7 October is the most painful day for the Jewish people since the Holocaust. Yes, every Jewish in Israel feels that 7 October is a painful remembrance for being Jewish, Jewish in Israel.

I came here today with my colleague Mr Boaz BISMUTH and I listened. I listened to the rapporteur. I am the whip of the opposition. You cannot suspect that I am in favour of my government. I have criticised my government every week in the plenary and in the committees. But this rapporteur is not against Israel, she is against the people of Israel, against the children of Israel. Against Israel. That every day that we are sitting here, more than 600 trucks are moving to the Gaza Strip for the civilians with food, with medicine aid, something that our hostages can only dream of. 600 trucks.

Imagine that you have been attacked, murdered your people 1 200 in one day, and you are supplying every day, every day more than 600 trucks crossing the border to Gaza Strip.

Why no one speaks about it in this report?

Why don't you mention, thanks God, that I went with Mr FASSINO to the Krem Shalom crossing and he saw it in his own eyes. He saw the humanitarian aid that we are moving.

Why didn't you mention this in your report? Why you didn't mention the babies? Kfir Bibas, Ariel Bibas. They are also babies who suffer from war. They are captive in Gaza.

So you told me it's a rapporteur about Gaza, and I really try everything to hold myself and Mr FASSINO told me, please, Meirav, and I strongly believe that you need to hear me and not be angry about me.

But when you put a rapporteur about Israel and you don't mention our help to the Gaza people and you don't mention our civilians who are suffering every day from this terror organisation, this is not a report, this is one side of the story and you took Hamas' story and this is shame, shame that Hamas is the representative in your report.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Dear, Meirav, with all due respect, I would ask you kindly to change the wording that Hamas is represented in this report.

You, and I respect your opinion, may have disagreements about the report, but by saying that Hamas is represented in a report of the Council of Europe, I think that you are not just. And I think that it would be better if you just changed the wording, instead of talking about the rapporteur, talking about the report.

This is my personal opinion, and I would kindly ask you to make the change.

Ms Meirav BEN ARI (Israel): ...that to take 45 000 people who killed in Gaza from the Ministry of Health it's the data of Hamas it's not the data that we know, and of course I'm sorry if you offend from us, believe me, to suffer from 20 years of missile attacks and murders of our people just because they are Jewish in Israel, believe me, we are suffering more than everyone, everyone who sits here in this chamber.

But I'm sorry if you're offended. I'm sorry.

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

Thank you.

Dear colleagues, we are going on with Ms Gökçe GÖKÇEN.

Ms Gökçe GÖKÇEN (Türkiye, SOC): Thank you, Mister President.

Dear colleagues, I do not come from a country free from terrorism. When we speak of fight against terrorism, I come from a place where society is very sensitive to this issue. I live in a country where I can fully understand how people might feel insecure about violence.

However, I also know what fight against terrorism is and what it is not. Fighting terrorism cannot be achieved through disproportionate responses to attacks. Killing children is not self-defence. Forcibly displacing more than 1 million people is not self-defence.

In Gaza, civilians, women, the elderly, and children have suffered immense harm. Tens of thousands of people have lost their lives and humanitarian aid was blocked.

The food crisis has reached unacceptable levels. Diseases have spread and medical assistance has become impossible. Hundreds of thousands of survivors will now live with these traumas. Children will grow up in a place where their fundamental rights are never recognised.

In Gaza, not only the lives have been threatened. A propaganda war was also waged. In this propaganda, Palestinians were dehumanised.

This is not a fight over who started first when it comes to humanitarian law. But let's also remember that history did not start on 7 October. What we face today is the result of a much deeper historical context.

Dear colleagues, the Council of Europe is putting in tremendous efforts to ensure the implementation of its court rulings. What makes Europe valuable is its commitment to protecting rights that are universal for all of us, without discrimination.

The people of the Middle East, the people of Palestine, are no less human. They are not numbers.

The orders of the International Court of Justice and the decisions of the International Criminal Court against Israel are not decisions we can ignore.

Dear colleagues, we are at a turning point in history. The world is currently in a period of multiple crises, and institutions like the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe stand at a crossroads.

We face a difficult decision and I believe this work will be one of the big steps.

I would like to congratulate dear Saskia for her hard work for this report, which looks at Gaza from the humanitarian perspective it deserves.

And I hope this will only be the beginning.

Thank you.

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

Mr Joseph Beppe FENECH ADAMI is next.

Mr Joseph Beppe FENECH ADAMI (Malta, EPP/CD): Mister President, may I start by thanking the rapporteur on the presentation of this report and resolution being discussed and voted upon in this plenary session.

This report comes at a very defining moment of the conflict in the Middle East, triggered primarily by the 8 October massacre of 2023, followed by a full-blown conflict in Gaza, escalating as well in the West Bank, in Lebanon and affecting the whole region.

Dear colleagues, this is a conflict which has gripped the conscience of the international community and underscored the urgent need for unity, compassion and action.

On 7 October 2023, a horrific terrorist attack by Hamas and other militias against Israel claimed countless innocent lives and violated the fundamental principles of human dignity and rights. This Assembly has unequivocally condemned these atrocities, calling for justice and the immediate release of all hostages still held in captivity.

In response to this tragedy, military operations in Gaza have created a humanitarian catastrophe of unimaginable proportions. More than 43 000 lives have been lost, with women and children comprising the majority of casualties.

The infrastructure of Gaza, homes, schools and hospitals have been reduced to rubble, leaving hundreds of thousands in desperate need of basic necessities.

As we speak, we are still faced with a humanitarian crisis which threatens to deepen further. With so many families displaced, multiple times lacking shelter, food and medical care.

The recent ceasefire agreement of a few days ago offers a glimmer of hope, a chance to pause the cycle of violence and prioritise human lives. But we must ensure that this is not merely a temporary reprieve. So, once again, it is our duty to call on all parties to uphold their obligations under international humanitarian law. Civilians must be protected, humanitarian aid must flow unhindered, and the attacks on medical and humanitarian workers should not be allowed to happen again. This is not just a legal obligation, this is a moral imperative.

Mister President, once again, implore Hamas to immediately release all – yes, all – hostages and grant access to the International Committee of the Red Cross. The suffering of these individuals, compounded by the dire conditions in Gaza, are absolutely unacceptable.

Mister President, in the name of humanity, in the name of human dignity, we demand a swift and unconditional return of all hostages to their families.

As this Parliamentary Assembly, we affirm our commitment to ensuring accountability, justice and sustainable peace.

I call on member states and the international community to provide and increase immediate humanitarian aid to rebuild Gaza's devastated infrastructure and ensure medical care to those affected by the conflict.

Children who have suffered the most deserve safe space, education and hope for a brighter future.

Thank you, Mister President.

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

Is Iwona here?

No.

Ms Fiona O'LOUGHLIN.

Ms Fiona O'LOUGHLIN (Ireland, ALDE): Thank you, Mister President.

And I want to thank Ms Saskia KLUIT for her report and all the work that has gone into it.

And I've listened carefully to the words from Mr Bernard SABELLA and from Ms Meirav BEN ARI. And Mr SABELLA has asked that we look forward and that we work together. And that is hugely, hugely important.

We often hear the Irish poet, Seamus HEANEY's words quoted at political gatherings. And hope and history rhyme. The beginning of that particular piece of poetry starts with "Human beings suffer, they torture one another" and never has the world witnessed such suffering and torture since the Holocaust, 80 years ago, as in the last 480 days. More than 15 months of daily bombardments, deaths, injuries, displacement, and starvation. 47 000 people have been killed and we know that 70% of these have been women and children. Almost three times that number have been injured, with about 25% of those suffering life-changing injuries. Almost every day, 10 children lose one or both legs. One million children are among the 1.9 million Palestinians who have been displaced and 20 000 children have become orphans. More than 96% of women and children cannot meet their basic nutritional needs. And we must remember that 155 000 women are now pregnant or breastfeeding.

So just imagine the world for those children, for those babies.

My country, Ireland, along with all of the other countries, certainly welcomes the agreement reached on a hostage-release and ceasefire deal. And of course we must demand that all remaining hostages be released. It is also positive to see significant amounts of aid enter Gaza since 19 January after months of obstruction by Israeli forces.

We need to see a continued and sustained massive scale up of humanitarian aid into Gaza, a return of basic services and a clear framework under which those that are displaced from the conflict can return and receive the required medicines, nutritional needs, and supports.

Ireland's long standing support for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains an integral aspect of our foreign policy, and our government is working to build consensus at EU and international level to support that implementation of a negotiated two-state solution and lasting peace process.

And I ask all of you here to use your powers of persuasion to support this in your country.

Seamus HEANEY also said:

"So hope for a great sea-change on the far side of revenge. Believe that further shores reachable from here."

We have to believe in miracles and in cures.

Thank you.

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

I know that there are colleagues who are complaining and they are right.

If we do not respect the time limit, then some of our colleagues will not have the ability to take the floor. So please keep in the time limit.

Joseph, Joseph O'Reilly.

Mr Joseph O'REILLY (Ireland, EPP/CD): Could I begin, Mister President, by congratulating my colleague Fiona on that fine address?

Might I, first of all, welcome the report and again say that its focus is on the humanitarian situation, with particular reference to women and children.

Ireland welcomes the agreement and the ceasefire, as do all right-thinking people here. We are glad that food entered Gaza on Sunday, 19 January after months of blocking.

We cannot escape the reality – and the tragic reality – that 43 000 lives were lost, 100 000 civilians were injured and 122 000 people died of various ailments because of the situation.

We cannot escape the reality and the return to the rubble of those people on television now is pitiful on our screens – 1.9 million Palestinians have been displaced; 19 000 have been orphaned or left without a caregiver; the Israeli military have deprived children access to food, water and medical aid; risk of famine persists; 96% of women and children cannot meet nutritional needs; 155 000 women are pregnant or breastfeeding; and a number of women, as has been stated earlier, are having their babies without anaesthetic and without any proper medical support; 98 000 children already had a disability; medicine is in scarce supply and is needed.

Now a report from the UN, and this is not Hamas, of 6 November 2024, said that in the six months from November 2023 to April 2024, 70% of fatalities were women and children.

Now, we should be advocating ongoing amelioration of the neglect and the misery and seeking aid. That's our job. All leaders up on that platform and in the body of this hall should be loud in seeking that from now on. That amelioration is needed. We should, as my colleague said earlier, be seeking the two-state solution, not President TRUMP's proposition, that people be brutally lifted up and transported to another land.

We need a political solution. But the focus of this report is that we need a humanitarian solution. It behoves us – and we have no right to be here, if we are not from the top table right through this Assembly calling for an amelioration, an immediate input to deal with the humanitarian reality with bringing in aid, bringing in medical supplies, rebuilding Gaza – that's needed and parallel with that are political developments to bring about a two-state solution.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Aysu Bankoğlu. You're next.

Ms Aysu BANKOĞLU (Türkiye, SOC): President,

I thank dear Ms Saskia KLUIT for her compassionate and timely report on humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza. Sadly, we have not paid enough attention as a human rights body to this tragedy. We have faced and watched unprecedented destruction, occupation and killings which are absolutely against international humanitarian law.

Women and children have faced the devastation of their homes, the loss of loved ones and the crippling scarcity of essential resources, food, water, medicine and shelter. As we speak, thousands, especially the most vulnerable ones, are living under terrible conditions.

Over 38 000 Palestinian children have lost their parents. Children have died from starvation and dehydration. One third of children under the age of three are now malnourished.

For the women of Gaza, the challenge of providing decent care for their children between the ruins remains insurmountable.

For the children whose laughter has been replaced by cries, this is not merely a crisis, it is a theft of their future.

I'm glad that there is now a ceasefire and I hope this ceasefire will be lasting and permanent.

The release of prisoners and hostages is another welcome development.

However, we should not forget that the ceasefire agreement is not a solution in itself. Gaza is now the wasteland with no homes, no schools or hospitals. But what is left is just rubble.

It is now time to put even more attention to the Gaza tragedy. We must deliver unhindered aid. We must help Gaza to rebuild its infrastructure and homes. We must send humanitarian aid people to assist these efforts.

We have another obligation to Gaza and Palestine. We must prevent Israel from attacking Palestine and its people again. We must use our national political mechanisms as well as this body, to exert pressure on Israel to stop its occupation, to stop building settlements, to stop the state-sponsored settler violence. We must immediately start working towards a two state solution.

I would like to end with a poem by a Palestinian poet:

"Oh, rascal children of Gaza. You, who constantly disturb me with your screams under my window. You, who filled every morning with rush and chaos. You, who broke my vase and stole the lonely flower on my balcony. Come back and scream as you want and break all my vases. Steal all the flowers. Come back. Just come back."

Thank you.

(Applause)

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

Mr Theo BOVENS is next.

Theo.

Mr Theo BOVENS (Netherlands, EPP/CD): Mister President, dear colleagues,

Yesterday His All Holiness Patriarch BATHOLOMEW gave an impressive speech, in which he called upon all faiths to invest in mutual understanding, dialogue and living peacefully together on this one planet. And he mentioned his warm co-operation with the Roman Catholic Church, and especially the Latin Patriarchate in the Holy Land, that looks after the Catholics in Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Cyprus. The presence of Christianity in the Middle East is and stays very important.

I myself am member of an international catholic organisation that supports the Patriarchate in Jerusalem, the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre. We support financially, and in our prayers parishes, schools, youth organisations, elderly homes, hospitals etcetera. And yes, we do that also in Gaza.

