



Provisional edition

Thursday 26 June 2025, afternoon

Official report of debates

Opening of the sitting No 26

Debate under urgent procedure: Women's rights in Europe – Progress and challenges

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

I remind members that they should insert their badge before taking the floor. As you begin your speech, please press the microphone button once only.

I also remind the Assembly that Members who have not submitted an annual declaration of interests are required to start any intervention with an oral declaration of interests under paragraph 20 of the Code of Conduct for Members of the Parliamentary Assembly.

The next item of business this afternoon is a debate under urgent procedure on “Women's rights in Europe – Progress and challenges” – Document 16211 – presented by Ms Petra BAYR, rapporteur, on behalf of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination.

The debate is expected to end at around 4.15 p.m., maybe a bit later because of this delay we had.

And I call now Ms Petra BAYR, rapporteur. Dear Petra, you know of course that you have seven minutes now, and three minutes to respond.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, Rapporteur): Thank you very much, Theodoros.

"Your body, my choice."

"Your body, my choice" is a quote from a male US nationalist, a Holocaust denier. I think that his name isn't worth mentioning. But his quote went viral on X last winter, and I think that attacks against the rights of women couldn't be summarised more concisely, as in this quote. "Your body, my choice" expresses male supremacy and female submission. I associate it with slavery because it's also about degrading women's bodies to possessions. And it deprives women of self-determination.

In this report:

1. Speeches in English, French, German and Italian are reported in full in English.
2. Speeches in other languages are summarised from the interpretation and indicated by an asterisk (*).
3. Speeches in German and Italian are available in full on the Assembly's website.
4. The text of the amendments is available at the document centre and on the Assembly's website. Only oral amendments or oral sub-amendments are reproduced in the report of debates.
5. Corrections should be handed in at Room 1081 not later than 24 hours after the report has been published.

The ideology behind this is clear. Women must not decide about their lives, about their partners, about their professions, about their reproductivity, or about their bodies. This misogynist ideology is in sharp contrast to all that was politically gained over the centuries. Women's rights to inherit, to possess land, to choose the profession they would like to choose, to participate in all spheres of public life and society, and to live a self-determined life are at risk. Because this ideology is a great threat to everything that was gained. It's also lethal for thousands of women. Let me take some examples. For instance, we know that more than 50 000 women every year become victims of femicides. We know that about 700 women die every day because they do not have appropriate assistance when they give birth to their children, because there is no midwife available, for instance. And we know that women who are trafficked, who are assaulted, who are exploited, are under dramatic danger.

You could get the impression that there is a war going on against women. A war that is a global war and that is a silent war. And the withholding of women's rights has indeed many faces. Women are urged back into so-called traditional gender roles, supported also by algorithms and by artificial intelligence. Equality in political and economic bodies is still a dream for many. Vulnerable groups are at higher risk of cumulative forms of discrimination. Access to sexual and reproductive health and rights is cut, restricted and underfunded globally. And this list is by far, by far, by far not exhausted.

We are told, quite often with a patronising smile, that women never had it better. We vote, we lead, we build, we create, and indeed we survive. But the truth is, every right we hold today was not handed to us. It was fought for. It was fought very hard for. And every inch gained is under threat. And let me be clear, this debate is, first and foremost, about power and about fear. Fear of what the world would look like if it were led by equality.

We are not just reacting, although with this report, we are building. We are building across parliaments, we are building in courtrooms, in classrooms, in rural villages, we are building in war zones. Women indeed are rising. Women are organising and women are winning. Even as we are targeted with hate speech, with death threats, with attempts to silence. We will continue because silence is not an option. Every law passed, every single shelter opened, every young girl who learns to say no because somebody told her that she could say no.

Every single step is a revolution. We do not ask for permission to live full lives. We demand it. And we will not stop. We will not stop. Not until the word equality is no longer a debate about how to live.

But it's really a fact for most women. We will not stop until no woman has to choose between her safety and her ambitions. And we will not stop until every voice in all their very beautiful diversity is heard, is respected and is protected. And the space we have is an important part in this global fight for equality. It is indeed urgent that today we fulfil the expectations placed in us.

So I want to thank you for your solidarity in this important struggle for women's rights. Because "your body, my choice", must be gravated at a cemetery of historic faults and ideological dead ends, and it never, never again must revive.

Thank you very much.

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

Dear colleagues,

I now open the list of speakers, and first, on behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group, is Céline THIÉBAULT-MARTINEZ.

Ms Céline THIÉBAULT-MARTINEZ (France, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mr President.

Mr President,

Madam rapporteur,

Ladies and gentlemen,

"Never forget that it only takes one political, economic or religious crisis for women's rights to be put in jeopardy. Those rights are never to be taken for granted."

These words from Simone DE BEAUVOIR particularly resonate with me today, as they do in the heads and hearts of everyone who is committed to equality between women and men.