Because of that I'm looking with the greatest concern and in great sadness to the humanitarian situation in Gaza. Patriarch Cardinal PIZZABALLA visited a few days before Christmas the parish of the Holy Family in Gaza, and celebrated mass there, as he did on Christmas Eve in Bethlehem. I recommend my colleagues to read his sermons given in these events.

Dear colleagues, it can be difficult to choose sides in the conflict which is highly complicated to follow in detail. I strongly condemn the terrorist attack by Hamas and other terrorist movements on 7 October 2023. And I strongly support the legal right of the State of Israel to defend itself and to try to free hostages and attack terrorist movements.

All of us here, members and observers, and I mean everybody, wants to make an end to the suffering of the people of Gaza and Israel. That unites us as being humans. But we are not united in how to achieve this, not thinking the same about who's to blame most, who's the most responsible, who should start first, who should end.

And that's why it is important that the international community takes a stand in favour of the innocent civilian population, according to international humanitarian law. Fighting and blaming is one thing, but solving the crisis, fixing the deplorable situation of women and children, is another thing. The resolution of today asks just for that, and does that in a remarkable balanced way. Starting with a lasting ceasefire and the release of hostages, we now should focus on the humanitarian situation, access to health care, availability of food, education, housing and shelter.

Minister BETTEL of Luxemburg said yesterday: the rule of law protects the innocent against the force of the powerful. We as Assembly should take the side of the weak, the innocent, the victims, against the power of terrorist organisations, against the power of conflict and the power of war.

And that is also the message of people of goodwill to the other people of goodwill: peace shall be on you, that's the only way.

And I will vote in favour of this resolution and thank the rapporteur and her team for the balanced approach, based on international law.

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

Alfred Heer, you have the floor.

Mr Alfred HEER (Switzerland, ALDE): Thank you, Mister President.

I wish I could thank Ms Saskia KLUIT for her report, but I'm not able to do so. It's completely one-sided and I listened very carefully to what you mentioned about the humanitarian law.

What about the humanitarian law on 7 October? What about the hostages? What about the access of the Red Cross for the hostages? Is there any access for them? No. It's a breach of humanitarian law. What about the terrorist attack against civilians, against families, mothers, children? What do you say about that? Did I hear ever anything from you when Hamas took over the Gaza Strip and when they killed the Fatah brothers? Have I ever heard anything from you about humanitarian law? I didn't hear anything. Did I hear anything when they abused billions of taxpayers' money, dollars and euros which they kept in their pockets, the Hamas terrorists,

they had a luxury life in Qatar. They used it to buy military equipment. They used it to build tunnels with it. They didn't give it to the people in Gaza, to the poor people you are deploring now. They kept it for themselves mainly. I never heard from you about humanitarian law.

You said that there is no free press in Gaza now. Was there a free press before? There was never a free press in Gaza under this terroristic regime. And this we should bear in mind. And with Israel we have the only democratic state. We have freedom of press. We have demonstrations nearly every week against the government which we don't see anywhere in the near Middle East. They have a rule of law, they have separation of powers which we don't see anywhere. And you don't mention this.

They send rockets from Lebanon, they send rockets from Yemen, they send rockets from the Gaza Strip. What about that? About humanitarian law? What about the displaced persons in Israel that cannot live anymore in the north of Lebanon and in the area of the Gaza Strip? You don't mention them at all. It's a shame, I'm sorry to say so. Your report is one-sided, is a shame. And Jews are no more safe in Europe, they're not safe in the Netherlands, they're not safe in France, they are even not safe in Switzerland. Because we have those terrorists here. And the only place where Jews should be safe is in Israel. And if they cannot be safe there anymore, then we will have a revival of a second Holocaust and you will be responsible for it.

So we should support Israel in its right of self defence and release the hostages. And then this nightmare will be over.

Thank you.

(Applause)

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

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

I thank the rapporteur for this important report.

Dear colleagues,

After more than a devastating year of war between Israel and Hamas, a ceasefire has finally been reached.

This truce included an exchange of prisoners and allowed much-needed humanitarian aid to reach affected areas.

Until when? I don't know, but I know that Palestinians need peace to rebuild their lives and their homes. I know that women and children of Palestine have a right to live in peace. Enough of bombs and violence! Enough destruction and death! Enough of the useless suffering!

The war in Gaza following the terrorist attack on 7 October 2023 has escalated into a devastating humanitarian crisis.

The continuous bombing and ground operations have caused countless civilian deaths and have left the population without access to basic humanitarian services or safe refuge. These actions represent a grave violation of international humanitarian law and children's rights.

Entire cities have been reduced to rubble, and hundreds of thousands of people were forced to flee their homes.

A sustainable resolution to this conflict must address the root causes, including decades of displacement, systemic inequality, and the denial of self-determination. Peace cannot be achieved without justice, and justice cannot be served without a commitment to human rights and the rule of law.

The international community must also ensure that organisations like the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East are not hindered in their vital work.

The ceasefire did not end the humanitarian crisis. Children continue to be left without access to education, without access to health care, without food, without a home and without a family. Children will suffer the consequences of this war for many years, various consequences, physical and psychological consequences. In many cases, most probably, they will suffer throughout their lives the effects of this war, of the many deficiencies, of what they saw, they heard and suffered.

Thank you.

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

Mr Niklaus-Samuel GUGGER is next.

Mr Niklaus-Samuel GUGGER (Switzerland, EPP/CD): Mister President, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for the draft report on the humanitarian situation in Gaza.

Unfortunately, this report is not balanced. Why? The report is primarily based on data from the Ministry of Health in Gaza, which is under the control of the terrorist organisation Hamas. The report unfortunately relies on this biased data, ignoring credible and verified information from the Israeli authorities. In Switzerland, Hamas is classified as a terrorist organisation and it is therefore very surprising that the Ministry of Health is adopted with relative impartiality.

In particular, the report does not address the following points: Israel has consistently taken steps to prevent a humanitarian crisis in Gaza by allowing the transfer of unlimited humanitarian aid. Conversely, Hamas has systematically sabotaged and looted this aid, as well as abused it and prevented it from reaching the civilian population. Until the ceasefire agreement, Israel facilitated the transport of over 1 326 tons of humanitarian aid - with more than 66 000 trucks and over 10 000 airdrops.

Over 2 400 aid trucks have also arrived in Gaza since the beginning of the ceasefire. Yes, people forget: Hamas has continuously committed war crimes throughout the conflict, firing thousands of rockets and projectiles at Israeli civilian areas. It has committed double war crimes by using the civilian population in Gaza as human shields and hiding weapons, launching pads and terror tunnels in hospitals, schools, mosques and other civilian infrastructure.

Therefore, I will support several amendments and oppose others. I am grateful that we have at least a fragile ceasefire agreement today. I call for the hostages to be released immediately and conclude with the famous quote: "Imagine there is a war and nobody goes." This absurdity and senselessness is already described by wars. It reminds us that wars can only be waged with the participation of people. If no one participates, there is no war. It is a powerful appeal for peace and solidarity. Thank you.

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

Mr George LOUCAIDES is next.

Mr George LOUCAIDES (Cyprus, UEL): Thank you, Mister President, dear colleagues,

I would like to congratulate and thank the rapporteur for the objective and impartial work she has done.

Today is an important day for the Parliamentary Assembly because even at this late point in time, through this Resolution, we are saving to some extent the organisation's credibility and dignity in relation to our response to the Gaza war.

I would like to recall that for one year this Assembly has not felt compelled to nor shocked enough by the genocide of the Palestinians in Gaza to request a discussion under urgent procedure that would have led to the adoption of a resolution.

At a time when millions around the world, including many Jews, were demonstrating against Israel's atrocities and demanding an immediate ceasefire and the release of the hostages, we went a step further from remaining silent.

The resolution we adopted last January called for a ceasefire, but on the crucial condition that Israel totally dismantle Hamas. In effect, dear colleagues, this was an indirect authorisation to continue the war.

It is regrettable that the ceasefire agreement, which was welcomed with much relief and satisfaction by all peace-loving people around the world, was reached without any input from us here in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

My aim is not to criticise those responsible for this dark page in the history of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Council of Europe. We now have the opportunity, beginning with this report and resolution, to follow a different path, this time truly in line with the principles and values of this organisation.

We must condemn extremism wherever it comes from and break from a new vicious cycle of violence that will harm both the Palestinian and the Israeli people. That includes the West Bank and Jenin.

We can start on a new path in which all parties will respect international law, international humanitarian law and relevant UN resolutions that must serve as the compass leading to lasting peace, stability, security and prosperity for both peoples.

We must assist in ending the occupation of the Palestinian territories, the illegal settlements and the systematic violations of Palestinian people's human rights. We must be both consistent and persistent in our efforts to reach peace that can only be realistically achieved through a two-state solution with two peoples living together in peace on the basis of the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as capital, co-existing side by side with the State of Israel.

Last but not least, we must make sure that all recommendations in the Resolution will be implemented and monitored in order to mitigate, to the extent that we can, the unprecedented humanitarian crisis that has mostly affected, let us not forget, women and children.

Thank you.

(Light applause)

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

Margo Greenwood.

Ms Margo GREENWOOD (Canada): Thank you, Mister President.

Honourable colleagues,

I begin by acknowledging the ancestors and peoples of these lands from the past, the present and into the future.

Hamas' horrific terrorist attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 has been called the deadliest day in Israel's history.

Since then, according to the WHO, more than 46 000 people have been killed in the Gaza Strip and Hamas' horrific terrorist attack on 7 October 2023 has been called "the deadliest day in Israel's history."

Over 100 000 Gazans are injured and missing.

Rapporteur Ms Saskia KLUIT's report called for "an immediate and unconditional ceasefire and the immediate release of hostages."

The images we have seen, of young women emerging from captivity, one with missing fingers and the drone footage showing the complete razing of Gaza, were yet another brutal reminder of how essential this ceasefire is.

As rapporteur Ms Saskia KLUIT's report emphasised, in wartime, women and children are the most vulnerable civilians.

In Gaza, they have accounted for 70% of the casualties.

But statistics are too abstract to truly convey the pain and suffering that have been inflicted on Gazans, particularly on women and children.

To help us know and understand, Ms Saskia KLUIT provides us with some concrete examples.

Imagine the trauma, she tells us, of a Gazan child undergoing an amputation in "unspeakable conditions".

Imagine a Gazan child with third-degree burns who cannot be hospitalised because there are no beds.

Imagine a Gazan child with leukaemia who cannot access medical care or medication.

And now imagine that these children are all orphans.

Because that is increasingly the reality.

The report quoted the United Nations' Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator, who said that it has become common in Gaza for injured children to have written on their arms "wounded child, no surviving family".

Women too have suffered terrible physical and psychological pain.

More than 183 women are estimated to be giving birth every day without any pain relief.

Newborn babies are dying.

What is vital right now is that this ceasefire holds.

Yesterday, in the Political Affairs and Democracy Committee, I heard parliamentarians speaking of Israel and Palestine, of the lived realities the peoples of those lands were experiencing. What struck me most was that the people of these lands are all suffering – all of them.

In closing, I want to share a teaching given to me by one of my Indigenous Elders: “You cannot change the darkness with darkness; only the light can change the darkness.”

Let us show our children the light.

Thank you.

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

Mr Mehmet AKALIN is next.

Mr Mehmet AKALIN (Türkiye, ALDE): Thank you, Mister President,

Honourable members of the Parliamentary Assembly,

First of all, I would like to thank the rapporteur for this detailed report on Gaza.

The attack on civilians by Hamas launched on 7 October and widespread violence has led to prolonged conflict and tragedy in Gaza.

According to UN Women, out of over 40 000 casualties, 70% are Palestinian women and children. 85% of Gaza's population has been displaced, including nearly one million women and children.

Whilst the fragile ceasefire between Israel and Hamas has allowed hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to return to northern Gaza after 15 months of intense conflict, residents are confronting widespread disruption and infrastructure collapse, and essential services like water and electricity have been severely disrupted. The scale of devastation poses significant challenges to reconstruction efforts.

Children, the innocent victims in this devastating conflict, are not just losing their childhoods, they are losing their futures.

Humanitarian workers who dedicated their lives to saving others are operating under unimaginable pressure but still continue to deliver aid whilst their work is being hampered by severe shortages and blocked accesses. 90% of Gaza's population is experiencing acute food shortages, leading to rising malnutrition rates, especially among children.

Despite the recent ceasefire, a shortfall of humanitarian aid underscores the need for consistent and increased humanitarian assistance to meet the basic needs of the Palestinians.

The health system in Gaza is on the brink of collapse. The war has severely compromised maternal and child healthcare services. Efforts to establish safe and well equipped medical establishments must be made priority, enabling people who are injured or ill to get the medical care needed.

The destruction of homes and infrastructure is immense. We must prioritise the construction of temporary shelters that can provide refuge and allow families to rebuild and create some normality back into their lives. Children need to be back in the classroom. We must commit to rebuilding schools as soon as possible and provide educational activities and support that will assist in them learning to overcome the trauma that has been inflicted upon them.

The women, children and humanitarian workers of Gaza are not just statistics. They are mothers, fathers, daughters, sons and neighbours. They are people with dreams and aspirations, just like us. And they are counting on us to stand with them in their darkest hour.

Let us also recognise that while the road to recovery may be long, our actions today can lay the foundations for a better future; one built on compassion, justice and peace.

A two state solution for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, offering the potential for peace and security for both peoples, is the way forward.

Achieving this, however, requires bold leadership, mutual compromises and sustained international support.

Thank you.

(Light applause)

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

Aurora Florida you have the floor.

Ms Aurora FLORIDIA (Italy, SOC): Thank you, Mister President, dear colleagues,

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Ms Saskia KLUIT for her outstanding work on this crucial and balanced report. Its presentation in this Parliamentary Assembly marks an important moment for the Council of Europe, reaffirming our commitment to the core principles of human rights and humanitarian law, that are and should remain our guiding light. I urge all of you to adopt this report, as it represents not just a document, but a vital message to the world.

The humanitarian crisis in Gaza is not merely a distant tragedy. The facts are heartbreaking: over 43 000 lives have been lost, with women and children making up 70% of the victims. An estimated 120 000 people have died from preventable diseases due to the catastrophic collapse of the health system. Hospitals and schools — over 80% of which have been destroyed — are no longer safe spaces but symbols of the deep suffering of the people of Gaza.

These figures, colleagues, are not just statistics. They reflect shattered families, children who will never grow up.

The Council of Europe must take a firm stand. As parliamentarians of this Parliamentary Assembly — an institution that has championed human rights for decades — it is our moral duty to act decisively. We must make it clear that the respect for humanitarian law is not negotiable. It is part of the DNA of this Council of Europe and a cornerstone of the values we stand for. For the same reason, all hostages must be free.

That is why the adoption of this report is essential. Beyond its facts and figures, it sends a powerful message: that this Parliamentary Assembly will not turn its back on Gaza, furthermore that we are steadfast in our commitment to uphold human dignity, protect civilians, and ensure that humanitarian aid reaches those who desperately need it.

Dear colleagues, today, we are not debating politics. We are not taking sides in a conflict. There is no propaganda for one side or the other in this report.

We are speaking about a humanitarian crisis.

As the Council of Europe, we have the opportunity — and the responsibility — to lead by example. Let us be the voice of humanity and solidarity in these dark times. Let us remind the world that peace, respect for human rights, and humanitarian aid are not abstract ideals but urgent imperatives.

I urge you to support this report and clearly show that the Council of Europe remains a beacon of hope and humanity.

We owe it to the present and future generations of our fragile world.

Thank you.

(Applause)

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

Lord Leslie GRIFFITHS is next. Dear Leslie, you have the floor.

Lord Leslie GRIFFITHS (United Kingdom, SOC): Thank you, President, and thank you, colleagues, for the impressive speeches that have been made.

I don't need to repeat the statistics. They've been made and made again. Nor do I need, really, to protect Hamas from proper criticism. What happened on October 7 was horrendous, and it needs constantly to be in our minds. The way that Hamas has manipulated aspects of the case also needs to be recognised and kept in the front of our minds. But we're not debating that now.

We're debating the fact that even when some of the people were hiding or were being used by Hamas as shields, many thousands of others were not. And it isn't true that all the hostilities have taken place against schools and hospitals that were hiding Palestinian civilians. There are many who weren't. The pictures of those terrible crowds being pushed this way and that way is reminiscent of other pictures of a similar nature I could recount now for the benefit of this debate.

It is horrible and something must be done.

This report is about the plight of people who are suffering for whatever reasons that may be put forward. Thousands, indeed tens and hundreds of thousands of people are in dire straits, and everybody on either side of the debate about what needs to happen here has to recognise that, and that's what has to be addressed, and that's what this report is all about.

One further thing before I finish, and it is that in London, in the comfort of my home, I watch on television what's happening in Ukraine. And whilst I do that, reports are fed back by reporters, international reporters embedded in the Ukrainian army, reporting on what's happening.

Why is that not happening in this instance? Why is the international journalist not allowed to tell us? Why are we constantly told to doubt the figures of the Hamas authorities? Why should we believe the figures of the Israeli Defence Force?

We need people on the ground to help us see with eyes that can see the extent of the suffering, the need for a response.

And it needs to happen as soon as possible.

(Applause)

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

Meryem Göka, you have the floor.

Ms Meryem GÖKA (Türkiye, NR): Thank you so much.

Dear President and colleagues,

The only crime was being born in Gaza.

For 467 days, Gaza has endured unimaginable horrors.

Children were torn to shreds by bombs; and journalists targeted and killed, marking the greatest massacre of media professionals in modern history. Hospitals, schools, mosques, churches obliterated. Four hundred and sixty-seven days of hunger, despair and inhumanity.

And now, over 50 000 innocent lives have been killed by Israel, most of them women and children. These are not just numbers. They each have a name, a face and a story.

The tragically overdue ceasefire will not repair the lives of Palestinians shattered by Israel's genocide in Gaza, and instead of stopping this genocide, the world has normalised the dehumanisation of Palestinians.

Auschwitz was remembered by all, yet no lessons were learned from history. We said "never again", but failed to honour that promise.

Is it possible to justify the unjustifiable? The principle of human dignity must apply to all people yet the Western media has remained deafeningly silent, repeating Israeli propaganda and whitewashing its crimes. Without this silence and complicity, the genocide could not have been sustained.

Justice is not a privilege for the few. It's a right for all. There can be no double standard when it comes to human rights. And all around the world, millions of people are rising up in solidarity with Palestine. But the weaponisation of terms like anti-Semitism has been used to silence those who dare to speak out.

But let me be clear, no accusation, no misdirection and no silence can hide the truth. No one can say we didn't know. When this chapter of history is written, it will be written by the people of Palestine who documented their suffering in every heartbreaking detail. And these all will stand as undeniable evidence of what happened. The truth is out there for all to see.

For Palestinians who have lost so much, there is little to celebrate when there is no guarantee that they will get justice and reparation for the horrifying crimes they have suffered. But darkness cannot last forever. Even in the deepest struggles, hope remains on the horizon, unshaken, untamed and eternal.

The thirteenth-century poet and Islamic scholar Mevlana Jalal ad-Din RUMI from the Turkish city of Konya reminds us, "There is hope after despair, and many suns after darkness". We will not remain silent and we will not rest until the occupation is ended and there is a two-state solution.

Thank you all. Thank you, Saskia.

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

Ms Nicole DURANTON.

Ms Nicole DURANTON (France, ALDE): Thank you, Mister Chairman.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank and congratulate our colleague Ms Saskia KLUIT for her report on the absolute necessity of putting an end to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

As a member of the French Senate's Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee, I visited Gaza in July 2022 with colleagues from the Committee, before the heinous terrorist attack perpetrated by Hamas on 7 October 2023. I spoke with young Gazans, gauging their distress, their suffering, their sense of abandonment, of being prisoners of this enclave. "We are prisoners of Hamas", they told me. They had never been outside Gaza.

Following this visit, and after numerous exchanges with the Israeli and Palestinian authorities, our commission issued a report. We highlighted the loss of political hope and development prospects for Palestinians cornered in the Gaza Strip. We also pointed to the risk of a generalised conflagration. We foresaw this and, unfortunately, it has come to pass.

Just after 7 October, I went to the horror kibbutz of Beerli, to the scene of the massacre, and met the families of the hostages. I will always remember the poignant exchange I had with the mother of Romy GONEN, freed last week along with Emily DAMARI and Doron STEINBRECHER, after more than 90 days in captivity.

Nothing can justify the terrorist attack perpetrated on 7 October 2023, and it is with deep emotion that I say this as we commemorate tomorrow the 80th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz camp. But nothing in return must lead Israel to violate international humanitarian law, although we must also highlight Hamas's strategy of sheltering behind civilian structures and using civilians as human shields.

I hope that the ceasefire announced between Hamas and Israel holds, and I call for the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages held by Hamas. Today, the challenge is to find a path of hope and development, which must ultimately involve a two-state political solution. To say this today may seem out of reach, but it is the only possible political solution.

The French Senate's Foreign Affairs Committee therefore called for an examination of the conditions for establishing a de jure capital for Palestine in East Jerusalem, for consideration of the question of recognition of the State of Palestine, on condition that it is based on a shared timetable for step-by-step accession to sovereignty, and for the setting of a democratic agenda for Palestine, with an international guarantee for the conduct of elections in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. It called on Israel to abandon its settlement strategy in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and advocated the de-escalation of violence.

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

Piero Fassino, you have the floor.

Mr Piero FASSINO (Italy, SOC): Thank you, Mister President. I am going to speak in Italian. [in English].

I would also like to thank, like many colleagues, my colleague Ms Saskia KLUIT for a report that, as the debate shows, is a difficult report. Difficult because we are talking about a war that has shaken the consciences of each one of us, that has aroused emotion, anguish, disquiet, indignation in everyone and in public opinions. And we are talking about a dramatic, huge humanitarian emergency, which has been documented, which has produced a high number of casualties, a huge amount of destruction of buildings, infrastructure, schools, hospitals, the continuous displacement of hundreds of thousands of people from one part of Gaza territory to another. And all of this was evidently done with unquestionable violations of international law.

There was an Israeli reaction to the terrible massacre of October 7 that was very harsh, that took on disproportionate characters, a reaction that went beyond the right of self-defence that everyone recognised. And so I think it is right what is recalled in the report, the need to denounce violations of international law and to remember that international law is the basis for any behaviour and is not contingent on reciprocity of behaviour.

Just as I think it should also be recalled, my French colleague who spoke before me was doing so now, that international law has not been respected by Hamas, whose responsibilities are not only dramatic for what happened on October 7, but also for what happened afterwards. I recall that the United Nations had called for the unconditional release of the hostages, and we are discussing these days that a conditional hostage release agreement be implemented.

I recall that Hamas has banned Red Cross access to the hostages and a number of other things that we cannot ignore, which of course are serious violations of international law that do not justify other violations of international law that have been carried out by the Israeli side.

In any case, we are now in front of an agreement. And we have to, I think, work for that agreement to be fully implemented. And this is by no means a foregone conclusion, as we have already seen in the early days. We need the release of the hostages to be complete, that there be a free-for-all forwarding of the humanitarian aid that is needed by the civilian population, that the return of the Palestinian population in Gaza and the Israeli population that had to evacuate their cities on the border with Lebanon or Gaza, is a return that is guaranteed and sustained for all.

Above all, a commitment to reconstruction must be put in place, and this requires a strong commitment from the international community. It is precisely the furrow of hatred, of resentment, of suffering produced by the war that makes it necessary to put in place an international initiative without which we will not arrive at peace.

Thank you president.

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

Ms Nerea AHEDO is next.

Nerea, you have asked for the floor. No?

Okay, you are on the speaker list. Are you going to..?

Okay, you can have the floor now.

Ms Nerea AHEDO (Spain, ALDE)*: I'm going to speak in Spanish.

So, we're talking about the conflict between Israel and Palestine here and the need to, of course, condemn the terrorist attack, the taking of hostages, the thousands and thousands of assassinations.

That on the one hand, but we also need to call out the disproportionate unjustified response by Israel.

Some 46 000 casualties, so many minors, children who are now left orphaned as well.

Hospitals and schools weren't shielded, the press was not free, and we're talking about a genuine humanitarian crisis.

Unfortunately, day by day, things are getting worse and worse.

We're talking about an international escalation. Look at what is happening in the West Bank.

Israel is not respecting international or humanitarian law. It is using hunger and illness as weapons of war.

So, we need to call this out.

You can't put this on the same footing. You can't talk about the actions of an organisation or indeed a state; it's not the same level.

I want to talk about not only human rights and dignity. I want to talk about something else as well.

In this report – we have been asking for this for some time now – in this report mention is made of a ceasefire.

The ceasefire seems to have been achieved, but it does not seem to be unconditional or permanent. It's not being respected at all. There are still attacks. There are still people dying. There are still casualties. There are still people who have been previously displaced who cannot move anymore. Yes, there is a corridor now, but where are these people headed towards? To ruins, to devastation.

We're asking for access. Access must be guaranteed, but it is only being guaranteed on a case-by-case basis, drip by drip.

Another point that I wanted to make is the following. In Gaza you have 2 million people who have been displaced. They don't have anywhere to go. They don't have water or food.

Israel actually prevented the UN agency, UNWRA, prevented them from operating in this territory, and they wouldn't give visas to many of the workers, who were refugees as it happens.

This is another issue which needs to be flagged.

We're also talking about 2 000 terrorists allegedly within UNWRA, that was the accusation. I don't know. I've listened carefully to what has been said here. Would that mean that all of the inhabitants of Gaza are terrorists? That would be a way of doing the maths, if you like. That is an accusation that is unfounded, because even though the accusations were made, so many people from UNWRA were dismissed, let go. What about donor countries? They started withdrawing from their donations and this made the situation even worse for the people of Gaza.

We've talked about the United Nations. We have said that the UN is a cornerstone in this particular edifice, but Israel did not respect the work or the role of the UN in the instant case.

We're making declarations. We're talking about good intentions. I think it's important to go beyond that, to really understand the suffering and the escalation of violence.

We're not doing enough, in other words.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Ms Luz MARTINEZ SEIJO is next.

Ms Luz MARTINEZ SEIJO (Spain, SOC)*: Thank you, President.

First of all, I would like to congratulate the Assembly for having put forward this essential debate on the grave, dramatic situation in Gaza.

The European and international community cannot simply turn away in the face of the suffering of thousands of people or what has happened. We are talking about a conflict that hasn't ended. A ceasefire is not the same as peace. This is proven by the fact that since the announcement of the ceasefire, more than 100 people have been killed in bombings and the people of Gaza are terrified the bombing will start again.

It is essential to properly conclude this situation, because since the conflict started, it has now spread to other open fronts – Lebanon, Iran, Syria. Therefore, we need unity if we are to ensure that these countries live together peacefully.

New scientific reports often provide harsh, inhumane truths. During the first nine months of Israel's invasion, there were more than 64 000 deaths caused by traumatic lesions compared with the figure of almost 38 000 recorded by the authorities of the Gaza Strip – that is, 40% more. In addition to the deaths, is an enormous number of people who were injured and have disappeared.