To be free to do whatever you want with your body, to choose to have a child, to share domestic tasks equally, to earn the same salary as someone with the same diplomas and qualifications, to be in public spaces without worrying about what you are wearing or how late it is. These rights and these political ambitions, which only a few months ago constituted the natural march towards equality, well, these rights have lost much of their power.

International tensions and wars have become a pretext for promoting male strength and unleashing masculinist rhetoric. All to the detriment of women and equality.

Last January, the U.S. government asked companies that bid for public contracts to abandon their diversity programmes: Meta, Disney and many others agreed to do so without batting an eyelid.

92% of USAID funding was cut, with immense consequences for women. In Yemen, many shelters for victims of violence have closed. In Guatemala, where access to abortion is extremely restricted, young girls who have been raped and become pregnant are now left to fend for themselves. In South Africa, Afghanistan, Mexico... NGOs everywhere are warning of a widespread catastrophic situation. Online, violence is unleashed on our girls through hyper-violent, sexist and racist pornography.

So yes, this debate is urgent.

Urgent, because by 2024, according to the UN, women's rights had regressed in one in four countries. Urgent, because armed conflicts are multiplying, and sexual violence in war zones has increased by 50% in ten years. Urgent, because everywhere on the planet, in Europe and elsewhere, women are being targeted, and the exaltation of the traditional family is popular.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The international context demands this urgent debate! And I'd like to take this opportunity to thank the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, which took up this issue immediately after the CSW because, as Chairwoman Ms Catia POLIDORI said at our Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination meeting on Tuesday, "we can't go back to the United Nations next year without having taken action!".

I'd also like to thank Ms Petra BAYR for her report, which gives a comprehensive overview of the situation and reminds us of our roadmap for action.

Taking action today means combatting violence against women, preventing online violence and educating our children from the earliest age. It means guaranteeing effective access to sexual and reproductive rights. It also means strengthening women's political participation. Women's rights are neither secondary nor incidental. They are at the very heart of human rights, and deserve special attention.

Simone DE BEAUVOIR urged us to remain vigilant throughout our lives.

I call on you to do the same, as will the Group of Socialists, Democrats and Greens, which will vote in favor of this report.

Thank you for your support.

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

Next is, on behalf of the European People's Party, Albana VOKSHI .

Albana, have you inserted your badge? Because I don't see you in the computer.

Ms Albana VOKSHI (Albania, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): I have.

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

Ms Albana VOKSHI (Albania, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you dear President,
Dear colleagues,

We are here today to discuss a report that presents both progress and the backslide in the state of women's rights across Europe.

Statistically, the numbers look encouraging: increased female participation in public and economic life, more women in parliament, more women in leadership roles, more women involved in decision-making processes, but despite this numerical rise, the reality is different. Higher numbers have not translated into better conditions for women.

There isn't a correlation.

The UN warns, and this is in the report, of an "extreme backlash" against women's rights, even in some parts of Europe. The report highlights: a surge in misogyny and masculism, online and offline, escalating violence against women in politics, aiming to silence them. And we have more and more cases lately. Myself and my MP colleagues in Albania face everyday intimidation and threats. Georgian women, Belarusian, etc., we have heard their testimonies these days.

Discrimination targeting minority, rural, and disabled women. Alarming rates of domestic violence: one in three women in Europe face gender-based violence. One in two in Albania. Cuts to sexual and reproductive health services support. Continuation of gender pay and pension gaps. And in conflict zones and authoritarian regimes, women are subjected to rape, trafficking, and gender apartheid.

In Iran, the regime has intensified its campaign against women's basic freedoms: severe restrictions on marriage, employment, travel, child custody, and dress. At least 30 women executed in 2024, many linked to domestic violence or protest.

Colleagues, there is a growing danger of propaganda via statistics where numerical representation doesn't represent women issues.

Albania ranks among the highest in Europe for women in ministerial and parliamentary roles.

Yet, the European Commission's latest report (2023-2024) paints a very different picture. What does the report say? Ongoing femicides and weak protective systems, failure to implement the Istanbul Convention, Global Gender Gap Index dropped 6 places, alarming rise in misogynistic harassment of women in public. Most gravely, institutional, verbal, and psychological violence against women in politics, coming from the highest levels: the Prime Minister, ministers, mayors, MPs.

It's crucial to empower honest, capable, strong, professional women. Women who fight for rights, not privilege. And it is absolutely important to involve men in this discussion. This is the only way to open the doors for others and build a fairer society.

We must move beyond rhetoric. We must act to fully enforce the Istanbul Convention, fund women's support programs, shelters, and legal aid, protect sexual and reproductive rights, ensure pay and pension transparency.

We at Group of the European People's Party (EPP) support the report.

Thank you.

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

On behalf of the European Conservatives, Patriots & Affiliates, Martina KEMPF. Martina, you should insert your badge first. Your badge. And keep it there. You have to keep it there.

Okay, now you can speak.