It has already been mentioned but the harshest situations are suffered by the most vulnerable groups – minorities, pregnant women and children. Fifty-nine per cent of deaths in Gaza were women, children and elderly people – vulnerable groups who are not very likely to be fighters.

The people who are killed by the indirect effects of the war are even more numerous than those killed by the war itself – malnutrition, polluted water, a lack of healthcare and so on.

In Gaza, there has been a greater conflict than in other conflicts because of the extremely dense population and the difficulties in getting healthcare through. In other words, we have seen terrible consequences because of a lack of healthcare. There has also been an enormous impact on mental health. We have also seen the reemergence of diseases, which were believed to have disappeared, such as polio.

It is essential now that displaced people are given free access to go back to their homes. We must also ensure that humanitarian emergency aid be made available to those in most need and so that we can provide the support to the almost 2 million displaced people in need, these people have been living in inhumane conditions.

It is essential too that the Palestinian authorities, as well as the humanitarian aid of the United Nations, UNRWA, which must be allowed to keep operating on the Gaza Strip.

The challenges we face in terms of administering and supporting this territory are enormous. Clearing rubble on the Gaza Strip – practically all basic infrastructure in the territory has been destroyed – plumbing, sewers, electricity – everything has been destroyed. The Gaza Strip needs a water system, and that's a real priority. They need urgent resources.

The European Union is working on this, my own country, Spain, has already sent €24 million, which will soon increase to €50 million. But all of that seems like peanuts in the face of the dramatic situation in Gaza.

We should never forget that our ultimate duty is to find a peaceful solution for the future.

We, together with other countries, have been defending the creation of a Palestine state for decades, which would be the real political solution to the conflict.

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

Mr Emmanuel FERNANDES (France, UEL): Thank you, Mister President.

Over thirty years less life expectancy: according to a study by the scientific journal *The Lancet* published last Thursday, since October 7, 2023, life expectancy in Gaza has dropped by at least thirty years. Yes, that's a chilling figure for a population of over 2 million.

In January 2024, however, the International Court of Justice called for the protection of Palestinians in Gaza from acts prohibited by the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Based on reports from WHO, UNRWA and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the Court found that the living conditions imposed on the Palestinians in Gaza, the impossibility of providing them with any real help or care, and the high death toll among women and children, brought the situation in the enclave within the scope of the Genocide Convention.

In March 2024, the same International Court of Justice ordered Israel to take measures to ensure the delivery of aid to Gaza, as the humanitarian situation in the bombed and besieged Palestinian enclave deteriorated. It called on Israel to prevent genocide, which the State of Israel deliberately ignored. In December 2024, an Amnesty International investigation confirmed what everyone could see: Israel was committing genocide against Palestinians in the occupied Gaza Strip.

The Israeli government's refusal to obey the ICJ's demands and to let humanitarian aid in was a clear indication of its genocidal intent. This trampling of international law by Israel is unbearable and unspeakable, and it is high time that our Assembly expressed this forcefully. And I congratulate and thank the rapporteur for her work.

Barely signed, the ceasefire agreement in Gaza is already being threatened and even violated, and at the same time, Israeli forces are stepping up their fire on the West Bank. On Monday morning, the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* reported that a house was targeted without justification or warning during an army raid on the town of Jenin, killing a 2-year-old child, little Laila. Since the beginning of last week, the Israeli army has launched a large-scale operation against the Jenin refugee camp, dubbed the "Iron Wall", just two days after the start of the truce in the Gaza Strip.

Dear colleagues,

We cannot accept that Israel, supported by the so-called Western powers - first and foremost the United States, but also a large number of our Member States - should continue to benefit from this double standard.

Yes, the 90 Israeli hostages still held by Hamas must be released, as must the thousands of Palestinians arbitrarily detained and tortured in Israel, hostages of Israeli supremacism. Yes, those responsible for the terrorist acts and war crimes of October 7, 2023, which resulted in the deaths of 1,200 Israeli civilians, must be condemned. And yes, Benjamin NETANYAHOU, prosecuted by the International Criminal Court, and the Israeli rulers, instigators of genocidal methods resulting in more than 46 000 deaths over more than fifteen months, must be punished.

Stop expansionism, stop colonisation. Palestine will live.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Ms Seda GÖREN BÖLÜK is next.

Ms Seda GÖREN BÖLÜK (Türkiye, NR): Thank you, Mister Chairman.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Over the past year, Gaza has been the scene of an atrocity that we have only encountered in the history books, and which shames us as human beings.

As we held dozens of meetings and discuss various related issues, more than 46 000 people in Gaza have been massacred, more than 30 hospitals and schools have been destroyed, 96% of the population is facing high levels of food insecurity, meaning they are suffering from extreme hunger.

Israeli security forces have used over 85 000 tons of explosives in the Gaza Strip, the equivalent of six nuclear bombs. Babies have died of cold and hunger. Families were burned alive in tents. International organisations were blocked.

Our Parliamentary Assembly was reluctant to adopt strong decisions that might induce Israel, which unfortunately continues to be an observer member of our Council, to end its attacks on the civilian population of Gaza.

Dear colleagues,

The agreement finally and belatedly reached for a ceasefire in Gaza is an important step for justice and humanity. Although this ceasefire is a ray of hope, the scale of the atrocities committed in Gaza has not yet been determined. It has not been determined because neither the lives of journalists have been guaranteed to provide accurate information, nor have humanitarian aid organisations such as UNRWA been able to enter the region. I fear that with the end of the bloody regime in Syria, images like those of Saidnaya prison, which wound our conscience, will also appear in Palestine.

We must therefore ensure that the current ceasefire is respected by Israel, which has continued its bombardments right up to the last minute. Above all, as an international community, we must start work on delivering humanitarian aid as soon as possible. Member countries must immediately assume this moral responsibility.

As a parliamentarian from the country that has provided the most humanitarian aid to Gaza, I would like to stress that Türkiye will assume all its responsibilities in this respect.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to stress once again: peace will be restored with a free Palestinian state, established within the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. Therefore, as parliamentarians, we must support international efforts to achieve a two-state solution, which can be the only guarantee of lasting peace in the region.

Finally, I would like to thank Ms Saskia KLUIT for this report and I hope that her hard work will lead to concrete results.

Thank you for your attention.

Long live Palestine, long live Gaza.

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

Mr Boaz BISMUTH is next.

Mr Boaz BISMUTH (Israel): Thank you Mister President, distinguished members,

I must say that I'm a little bit surprised. I think that you make a little mistake. Everybody thanking the rapporteur. I think the person you should thank between you and me is Mr Alfred HEER, member of the Swiss National Council, because I do believe that is, how would I say, thanks to him, your honour and the values of your Council of Europe are being saved today. So first of all I would like to thank you Mr Alfred HEER for saying the reality, the truth and being one of the only ones who make this sound or those facts being heard.

You know, about a year ago it was exactly on 25 January, I came here to this Assembly and I had a speech then and I was very disappointed by your speeches and I said it. I didn't know that the year after I would be disappointed not only by the speeches, you know, you get used to speeches, but by your report.

And I'll show you why, because, you know, you're commemorating now the 80 years we are commemorating. The world is commemorating the 80 years of the release of the concentration camp of Auschwitz. And we commemorate those horrific years. And I would like to take the rapporteur that two months ago, I think in Amsterdam, Israelis, I mean, who came to watch a football game, were aggressed in a horrific way. But thank God they had a plane, they could go back to their country, which is Israel. And Israel has taken as the obligation to protect its population, to protect the Jews in Israel. And this is exactly what we're doing.

But to show you the hypocrisy of all of you here who are clapping and thanking the rapporteur, let's go back to those years, to those horrific years in the 1940s. Let's imagine now we are in Dresden. Let's go back to the 13-15 February, where, you know, where thousands of bombs fell on a city, of one million population of course. Then you needed to destroy evil. Evil was Nazis. It was a consensus of the free world. Now today, the modern Nazis, everybody agrees that when you come to a territory, you rape, you kill, you hijack, you slaughter, you take a one year old baby back with you and you still keep him in tunnels. This is the new Nazis.

But when it comes to Israel, you, all of you here, clap hands for a report where you demand Israel for unilateral ceasefire. Meaning what? Let's think together, what does it mean, a unilateral ceasefire? And immediate. It means Hamas stays in power in Gaza. Now, you want to tell me that you think really of the Palestinian people? Because if you really love them, if you really like them, if you really care for them, you wouldn't allow them to live under the, how would I say? the regime or reign of a terrorist group. But this is hypocrisy. What you care is again, smashing, insulting, not respecting Israel. Not only the right to defend itself. When you don't respect the right to defend itself, you don't respect its right to exist.

And one last word, Ms Rapporteur. You mentioned UNRWA. The demand of immediately allowing UNRWA to function again. I would send you to Mr Jonathan SAMERANO's parents who I meet almost every week in the Israeli Knesset. His son was hijacked, kidnapped and murdered by an agent of UNWRA. And this was not the only one.

So I can look at you here in Strasbourg and tell you that I'm so proud to be the member of parliament that passed the bill to kick UNWRA out of Jerusalem. Terrorists have no place in Israel.

And the last thing today, something that shocked me this morning, there was an amendment. Last thing, there was an amendment saying that the Ministry of Health is run by Hamas. You refuse that amendment? For me, when you refuse such an amendment, you co-operate with Hamas. You're a Hamas supporter.

Thank you.

(Sporadic applause)

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Ms Valérie PILLER CARRARD is next.

Ms Valérie PILLER CARRARD (Switzerland, SOC): Thank you, Mister Chairman.

Dear colleagues,

First of all, I'd like, yes, once again, to thank our colleague Ms Saskia KLUIT, who spared no effort on the report entitled "The absolute and urgent need to put an end to the humanitarian crisis concerning women, children and hostages in Gaza".

Admittedly, since the report was drawn up, a ceasefire came into effect on 19 January, but it seems highly unstable, despite the good will of the initiators. The peace is therefore very fragile.

What are the findings of this report? A number of figures were mentioned by various speakers. I won't go into them again.

One important finding is that the healthcare system has been virtually destroyed. In addition to deaths, there are also illnesses and diseases. Finally, most of the time, the population of Gaza has no access to essential medicines. Blood supplies do not even cover half the needs, and surgical operations are carried out in tents. If 600 trucks were entering Gaza every day, according to some reports today, I think we'd know.

During the various hearings held by the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development on 13 and 30 September, humanitarian organisations working on the ground in Gaza sounded the alarm, pointing out that 90% of the population has been displaced at least once, and some people up to 15 times. Concentrated in small, overcrowded areas where garbage accumulates because it cannot be removed, displacement is systematically synonymous with a deterioration in living conditions.

The effects of the war are particularly disastrous for Gaza's children, who are deprived of schooling and grow up in total insecurity. In particular, they suffer from various disabling injuries, undergoing amputations, as our rapporteur explained, and, after more than a year of war, show signs of mental disorders with symptoms such as high anxiety, insomnia, emotional or panic attacks whenever they hear bombardments. Their mental health is described as critical.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I invite you to support the various recommendations of this report, which include respect for international humanitarian law and the need to provide special protection for children. But as underlined in point 33 of this report, it is also a question of preparing for the future, so that a healing process can be put in place with massive action at all levels, be it physical and mental health, reconstruction, education or the re-establishment of order.

Just last week, during a radio program on Swiss radio, I heard the testimony of a French teacher living in Gaza who answered the journalist's question. "What will change for you and your family after this ceasefire?" She simply replied that her daughter had told her she was looking forward to being able to sleep in her pyjamas again.

You have to realise that for months now, these children have not been living like other children, no longer wearing pyjamas to sleep in, no longer going to school, no longer being able to play with their friends, no longer having the right to health care and no longer having enough to eat. Today, all they want is to get their lives back to normal, so they can return home in safety.

We have a responsibility. We must commit ourselves in our states to promote a lasting peace and finally implement the Oslo Agreement by creating two independent states.

Thank you for your attention.

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

Mr Armağan CANDAN is next.

Mr Armağan CANDAN (Cyprus* [Resolution 1376 (2004)]): President,

These days we are commemorating the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. And during these commemorations held in Poland, we have seen the survivors of the Holocaust speaking, those who were able to travel at that age there to tell the world what should be learned from the Holocaust and from those bad experiences.

One of them said, memory hurts. Memory helps. Memory guides. Without memory, we have no history, no experience, no point of reference. Another one said, be sensitive to all manifestations of intolerance. Are we going to listen to those people or we will go as we are doing?

Another one said, 90 years old, we all have an obligation not only to remember but also to warn and to teach that hatred begets more hatred and killing more killings. Another Holocaust survivor warned the world, saying, "I appeal to all people of goodwill. And in particular to young people, be sensitive to all manifestations of intolerance and dislike of those who differ in terms of skin colour, religion and sexual orientation".

Well these people had the worst time of their lives when they were kids and they are telling us something now. Will Israel listen to those people? Will those terrorists of Hamas listen to those people? Will the world listen to those people so history doesn't repeat itself or everybody will continue to go their own way and we will continue not to learn from history.

One of the Holocaust survivors said that she missed her mother when she was a child and talked about the conditions, well very similar to what a Gazan baby is going through. So actually history tells us what to do, what not to do.

So I'm really happy and relieved that finally, after so many months, at least some faces smiled both on the Palestinian side and on the Israeli side. After the deal was reached and hopefully we have to keep watching...

Mr Denis BEGIC (Sweden, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

The crisis in Gaza is one of the worst humanitarian disasters we have seen in decades. Women and children are paying the highest price in this tragedy. Thousands of children have died, and many more are injured, traumatized, or orphaned. Pregnant women are giving birth in unbearable conditions, and families are struggling to find even the most basic necessities like food, water, and shelter.

This is not just a crisis of numbers or statistics—it is a crisis of humanity. Behind every number is a child who deserves a future, a mother who deserves safety, and a family that deserves dignity.

The ceasefire that has been signed is a step in the right direction, but it must be respected by all sides. Any further violence risks undoing the fragile progress made. All hostages must be released immediately, without conditions, to bring relief to families and uphold basic human rights.

We must act now! First, Humanitarian aid—food, water, and medical supplies—must flow into Gaza without delay. Aid workers need to be allowed to do their jobs safely, and hospitals must be rebuilt to provide care for the injured and sick.

Second, we must ensure justice. Violations of international law cannot be ignored. Those responsible for targeting civilians and humanitarian workers must face the consequences for their actions, and international courts must have access to investigate and bring justice to the victims.

We must stand up for what makes us human, the values we all share: the right of every person to live in safety, with dignity, and free from fear. The people of Gaza are counting on us to ensure they receive the help they need to survive today and the chance to rebuild their lives tomorrow. We cannot let them down. Their future depends on what we do now.

Thank you.

Mr Stéphane BERGERON (Canada): *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in French*

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

Dear President, dear colleagues,

I sincerely welcome the ceasefire in Gaza and hope it eases the suffering of the Palestinian people. The ceasefire may have been reached, but it does not absolve Israel of the human rights violations it has committed over the past year and before.

There are more than 46 thousand killed by the Israeli Defense Forces since the war erupted. It's heart-breaking that almost 70% of the victims are women and children. The Israeli government still needs to be held accountable for this.

The humanitarian catastrophe in Palestine remains unresolved; the situation for surviving civilians, especially women and children, is still dire.

Approximately around 1.9 million people, 90% of the population are displaced. Over half of the displaced individuals are children and women, facing shortages of water, food, fuel, and medicine.

With the vast majority of buildings in Gaza reduced to rubble, residents face the heartbreaking reality that even if they return to their neighborhoods, there are no homes left for them. As critical infrastructure also lies in ruins, the dire shortages of basic necessities are likely to endure for a long time.

Many women and children will have to continue living in temporary shelters during winter, which poses serious risks to their safety and health.

There is still an urgent need for medical assistance, many people are being deprived of the care that we often take for granted. The few operational hospitals are overwhelmed, and they lack the necessary equipment to perform even basic surgeries.

The ceasefire is just the first step toward ending this horrible situation and suffering. As the forefront of defending human rights, our Assembly must continue to follow and address this grave situation. Moreover, it is essential for Member States to come together in their efforts to uphold the ceasefire and to act promptly in delivering vital humanitarian aid.

Thank you.

Ms Sena Nur ÇELİK KANAT (Türkiye, NR): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Dear colleagues,

The humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza is unprecedented, with fastest acceleration into famine, complete destruction of civilian infrastructure, and displacement of 2 million people. A study published in *The Lancet* estimated that the death toll in Gaza could exceed 186,000, factoring in indirect causes like starvation and lack of healthcare. Mothers in Gaza have buried over 17,000 children, and Gaza now holds the grim record for the highest number of child amputees in history. The world, tragically, has remained a passive observer to what is effectively the first live genocide in human history.

In the face of this devastation, a ceasefire has been reached, halting the immediate violence. This ceasefire is not a solution—it is a pause in the relentless cycle of violence. The illegal settlement expansion in the West Bank, the unchecked rise of settler violence, and the systemic discrimination faced by Palestinians continue unabated. The violations of international law are constant and unchallenged, further deepening the cycle of violence.

The military assault launched by Israel in 2023 has disproportionately ravaged the lives of women and children. The Gaza Strip is the most dangerous place in the world to be a woman or a child. For the women of Gaza, the horrors of this conflict extend far beyond the immediate violence. With limited access to food, water, and medical care, they face the impossible task of keeping their families alive. Pregnant women, already vulnerable, now face severe risks due to the lack of maternal healthcare. The situation of children is even more bleak. The youngest victims of this war bear scars that will last a lifetime. According to an analysis published by Save the Children, an average of 475 children every month – or 15 children a day – have sustained potentially lifelong disabilities due to the use of explosive weapons in the Gaza Strip in 2024.

The ceasefire in Gaza brings hope, but according to the WHO; immense challenges lie ahead to restore life in Gaza. It requires rebuilding of critical infrastructure, including homes, schools and hospitals. Investments in education, job creation and local industries is also important as they can foster long-term resilience. We must now decisively call for the implementation of the ceasefire, delivery of unhindered humanitarian aid, cooperation with UN agencies, especially with UNWRA, support for ICC and ICJ proceedings, a definite end to illegal occupation, and a two-state solution based on the 1967 borders.

Mr Paul GAVAN (Ireland, UEL): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

I want to broadly endorse this report, and especially the clear call for an end to the horrific slaughter of the Palestinian people. Anybody who believes in humanity must endorse the call for an immediate, permanent and unconditional ceasefire.

In addition, we must be clear that the current ceasefire, whilst welcome, is certainly not permanent or unconditional.

My only regret regarding this report is the absence of any clear direct condemnation of the Israeli states genocidal policies. This is despite Israel's continued refusal over one year to comply with provisional measures ordered by the International Court of Justice to prevent genocide in Gaza.

I do see a clear statement of condemnation of the Hamas slaughter of October 7th.

If it was wrong to slaughter 1100 people on that day how can there not be a clear condemnation of the subsequent slaughter of at least 46,000 people, 70% of whom were women and children?

Do some lives have less value? Do our much-vaunted European values not extend to Palestinian women and children? Does our opposition to one state illegally occupying another only extend to Ukraine?

Of course, the genocidal actions of the Israeli state are only made possible due to the supply of weapons, armaments and ammunition by western states, including member states of this assembly.

I am calling here on Britain, Germany and Italy to stop enabling this genocide. And I am calling on our Commissioner for Human Rights Dr Michael O'Flaherty to make a clear call on these member states to stop their sale of weapons to Israel. I would remind Dr O'Flaherty of the words of Martin Luther king; "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."

A Commissioner for Human Rights should never be silent about things that matter. Palestinian lives matter.

One year after a shameful report from this assembly effectively gave a green light for the genocide to continue, the least this assembly must do is endorse this report and its call for an unconditional ceasefire.

In our lifetime we have never witnessed anything like the mass slaughter of women and children that we have seen take place in occupied Gaza. Today I again call for full accountability for this genocide, and justice for the people of Palestine.

Mr Didier MARIE (France, SOC): *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in French*

Mr Cemalettin Kani TORUN (Türkiye, NR): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Dear esteemed colleagues,

For decades, Israel has been working to realise its Zionist ambitions over Palestine, targeting the lives and properties of the Palestinian people and interfering with their basic freedoms. However, since October 7th, these Zionist policies have escalated into one of the greatest genocides of the past century, with 50,000 people ruthlessly slaughtered before the eyes of the entire world. The murderer Netanyahu Government indiscriminately bombed schools, hospitals, and offices of international organisations. A war crime was committed with the killing of 20,000 children.

The Netanyahu Government, emboldened by the silence of the world, has added new massacres to its list every day. While nearly all of the world's populations have called upon their governments to take action for Palestine, Zionist lobbies have blocked any decisive steps. Even today, we witness Israeli observers recording the names of those voting and speaking against Israel within this assembly. Israel's pressure and tyranny are unrelenting.

Now, I ask all my colleagues to reflect on this question: Despite the support of our peoples, why have we been unable to prevent the greatest massacre of the 21st century? Why have intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations and the Council of Europe been unable to impose sanctions on the State of Israel?

There are two possible answers. Either the European states, which claim to guide the world, are powerless to stop the State of Israel, or Europe, which claims to be the founder of universal human rights norms and never compromises on justice and human rights when it concerns its own citizens, chooses to remain passive in the face of this massacre.

Dear Participants,

You are either with the genocide, or against it. There is no third option. For we have recently witnessed that the ultimate goal of Zionism is not limited to Palestinian territories. It is impossible to predict where Israel will stop when it faces no sanctions for its actions in Gaza. The Middle East stands on the brink of a regional war, the repercussions of which will not only affect the region but the entire world. The previous century saw the destructive social, economic, and political consequences of such wars, which all countries present here felt in the harshest manner. These international organisations were established to prevent such wars from recurring.

From here, I once again salute all those fighting for Palestine with the utmost respect.

Long live Free Palestine.

Ms Naomi CACHIA (Malta, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

"The memory of the war will last for a long time. All we ask is to be treated as human beings"

"No one in Gaza is healthy. They have all lost something, whether family, friends or their homes and businesses."

"When you get a message every day informing you that someone you know has been killed, you learn to suppress the pain. I think only now will we realise the full extent of what's happened to us,"

These are all excerpts of quotes from an interview with Gazans with Maltese citizenship published this morning in a newspaper in my country.

This is the effect of war on innocent bystanders whose only fault is that of being born on land which has been torn apart for decades.

Mental anguish, children suffering, children dying.

I was very touched by the resolution and memorandum – and i'd like to congratulate the rapporteur - because it is a very timely reminder, within the context of the ceasefire, of the consequences of this humanitarian catastrophe. Consequences which will long outlast the ceasefire.

It is a reminder of the importance of working for dialogue.

We are often so preoccupied with taking sides – But no matter how you look at the war, I choose, and we must choose - to stand with the victims.

The attacks and ensuing retaliation have left only suffering and fear, leaving people dead, injured, without essential services, hostages and people who are displaced and forced to move from their homes.

And so we must work to bring a lasting end to this suffering. We must say, never again. And in order to do so we must lay the foundations to secure lasting peace in the region, to see the two-state solution finally come to life as the only viable path ahead to ensure peace and security for all.

We must make sure that children, young people are able to aspire to a better future, a future which they deserve.

Ms Marietta KARAMANLI (France, SOC): *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in French*

Ms Jamila MADEIRA (Portugal, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

At the moment we signal the passage of the 80th anniversary of the end of the holocaust we must ensure no one will in no way pass through that again. That's part of the past that we must remember, so that we may never repeat it again.

Having said this, I would like first of all to thank Saskia Kluit for bringing this relevant report at such a symbolic moment to be debated here. This report shows a deep concern about reestablishing peace, humanitarian aid and rule of law.

This report is based on an approach to deliver to the world the end of this conflict without delay and end the suffering of all civilian and innocent people.

The trigger to the escalating of this level of aggression was the terrorist attack that was made by Hamas on the 7th October 2023 that we reiterate to condemn.

Innocent people were killed and made hostages and subject to clear violations of human rights and human dignity. We must loudly condemn and by no means tolerate. Hostages of both sides must urgently be released.

Defending democracy and international law is defending civilian that are exposed to any kind of abuse or violence.

The military response that was used to react cannot forget that thousands of people in an under-siege territory were unable to escape or defend themself.

Today we have an agreement and a roadmap for the immediate implementation of a cease fire which is a first good signal to everybody.

This report properly signals that in Gaza more than 46.000 people lost their lives.

Homes, schools, hospitals, medical facilities, critical daily life institutions, water supply, energy supply, all was lost in this year and a half of war.

This massive destruction urges a speedy and proper international help.

We have good news about first convoys of food and water and basic medical supplies.

Even though to ensure a proper answer we need to increase the work on the ground.

We need to, as Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, to use our influence to monitor the cease fire and properly insure a good support to civilians.

We must also not forget the loss.

That's why this report properly claims for an urgent psychological support to all families, women and children that faced loss during this process.

We must be there to ensure peace, to heal and provide grounds that allows peace to stay and gain. We must not fail this time.

Thank you.

Ms Annika STRANDHÅLL (Sweden, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

I would like to thank the rapporteur for this important report.

The grave humanitarian crisis in Gaza—a situation that starkly challenges our commitment to human rights, international law, and the principles that unite us under the Council of Europe. This is not just a conflict—it is a catastrophe unfolding before our eyes, with devastating consequences for millions of innocent civilians.

Thousands of civilians have been killed, including women and children, and over a million people have been displaced. Gaza's infrastructure lies in ruins—hospitals, schools, and essential water and power systems have been deliberately or indiscriminately targeted, leaving the population without access to basic necessities. Behind the statistics are human lives—mothers and fathers mourning their children, families torn apart, and communities shattered. Children in Gaza, who should be playing in schools and parks, are instead living in fear, knowing no life beyond conflict and violence.

This is not just a tragedy; it is a violation of international law. Civilians must be protected during armed conflict, and the targeting of non-combatants and essential infrastructure is prohibited. Furthermore, human rights—such as the right to life, access to healthcare, and the protection of children—are being systematically denied in Gaza. These are rights the Council of Europe and its member states are bound to defend, not just in theory but in action.

The Council of Europe plays a vital role in promoting peace, democracy, and human rights across the continent. But its influence must extend beyond Europe's borders to uphold these values wherever they are under threat. This moment calls for more than words—it calls for action. We must ensure that humanitarian aid reaches those in need, and advocate for accountability for the violations of international law.

The Council of Europe has always stood for the principles of justice, dignity, and human rights. Let us not falter now. Let us reaffirm our commitment to these principles and work together to ensure that the people of Gaza, like all people, can live with safety, dignity, and hope for the future.

Let us remember that silence in the face of injustice makes us complicit.

Thank you.

Ms Gala VELDHOEN (Netherlands, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Ladies and gentlemen,

Since the end of the Second World War, the international community has built a comprehensive legal framework to govern war and military occupations, ensuring that civilians are protected from unnecessary death and suffering.

Three key branches of international law apply to this conflict:

- International humanitarian law, which prioritizes the protection of civilians, establishes critical principles of distinction, proportionality, and precaution.
- International human rights law,
- International criminal law,

We condemn, in the strongest terms, the terrorist attack by Hamas against Israel on October 7, 2023. This horrific act of violence has sparked a nightmare that continues today. However, this act of violence can not be a justification for the ongoing violations of international law by Israel.

Independent human rights experts have documented crimes against humanity, including murder, torture, sexual violence, and repeated forced displacement. These crimes also include war crimes such as indiscriminate attacks on civilians, starvation as a weapon of war, targeting healthcare workers and journalist. And above this all, restricting humanitarian aid.

The International Court of Justice has ruled that Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories is unlawful and must end unconditionally. The International Criminal Court has issued warrants against Israeli leaders. Yet, Israel faces no real consequences, protected by allies who undermine accountability and international institutions.

This impunity is a dire threat to global justice. It sends a dangerous signal to others engaged in conflicts worldwide: that violating international humanitarian law carries no real cost. We mourn the loss of at least 46000 civilians, of which 70 percent women and children. If Gaza becomes not only the graveyard of all those men, women and children but also the graveyard of international law, we risk losing the multilateral system meant to safeguard us all.

This Assembly must not remain silent. The victims of this conflict, and the credibility of international law itself, demand accountability. Especially now at this moment in time where the world is holding its breath about this fragile cease fire. Let us reaffirm our commitment to justice, to human rights, and to the principles that protect all people.

The world is watching. Let us not fail. Thank you.

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

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

I call now Ms Saskia KLUIT, rapporteur, to reply.

Dear Saskia, you have 3 minutes.

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

A lot has been said and I really want to applaud my colleagues to speak words that de-escalate the situation and that give a broad understanding to both parties in this conflict.

Some remarks were made about my person. It is my firm belief that you can never, never be associated with a terrorist group or be responsible for a genocide if you are fighting for the humanitarian laws that were made especially to prevent the organisation. And this report is about sustaining, protecting and holding firm on humanitarian laws that we made with each other after the Holocaust, after the bombing of Dresden, after Hiroshima and after all the situations that were made. So these laws should be wholly in our room and prevail over everything.

Of course we need to work on long term solutions, dear President. And I hope we will find many more initiatives in our room in this plenary session to work on long-term solutions and bringing parts together.

Our work is not done. Gaza is in rubble. The people in Gaza are in rubble. They need to start all over. They need to go to school, they need to have some repair of their physical impairments, they need to have jobs, they need to have food, they need to have houses and the hostages need to recover from the terrible ordeal that they have been through.

So our work is not done, now we should continue talking about that. I'm looking forward to debating the report.

If I look at Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS about the amendments, I hope you say your name. Actually it was very – one of your amendments was adopted and one was already, before we talked about your amendment, prevailed by a Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development amendment. So they were not all rejected on substance.

And to be honest, I was very happy to see you and Mr Bernard SABELLA together trying to get Mr SABELLA to the phone and microphone. So let's keep that spirit up in the rest of our meeting.

President, I think I will finish here. Let's go to the amendments and the reports.

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

I will now call Mr Armen GEVORGYAN. You have 3 minutes.

Mr Armen GEVORGYAN (Armenia, EC/DA, Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development): Mister President, dear colleagues, we have heard many interventions. The long list of speakers today underlines the importance of this report. In connection with the preparation of this report, our Committee held several hearings.

The approach of the Committee members was always to put aside their political differences and focus on the scope of the report, namely the humanitarian situation, in line with the fundamental values of the Council of Europe.

The draft resolution and its addendum were adopted unanimously. The Assembly should welcome the recent conclusion of a three-phase ceasefire agreement. This agreement remains fragile.

The Assembly should call on all parties to honour it so that it can lead to a lasting peace and the reconstruction of the zone.

The Assembly should also call on all parties to the hostilities to respect international humanitarian law. And in this regard, it's quite important that all the international agencies can operate unlimitedly and without restrictions on the ground.

On behalf of the Committee, I would like to thank Ms Saskia KLUIT for her commitment to a very, very sensitive but very important issue. And I would also like to thank the members of the Committee Secretariat for their hard and dedicated work.

Thank you.

Vote: The absolute and urgent need to end the humanitarian crisis for women, children and the hostages in Gaza

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, dear colleagues, the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development has presented the draft resolution to which 34 amendments and one sub amendment have been tabled.

Any amendment which has been unanimously approved by the Committee seized for report shall not be put to the vote in plenary and shall be declared as definitely approved unless 10 or more members of the Assembly object.

I understand that the Chairperson of the Committee wishes to propose to the Assembly that Amendments 22...

Quiet please. It is a very delicate procedure now.

..22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 3, 31, 27, 4, 28, 34, 29, 30, and 19 to the draft resolution which were unanimously approved be declared as approved.

Is that so, Madam Kluit?

Yes.

If no one objects, I will consider the amendments to be approved. Is there an objection?

So, there's no objection. then Amendments 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 3, 31, 27, 4, 28, 34, 29, 30, and 19 to the draft resolution are therefore approved and will not be called.

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

I understand that the Chairperson of the Committee wishes to propose to the Assembly that Amendments 1, 2, 14, 20, 32, 21, 15, 16, 6, 7, 17, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 18, and 10 to the draft resolution, which were rejected by the Committee with a two-thirds majority be declared as rejected.

Amendment 32 was also rejected by the Committee by a two-thirds majority.

However, a sub-amendment has been tabled to it, which has subsequently accepted by the Committee. Therefore, Amendment 32 will be called separately.

I repeat, Amendment 32 must be called separately, as we must deal with the sub-amendment. Is that so? This is good. Okay. If no objects, I will consider the amendment to be rejected.

Is there any objection?

Yes.

So, there are more than 10.

The request of the Committee is rejected.

So, each amendment will be taken individually in the order in which they appear in the Compendium.

Amendment 1.

I call Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS to support Amendment 1.

You have 30 seconds and, please, be strict with the time.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD): Yes, that was the case when simply during those days it was done historical agreement and from my side, simply I just would like to welcome the current ceasefire agreement and scheduled hostage release plan agreed between Israel and Palestine and hope that this lasting peace in the Middle East can be built from this process.

It's a very simple amendment.

Thank you.

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

No.

To speak again, sorry.

Who will speak against the amendment?

The chair?

We go to the vote.

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

I shall now put the amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The amendment is rejected.

Amendment number 22.

I call Ms Saskia KLUIT on behalf of the Committee to support.. Sorry, sorry. This is accepted.

Amendment 2.

I call Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS to support Amendment 2. 30 seconds.

Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS (Estonia, ALDE): Yes. Thank you.

As with all of our amendments, this attempts to bring some balance to the text. So I ask you to support it. Thank you.

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

Ms Saskia KLUIT (Netherlands, SOC, Rapporteur): We have discussed this in the Committee quite extensively.

So this amendment, we do not know a separation in the numbers because there's no independent international press. And we try to be fact-based and that's why we use the numbers that are in the report that are just factual.

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

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

I shall now put the amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The amendment is rejected.

Amendment 14. I call Mr Emanuelis Zingeris to support Amendment 14 – 30 seconds.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD): Thank you, guys. Thank you for telling me how to put the button.

So, my amendment is extremely simple. To have the list from the humanitarian organisations and to prevent the terrorist teams to be integrated to them, that was about that. Well, we have United Nations official statement that it was the case when the Hamas guys were involved in UNRWA activities.

So, simply to have the list of that to prove the list of the workers.

Thank you.

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

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

I would like to plead against this amendment. UNRWA is a very large organisation with a lot of people and the signals about UNRWA have been examined independently by the United Nations, and they have been dealt with accordingly.

I think the more principal point is that we need to stand for UN bodies that are working in extremely difficult conditions, that we take their side if they are being attacked, because, otherwise, all other UN bodies will be sensitive to this.

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

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

I shall now put the amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The amendment is rejected.

Amendment 14.

No.

Now we go to Amendment 20. I call Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS to support the amendment in 30 seconds.

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

We keep referring to the Gaza Ministry of Health without mentioning that it's run by Hamas. It's an extremely important qualification that I urge you to add to this report.

Thank you.

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

Ms Saskia KLUIT (Netherlands, SOC, Rapporteur): It speaks for itself. Hamas was the governing party in Gaza. We also do not mention the Israeli government as NETANYAHU's government. So I speak against it.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): The Committee rejected this amendment by a two-thirds majority.

I shall now put the amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

Colleagues, this is why you are using the electronic system. They don't need to have your voice shouting what one should vote or not.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The amendment is rejected.

Amendment no 32.

I call Mr Piero FASSINO to support Amendment 32. You have 30 seconds.

Mr Piero FASSINO (Italy, SOC): To simply recall that in addition to all the suffering suffered by the Palestinian population, about which, there is ample testimony in the report. A part of the Israeli population living in the parts near the Gaza border and the Lebanon border have also suffered continuous rocket attacks on the civilian population.

In committee, the rapporteur had given a favourable opinion, and the Committee voted in favour.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): As you have heard, we have one sub-amendment.

And I call Ms Saskia KLUIT on behalf of the Committee to support the sub-amendment.

30 seconds.

Ms Saskia KLUIT (Netherlands, SOC, Rapporteur): We are now talking about 32 as sub-amended, right?

I want to present a sub-amendment because I understand the point of Mr Piero FASSINO and I just want to delete the last sentence because it would be unbalanced and we try to be factual and not, well...

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Anyone against the sub-amendment?

No.

Dear colleague, are you standing because you want to speak against? Are you standing because you have asked for the floor?

Oh thank you, my mistake.

The Committee is obviously in favour of the sub-amendment.

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

The vote is open.

It is sub-amendment to Amendment 32.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The sub-amendment is accepted.

Now we come to the main Amendment 32 as sub-amended.

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

The Committee unanimously accepted this amendment and supports the sub-amendment.

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

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The amendment as sub-amended is accepted.

Amendment no. 33. I call Mr Piero FASSINO to support Amendment 33.

30 seconds.

Mr Piero FASSINO (Italy, SOC): Mister Chairman,

To emphasise that 120 000 Israeli citizens have been forced to evacuate their homes. This needs to be included in the Resolution, because several times in the Resolution we highlight all the problems that have weakened the lives of Palestinians, but there is also the problem of 120 000 Israelis who have been forced to leave their homes.

In the Committee, the rapporteur's opinion was positive.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Does anyone wish to speak against the amendment? What is the opinion of the Committee on this amendment?

Mr Armen GEVORGYAN (Armenia, EC/DA, Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development): It was approved by the majority.

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

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

Amendment 33 is accepted.

Now Amendment 21. I call Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS to support Amendment 21 in 30 seconds.

Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS (Estonia, ALDE): We call for the parties of the conflict to be responsible and follow all the rules. And then we state, "particularly the State of Israel". We request to delete that "particularly the State of Israel", because both parties in a conflict are equally responsible.

Thank you.

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

Does anyone wish to speak against the amendment? Yes, Saskia.

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

I want to argue against it. It's true there are more parties to the conflict. They all play their role, and they all have responsibilities. But the hearings were very clear. Israel was the biggest problem in the humanitarian crisis and also in solving it. So, that's why we stated it as it is, and it should be in.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): This amendment was rejected by the committee with a two-thirds majority.

I shall now put the amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed and I call for the result to be displayed.

Amendment 21 is rejected.

Amendment number 15. I call Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS to support Amendment 15 in 30 seconds.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD): Thank you, dear President.

It's about that terrorist organisation Hamas was involved in looting of supplies and tried to monopolise and control the supplies from their military wing and that even not from their civil wing. So in this case that is a fact and should be admitted if the report is not biased and based on a balanced approach.

Thank you.

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

Ms Saskia KLUIT (Netherlands, SOC, Rapporteur): I'm against this amendment for two reasons.

It was not in line with the testimonies we heard at the hearings, and the numbers that are mentioned are giving an image that it was enough to feed 2.2 million people and it was not. So, that's why I try to be factual in the report and do not want it in. So, against.

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

This amendment was rejected by the committee with a two-thirds majority and I shall now put the amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

Amendment 15 is rejected.

Amendment 16, Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS. Emanuelis, 30 seconds.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD): Thank you, dear President.

About attacks on Israel from multiple fronts: That is a fact. And we should add that to have the general background.

Thank you.

The European countries will be acting the same, defending their freedom and statehood.

Thank you.

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

Ms Saskia KLUIT (Netherlands, SOC, Rapporteur): I plead against this amendment for two reasons.

It says that Israel has been abiding international law. We have two court orders from the ICG and the ICC questioning that.

And the second is the last sentence which says that European countries would have acted the same way against threats of security of their citizens and sovereignty. And I really hope that that will not be the case.

I hope that when we are in a war, we abide by humanitarian law.

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

This amendment, colleagues, was rejected by the Committee with a two-thirds majority.

I shall now put the amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

Amendment 16 is rejected.

Amendment 5.

I call Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS to support Amendment 5.

Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS (Estonia, ALDE): Thank you very much.

Paragraph eight describes ongoing legal procedures and it describes the ICC arrest warrants.

Several ICC countries have put those warrants under doubt, including France for example.

So at least we should say that Israel has appealed those decisions. That would be only fair and descriptive.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Mr SCHWABE will speak against.

Mr Frank SCHWABE (Germany, SOC): Thank you, Mister President.

I'm strictly against this amendment because this is an organisation of international law, so we defend our court, our European Court of Human Right, and for sure, whether we like it or not, we have to defend the International Court of Justice, as well.

So, I'm against this amendment.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): What is the opinion of the Committee on the amendment?

Mr Armen GEVORGYAN (Armenia, EC/DA, Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development): The Committee was in favour of that amendment.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Amendment No. 5.

I shall now put the amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

Amendment No. 5 is rejected.

Amendment No. 6.

Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS to support Amendment No. 6.

Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS (Estonia, ALDE): Yes, it's about paragraph 9.

And again, to make it more balanced, and add also the Israeli side to the narrative.

Please support this amendment.

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

Saskia?

Ms Saskia KLUIT (Netherlands, SOC, Rapporteur): I'm against this amendment because it's important to stress that the response is important and that we are still seeing an ongoing humanitarian crisis, and therefore I'm against it.

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

This amendment was rejected by the Committee with a two-thirds majority.

I shall now put the amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

Amendment 6 is rejected.

Amendment 7.

I call again Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS to support Amendment 7.

Eerik.

Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS (Estonia, ALDE): Thank you very much.

There are documented cases where Hamas is harassing humanitarian workers.

My wife worked in one of the refugee camps in Egypt where personal accounts of this were documented.

So, we should stress that the safety of humanitarian assistance workers is important, and they should also be protected from terrorist attacks and Hamas activities.

Thank you.

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

Ms Saskia KLUIT (Netherlands, SOC, Rapporteur): Two-thirds of the Committee was against it because we adopted another, Amendment 34, which dealt with what was stated in this amendment and is more in line with international humanitarian law.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you. The amendment was rejected by the committee with a two-thirds majority.

I shall now put the amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

Amendment no 7 is rejected.

Amendment number 17.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS, will you support it.

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

Looking at all international reports about UNRWA's involvement just in the part of UNRWA's involvement of their workers in the network of Hamas, this is suggesting that we should find the parallel organisation, probably under the United Nation roof, under hospices, to supply massively absolute massively to supply Gazans with humanitarian aid.

Thank you.

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

Mister Schwabe, do you want to speak against?

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

We know about the problems of UNWRA, but they address it. They work with it.

We are up to opening an office in New York now as the Council of Europe. How at this moment can we not respect the UN organisation?

So, we should really do everything to protect UN organisations even if we don't always like them. So, I'm against the Amendment.

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

This amendment was rejected by the Committee with a two-thirds majority.

I shall now put the amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

Amendment 17 is rejected.

Amendment 8. Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS. Eerik, you have the floor to support.

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

It goes in line with the previous amendment that you rejected, unfortunately.

And it's about the safety of humanitarian aid workers.

We should mention that they are constantly under threat from Hamas, who also fires rockets upon them.

Thank you. Support it, please.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Who will speak against?
Saskia?

Ms Saskia KLUIT (Netherlands, SOC, Rapporteur): The aid workers are working in extremely difficult conditions because they are not only under attack from Hamas, they are also under attack from Israel.

And they are also under attack from warlords.

So that's why we stated that all conflicting parties would work on this.

And so this would be unbalanced and incomplete.

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

This amendment was rejected by the Committee with a two-thirds majority.

I shall now put the amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

Amendment 8 is rejected.

Amendment 9. Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS. Eerik, you have the floor to support Amendment 9.

Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS (Estonia, ALDE): Yes, thank you.

The idea of this amendment is that the current wording reads as if there is no facilitation of evacuation of neonatal facilities and protection. That is going on so what we want to say is that this needs to be continued, please support it.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Who will speak against?

Saskia?

Ms Saskia KLUIT (Netherlands, SOC, Rapporteur): I want to speak against because this has been addressed by Amendment 34 and that is concise and therefore this is not necessary.

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

The amendment was rejected by the Committee with a two-thirds majority.

I shall now put the amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

Amendment 9 is rejected.

Amendment 11.

Mister Kross, will you support Amendment 11?

Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS (Estonia, ALDE): ..attempt to say the same.

Thank you.

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

Ms Saskia KLUIT (Netherlands, SOC, Rapporteur): I'm against this amendment because the words "immediate" and "unconditional" are taken out. This is about very serious injured people. They need to be taken out immediately. So it should not be adopted. So I'm against.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): The amendment was rejected by the Committee with a two-thirds majority.

I put it now to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

Amendment 11 is rejected.

Amendment 12.

Mister Kross.

Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS (Estonia, ALDE): While we support media freedom and access of journalists, obviously to any conflict zone, we would like to add it's important for balance that several Palestinian journalists personally took part in the October 7 attacks.

Thank you very much.

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

Ms Saskia KLUIT (Netherlands, SOC, Rapporteur): I strongly plead against this amendment because we have no independent verification because there is no independent press available in Gaza.

And this also suggests it's okay to attack press officers when they are working in these conditions. And it never is. We should be clear and unconditional about this. So I'm against this amendment.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): The amendment was rejected by the Committee with a two-thirds majority.

I shall now put the amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

Amendment 12 is rejected.

Amendment 13.

Mister Kross, will you support 13?

Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS (Estonia, ALDE): Thank you very much. While we agree with all the obligations that the Israeli side is in honouring international law, it is important to stress that the other party of the conflict, namely Hamas, is not following any of the same standards.

Thank you.

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

Ms Saskia KLUIT (Netherlands, SOC, Rapporteur): It's very clear. I'm against this amendment.

And it's very clear that Hamas is following different rules and also other organisations follow different rules.

They are non state actors, sometimes terrorist groups, and Israel is a state and they have different responsibilities under international law.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): The amendment was rejected by the Committee with a two-thirds majority.

I shall now put the amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

Amendment number 13 is rejected.

Amendment 18. Mister Zingeris will you support Amendment 18?

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD): It was just, people just said what was yesterday said in Auschwitz: no hatred anymore, no hatred anymore after Holocaust ideology of the parties, including spreading by terrorists group.

That's inscribed without incitement for hatred. Only two words inscribed after the word education "without incitement for hatred".

Very key issue. Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Who is against? Who is to speak against?

Okay, let's go to vote.

The Committee has rejected the amendment with a two-thirds majority.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

Amendment 18 is rejected.

Amendment 10.

Mister Kross, will you support Amendment 10? Eerik.

Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS (Estonia, ALDE): We propose to change the title of the resolution to be a little less alarmist. So instead of "absolute" and "urgent", we suggest we call the report and resolution "addressing the humanitarian situation in Gaza and Israel with a focus on the protection of innocent civilians, women, children and hostages". Thank you.

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

Ms Saskia KLUIT (Netherlands, SOC, Rapporteur): I'm very against this amendment because the humanitarian crisis is a crisis.

It's still continuing and it will continue for at least a couple of months and even years.

So it should be on our table and therefore against.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): The amendment was rejected by the Committee with a two-thirds majority and I shall now put the amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

Amendment 10 is rejected.

We will now proceed to vote on the draft resolution as amended contained in Document 16093.

A simple majority is required.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The draft resolution as amended in Document 16093 is adopted.

(Applause)

Debate: Addressing risks to human rights and the rule of law posed by mercenaries and private military and security companies: a call for comprehensive regulation

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Dear colleagues, we will continue.

There is still one item on our agenda.

Very good evening for everyone who stays. It will be the debate on the report by Mr Andrea ORLANDO titled "Addressing risk to human rights and the rule of law posed by mercenaries and private military and security companies: a call for comprehensive regulation", Document 16092. It will be today presented by Lord KEEN on behalf of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights.

Can I please ask the members who will not stay to take the discussions and debates outside of the room so we can proceed to the last topic?

Dear colleagues, thank you.

So in order to finish by 8:15 p.m. – we have 15 minutes extra time – I will need to interrupt the list of speakers if need be some 8:05 p.m., five if need be.

The rapporteur needs to go also. So then we try to stick to the original timetable to finish by 8 p.m. and then I hope everybody will respect the timelines or even be shorter so we can have some speakers.

So now I call Lord Keen. You have a maximum of 7 minutes now and at the end, I will give you a couple of minutes before the vote to reply to the debate.

So thank you, and the floor is yours, Lord Keen.

Lord Richard KEEN (United Kingdom, EC/DA, on behalf of the Rapporteur): Apologies.

Thank you, President.

Thank you, colleagues.

Could I begin by expressing my gratitude to the rapporteur, Mister Orlando, who has unfortunately left this Assembly and could not present this report for debate in the plenary. I'm therefore presenting this report on his behalf in my capacity as Chair of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights.

The context for our deliberations is both historical and, indeed, contemporary. As we know, the use of mercenaries has ancient roots, dating back to the Peloponnesian War and the medieval Crusades. We are also aware that the 21st century has seen a marked increase in the involvement of non-state actors in military operations. The rise of private military and security companies (PMSC), of mercenaries and foreign fighters,

particularly in the wake of what was termed the "Global War on Terrorism", underscores this trend. While traditional forms of mercenarism may have waned due to the changing nature of armed conflict, the scale of use of PMSCs is on the rise.

The underlying assumption of our report is that there exists a gap in international regulations governing the use and functioning of PMSCs, negatively impacting the respect for human rights and the rule of law. Numerous examples of human rights violations mentioned in Mr ORLANDO's report demonstrate that existing non-binding instruments, such as the Montreux Document, have proven insufficient to provide justice for the victims of abuses. The unregulated operation of PMSCs results in the erosion of state authority prevents democratic oversight and increases impunity for human rights violators.

Colleagues, following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in 2022, Russian-controlled entities such as the Wagner Group committed severe atrocities, including torture and murder of prisoners and civilians, as well as targeting civilian infrastructure. For all of this, accountability remains elusive.

The Wagner Group, actually recently renamed the "Africa Corps", operates as a proxy institution of the Russian State, allowing Moscow to extend its influence while maintaining plausible deniability, notably in Africa and, to a lesser extent, South America. Because of its acknowledged links and financial and operational support extended to the Wagner Group by the Russian Federation, the draft resolution proposes that the Wagner Group and similar Russian entities be distinguished from PMSCs, which are registered and operate within the legal framework of their home states.

But at the same time, it is imperative that we firmly reject the false Russian narrative that members of the International Legion for the Defence of Ukraine are "mercenaries". They are not. They are members of the Ukrainian Armed Forces and, as such, benefit from complete legal and humanitarian protection afforded to combatants.

Colleagues, turning back to PMSCs, it must also be acknowledged that they sometimes provide essential services in conflict zones, offering expertise and resources which help humanitarian and international organisations carry out their tasks. Their involvement can be instrumental in filling security gaps, particularly in states with weak institutions. Yet, without stringent oversight, their operations can equally undermine state authority and erode the rule of law.

The proposal before you acknowledges the urgent need for comprehensive international and domestic regulatory frameworks to ensure that the activities of PMSCs align with democratic principles and respect for human rights. We call on states to introduce relevant mechanisms when licensing, contracting, operating, and deploying PMSCs. These include vetting and training personnel, particularly before outsourcing services involving the use of coercive measures; conducting human rights impact assessments; establishing effective legal frameworks for prompt, transparent and impartial investigations into any allegations of human rights violations; and increasing transparency in public procurement and operations of PMSCs.

Collaborative efforts at both international and regional levels are critical to developing a legally-binding instrument that can guide states in managing the PMSC industry. Although the United Nations set up a working group to elaborate the content of an international regulatory framework on the regulation, monitoring and oversight of the activities of PMSCs, the outcome of its deliberations is still a distant perspective. For this reason, by way of an amendment to Mr ORLANDO's preliminary draft, the Committee proposed to invite the Committee of Ministers to examine the feasibility of drawing up a Council of Europe convention governing the use of private military and security companies. This initiative would complement ongoing efforts within the UN by providing a robust regional framework, promoting a human rights-oriented approach. The Committee further proposed that the Committee of Ministers intensify political dialogue with the United Nations by ensuring that the Council of Europe actively participates in the work of the UN working group.

I thank you all for your attention and look forward to the debate.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you. I call now the speakers on behalf of the political groups.

The first speaker on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe is Mr Petri HONKONEN.

Mr Petri HONKONEN (Finland, ALDE): Chair,

These private military and security companies pose major challenges in terms of human rights transparency and accountability.

Their activities, which are often poorly supervised, compromise the legitimate monopoly of states on the use of force and expose populations to unacceptable abuses.

The resolution before us therefore responds to an urgent need. It aims to fill the legal vacuum in which these companies operate and sets out clear rules to govern their activities.

This is an important step towards protecting human rights and strengthening the rule of law.

The resolution proposes concrete measures which have the support of the ALDE Group.

The introduction of strict authorisation and control mechanisms should ensure transparent supervision of the activities of these companies, rigorous investigations into human rights violations, and guaranteeing victims effective access to justice and advocate reparation.

It is imperative that governments assume their responsibilities. They must guarantee that the companies they mandate fully respect the obligations of states under international law, both on their territory and in the areas where they operate.

And private military and security companies must not become tools enabling states to circumvent their international obligations or to act outside any democratic control.

The example of Wagner Group highlights the urgent need to strengthen the legal framework and prevent such abuses in the future.

The draft resolution will send out a strong signal. Abuses and excesses in this area must no longer be tolerated, and the foundations must be laid for more ambitious and legally binding international regulations.

In 2006 Switzerland and the ICRC launched a diplomatic initiative that led to the adoption of the Montreux Document in 2008. This is the first international document to reaffirm states' obligations under international law with regards to the activities of private military and security companies.

Although non-binding, these two instruments have already enabled substantial progress to be made in reminding people of their obligations and developing good practices in this area and I'm therefore very glad that this draft resolution makes these principles more clear than before.

Thank you.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

On behalf of the Group of the Unified European Left, Mr Emmanuel FERNANDES.

Mr Emmanuel FERNANDES (France, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Madam President.

In 1532, Machiavelli was already urging us to be wary of mercenaries: the author of *The Prince* stated that mercenary troops are "uncertain, unfaithful and dangerous". Today, we say no different.

Since the end of the Cold War, the use of private actors has grown steadily; security is increasingly privatised. We all have in mind the example of the Russian group Wagner, but let's not forget North American companies such as Blackwater, operating especially in Afghanistan, or private Chinese companies operating in various African countries.

Faced with this exponential increase in the use of mercenaries, we need to guarantee a better legal framework for mercenary activities; in this respect, I agree with most of the report's recommendations. We need to do this because the use of mercenaries is dangerous.

It is dangerous because it is likely to compromise the effectiveness of security as a function of the state. The state must remain the sole operator of war.

Yes, the use of mercenaries is dangerous because it compromises the idea that security, a fundamental right, must be guaranteed by the public authorities within the framework of the rule of law and international law. Mercenarism means privatisation of the security service. Ultimately, it means reserving security for those who can afford it.

The principle is clear: "Since everything is for sale and everything can be bought, and since the state must divest itself of all its missions, let's make security a commercial service like any other. This is another reason why mercenaries reappeared in the 90s, just as neoliberalism was taking hold in the world. We don't want that kind of world.

And finally, yes, the use of mercenaries is dangerous because it encourages human rights violations, it encourages the indiscriminate and excessive use of force, particularly against civilians; we can use the example of the American company Blackwater which, in 2007, in Iraq, saw four of its agents fire indiscriminately on Iraqi civilians in Nisour Square, wounding 17 civilians and killing 14, including women and children. More recently, in 2022, according to German intelligence services, the Wagner Group took part in the summary executions, mutilations and torture of civilians in the Ukrainian town of Boutcha, resulting in the deaths of almost 460 people, including children.

We therefore call for a move in the direction of the rapporteur, whom we congratulate on this work, and for greater regulation of the conditions under which EMSPs operate. To this end, we call for clarification and refinement of concepts to better legislate and standardise these companies. We call for the separation of security activities from activities involving participation in hostilities, to promote clarity in the application of international standards.

Finally, we call for the rapporteur's recommendation to be followed, and we call on all member countries – first and foremost my country, France – to sign and ratify the International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries.

Thank you for your support.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): "Thank you" [spoken in French].

The next speaker, on behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group, is Lord David BLENCATHRA.

Mr Jone BLIKRA (Norway, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you.

It should be a big concern that private military and security companies are widely used by states and businesses.

Of course, we must recognise that security companies often play an important role in humanitarian missions, but that fact is no argument for not to regulate and work for a clarification of the legal consequences of their actions.

The erosion of the state monopoly on the use of force is an erosion of the states' authority, because it results in loss of democratic oversight and accountability.

Private military companies in modern time are a result of the idea called New Public Management, in this case, outsourcing of a state's legal right to use force.

Another problematic issue is that most of private military companies' main purpose is to earn money.

It is not acceptable that lack of regulations leads to potential mass-scale human rights violations.

This Assembly have several times debated this matter, also made recommendations. The report shows us that we still have a long way to go, and that former recommendations and existing regulation is not enough.

This Assembly's responsibility is to make sure that rule of law and human rights are a guiding star in all our work and decisions.

It's now time, in a much stronger way, to underline the need of a legally binding instrument to control and hold private military and security companies accountable.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

This next speaker I have on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party, Mr Yuriy KAMELCHUK. Is he in the room? He doesn't seem to be. Then the next speaker on behalf of the European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance is Ms Olena KHOMENKO.

Ms Olena KHOMENKO (Ukraine, EC/DA, Spokesperson for the group): Madam President, I congratulate you on your first chairing of your first debate in this Parliamentary Assembly.

Dear colleagues,

When I crafted the motion that led to today's resolution, I had the Wagner Group in mind. Wagner disrupted the East of Ukraine in 2014 and remained engaged throughout the entire decade of war in Ukraine. But their operations did not stop there. They expanded across Africa, Latin America, and Asia, essentially spreading their malign influence across the globe. These entities have stolen national treasures, fuelled corrupt regimes, and deepened conflict where peace and stability should have taken root.

This must serve as a stark reminder. States cannot hide under the cloak of private military companies. The idea of plausible deniability is a dangerous illusion. States that employ, finance, and co-ordinate malign entities must bear direct responsibility under international law.

Accountability must be ensured, and today's resolution is a step forward in dismantling the impunity they have long enjoyed.

We must develop rigorous standards for our own private military and security companies, certify them properly, and ensure that they operate in full compliance with human rights and democratic oversight.

That is why the proposed resolution is so vital. It provides a crucial foundation for regulating, monitoring, and ensuring accountability of private military actors. Pending the outcome of ongoing UN efforts, the Council of Europe must take proactive steps to examine the feasibility of a binding framework to protect human rights and the rule of law.

Our goal is clear. The fewer foreign malign tools like Wagner, the more stability in the world. By holding states accountable and ensuring responsible security practices, we can help nations be free from the shackles of terrorist regimes and exploitative mercenaries.

Let us ensure a future where security and human rights are not mutually exclusive, but rather mutually reinforcing.

Thank you, dear colleagues.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Under the speaker's list for 3 minutes, I call Ms Anna-Kristiina MIKKONEN.

Ms Anna-Kristiina MIKKONEN (Finland, SOC): Madam President, congratulations.

Dear colleagues,

It seems clear that the private military and security companies (PMSC) sector is marked by a significant regulatory vacuum. Despite their capacity to seriously undermine human rights and democracy and erode the rule of law PMSCs are only subject to soft law or voluntary self-regulation. However, it should be stressed that PMSCs can also pursue important objectives. They provide much-needed expertise and resources to humanitarian and international organisations working in various conflict zones. The budgetary constraints faced by many states have led them to downsize their armed forces and increasingly call on the services of PMSCs.

Unfortunately, their unbridled operation seems to have encouraged the likes of PUTIN and PRIGOJIN to exploit this loophole for purely criminal ends. Following the Russian Federation's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, entities such as the Wagner Group have committed numerous war crimes and human rights violations, for which the Russian Federation should be held to account.

The absence of sufficient international regulation to govern the activities of PMSCs has negative repercussions for human rights and the rule of law. Although PMSCs often play an important role in humanitarian missions, their unregulated activities can compromise the apparent neutrality of these operations. We need to find ways of regulating companies and protecting democracy through international law.

Thank you for your attention.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): "Thank you" [spoken in French].

The next and last speaker will be Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN.

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

It's really a very interesting topic. And today I found myself that we are speaking more and more of the terms which people used in Middle Ages. And unfortunately rapporteur Mr Andrea ORLANDO is not here, as he will be very familiar with the word "condottieri", which was used in the Middle Ages by Italians. And Italian cities actually just hire private companies to protect their cities.

Today we are discussing issues which actually combine two different phenomena. The issue of mercenaries or "condottieres", or call them as you wish, and the issue of the new phenomenon in international law, the phenomenon of private military and especially private security companies.

And I disagree with my colleagues who said that mercenaries are a dangerous phenomenon. My honourable colleagues, mercenaries are not a dangerous phenomenon. Mercenaries are a prohibited phenomenon in international law.

There are UN conventions under which the mercenaries are prohibited and we should respect them.

And here, unfortunately, in this draft, in this report, we have mixed private security companies, private military companies which are a new phenomenon and quietly regulated with mercenaries and foreign, let's say terrorist fighters which are prohibited under international law.

We should somehow have a clear cut approach between something which is prohibited under international law and which is allowed.

And here when we are speaking about private security or military companies, the main issue we should raise, and it is reflected in the draft report, that we should address the issue of direct participation on hostilities of these private military and security companies.

Because when we are in hostilities, we should respect international humanitarian law.

But which is more important, because we are thinking, we're speaking about the privatisation of the war and waging the war, its attribution of their acts to the state actors, because usually states use so-called private military companies to somehow escape responsibility.

From this perspective, I would like just to welcome the recommendation which is proposed in this report to have an internationally binding instrument on international private military and private security companies, which would allow first to separate them from the illegal participation in hostilities and finally solve the issue of attribution of their acts to the States who are actually hiring them.

Thank you so much.

Mr Marco DREOSTO (Italy, EC/DA): *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in Italian*

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

Madam President,

Our rapporteur Mr Andrea Orlando in his highly interesting report raises the question of whether – and if so how seriously – mercenaries and private military companies around the world pose a threat to democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

I would say there is indeed such a challenge, and that we may even have to broaden our definition of such groups than we have done up to now – but I'll get back to this later.

Internationally, we only have to look at the infamous Russian Wagner Group's deeds around the world.

The Wagner Group have razed entire villages and murdered civilians in the Central African Republic and neighbouring countries, in order to advance their economic interests.

They have participated in the unlawful execution of people in Mali, raided gold mines in Sudan, and undermined democratic institutions in every country where they have been or are present.

Before that they fought alongside Russian forces in the unlawful invasion of Ukraine, where they were known for their particular cruelty to Ukrainian prisoners of war.

In the meantime, the very term 'mercenary' has taken on a wider meaning. For it can now also mean being an underage - and hence 'unpunishable' - adolescent, who kills a target selected by a street gang he has joined.

And this he (or she) does for a mere pittance, perhaps a few hundred euros, and for a step up on the gang's career ladder.

Such killings take place more and more often in many of our member states, my own country Sweden included. It is becoming a plague, with several shootings occurring every day.

The gangs fight each other for more territory, just as mercenary groups do, and their main source of income - drugs - spread and find new consumers in vulnerable societies.

This to my mind indeed presents a serious threat to human rights and the rule of law. For what happens is that people will no longer dare go outside. The social atmosphere hardens and becomes increasingly suspicious and fear-ridden.

To conclude, I thank our Rapporteur and the Committee for their excellent report, and look forward to our further debate.

Thank you, Madam President.

Ms Regina BASTOS (Portugal, EPP/CD): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Mister President,

colleagues,

A first word to congratulate the rapporteur, Mr Andrea Orlando, for this important and realistic report.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal sixteen (16) promotes peace, justice, and strong institutions.

However, mercenaries and private military and security companies (PMSCs) pose significant challenges to this objective.

Their actions destabilize conflict regions, violate human rights, and operate with limited accountability.

A key example is the Wagner Group, as we all know, a Russian paramilitary organization accused of war crimes in Ukraine, Syria, and Central Africa.

Wagner operates with strong links to the Russian state, which uses PMSCs to advance its geopolitical goals while avoiding direct responsibility.

This highlights the urgent need for effective regulation.

The lack of uniform national legislation and the self-regulation mechanisms used by some PMSCs are insufficient to prevent abuses.

Sanctions are often absent, enabling these entities to act with impunity, particularly in multilateral interventions and conflict zones.

While this kind of entities are bound by international law, including the Geneva Conventions, evidence shows widespread non-compliance.

We strongly believe efforts to regulate PMSCs must continue, particularly through the United Nations open-ended intergovernmental working group, which is tasked with developing an international regulatory framework.

It is essential for the Council of Europe to be represented in this process to avoid duplication of efforts and ensure robust oversight.

Finally, violations of SDG 16 persist even within the Council of Europe, with examples such as conflict involvement, suppression of freedoms, and the erosion of judicial independence.

Accountability and commitment to peace and justice must remain at the forefront of our actions.

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

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

So I unfortunately had to interrupt the list of speakers as we have to vote also before 8 p.m.

The speeches of members on the speakers list who have been present during the debate but have not been able to speak may present their speeches to the Table Office in type-written text format, electronically if possible, no later than 4 hours after the list of speakers is interrupted.

So now I give the floor on behalf of the rapporteur, the Chair of the Committee, Lord Richard KEEN. Maximum 3 minutes.

Lord Richard KEEN (United Kingdom, EC/DA, on behalf of the Rapporteur): Thank you, Madam President, and thank you colleagues.

Despite the constraints of time that we've been under here, I would like to thank all colleagues for their clear and considerate contribution to this matter.

The engagement of private military and security companies, although it can be valuable in specific context, does pose significant risks if left unregulated.

The existing regulatory gap should be filled with a robust framework that ensures accountability, transparency, and the protection of human rights, and which defends democracy and the rule of law.

A binding international instrument is essential for addressing these challenges effectively and cohesively and ensuring that private military and security companies do not erode the very democratic values and legal principles that they should be engaged to uphold.

So I welcome the support for the draft resolution and draft recommendation expressed by colleagues.

It was adopted by the Committee on Legal affairs and Human Rights through a unanimous vote and I invite colleagues to vote in favour of this.

Thank you.

Vote: Addressing risks to human rights and the rule of law posed by mercenaries and private military and security companies: a call for comprehensive regulation

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): The debate is now closed.

And we proceed further.

The Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights has presented a unanimous draft resolution and a unanimous draft recommendation to which no amendments have been tabled.

We will now proceed to the vote on the draft resolution contained in Document 16092. A simple majority is required.

I declare that the vote is open.

I announce that the vote is closed.

I can clearly say that *the draft resolution is adopted*.

Thank you.

Then we need to proceed with the vote on the draft recommendation in Document 16092. A two-thirds majority is required.

I declare that the vote is open.

And the vote is closed.

I can say *unanimously approved*.

Congratulations for the whole Committee and the people behind it.

So it was the final topic on the agenda, our Assembly will hold its next public sitting tomorrow at 10 a.m. with the agenda approved on Monday.

The sitting is adjourned.

Thank you.