Ms Martina KEMPF (Germany, ECPA, Spokesperson for the group): Dear Mister President, dear members of the Parliamentary Assembly,

I would like to comment on a few points in the document "Women's Rights in Europe" as follows. Contrary to what is stated here, I do not see a lack of access to modern contraceptives. On point 12, I would like to make it clear that there is no right to abortion, at least in Germany, but that there is a constitutional right to life for unborn children in every month of pregnancy. This report only talks one-sidedly about women's bodies then the authors of the report are obviously ignoring a very important element in the equation, namely the unborn child. I would like to talk about that here. When do you think the human heart begins to beat? As early as three weeks after conception. Eight weeks after conception, the organs, arms and legs are present in this

child. And 10 weeks after conception, even small children can recognise a small baby in this model. But apparently this is different from the authors of this report, who cannot recognise a child here, because the unborn child does not appear anywhere in their report.

But as the Council of Europe, which deals with human rights, and I therefore wanted to take this opportunity to mention the fact that in Germany, hundreds and thousands of unborn children are killed every year. That is 6 million children killed since the 1970s. What is surprising is that half of all abortions in Germany concern the second or third child conceived in a family. We have to ask ourselves whether family policies in Europe are misguided if so many families do not have the courage to have a second or third child. And families must be better supported and financially relieved. We should eliminate the concrete problems and not the children. And this is also in the interests of women. Because hardly anyone is aware of the pressure from their environment to have an abortion. In this case, it is not a matter of self-determination at all. This is because 20% of women in pregnancy find that they are under pressure from their peers.

According to a comprehensive study on reasons for abortion conducted by the University of Mannheim in 2021, 30% of women also stated that the child's father did not want the child. So this is not a case of self-determination. On the contrary, there is nothing worse than being pressured into having your own child killed. That is the absolute opposite of self-determination. The study concludes that any further so-called liberalisation of abortion favours the interests of outsiders, first and foremost men. That cannot be in our interests. That is why we will reject this report.

Thank you.

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

On behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, Béatrice FRESKO-ROLFO, Béatrice.

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

I stand before you with both hope and concern. Concern, because I've just noticed that our colleague has reduced this report to abortion only, whereas the theme is indeed "Women's rights in Europe, progress and challenges". But at the same time, I'm hopeful, because Europe has never been so committed to advancing women's rights.

The Council of Europe has been a forerunner in defending fundamental rights. The European Convention on Human Rights and the Istanbul Convention are milestones in the protection of women against all forms of violence. We can be proud of these legal tools. But we must not let them lull us into a false sense of security. Equality is not a given; it's an ongoing battle.

At the European Union level, the roadmap for women's rights focuses on eight major priorities: equal pay, reproductive health, the fight against violence, work-life balance and political representation.

But dear colleagues, there are also red flags.

Today, one in three women in Europe is a victim of physical or sexual violence in her lifetime. Digital technology is becoming a terrain of violence: cyberharassment, threats, defamation campaigns. Politically committed women are prime targets.

The "Sexism Barometre" in France highlights the widening ideological gap between the sexes, the invisibilisation of violence, and the rise of a misogynist discourse trivialised in the media. The Mazan rape trial is a symptom of this. A divided society, where listening to victims and presumption of innocence are systematically opposed, whereas they should coexist.

Internationally, UNICEF data remind us that sexual violence against girls is a global emergency – 650 million girls and women have been victims of sexual violence, female genital mutilation, forced marriage and honour crimes.

So when I receive messages in my mailbox telling me that misogyny is a myth, that misandry is the real danger, I'm tempted to reply. What I receive is not a debate of ideas, but an attempt to discredit the feminist struggle.

Yet feminism is not a dogma; it's a democratic requirement.

Equality between women and men is enshrined in our texts. It is reiterated in our jurisprudence. But on the ground, in the home, on the streets, in the workplace, in politics and on social networks, it remains a distant goal.

Faced with this reality, the member states of the Council of Europe must act, because equality between women and men is not a fad. It's a fight for democracy.

The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe obviously supports this report and the rapporteur.

Thank you for your support.

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

On behalf of the Group of the Unified European Left, Sevilay ÇELENK.

Ms Sevilay ÇELENK (Türkiye, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister President,

Thank you, Rapporteur,

Dear Ms Petra BAYR and all those involved in the preparation of this report.

The report takes a comprehensive look at gender inequalities in many areas, from education to politics, from employment to access to media and technology, from sexual and reproductive health rights to representation in media and politics. It covers a wide range of challenges, including the invisible barriers that women face in all areas of life.

The findings of this report clearly show the difficulties of our time. It paints a powerful picture of how fragile and threatened women's hard-won rights remain. These threats sometimes manifest themselves in open attacks and sometimes in systematic steps backwards. For example, Türkiye's decision to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention, a ground-breaking international norm to prevent violence against women, is a serious warning of regression in this area. The occasional attempts to target the Law on Protecting Family and Preventing Violence against Women, which is our unique protection against violence, the *de facto* obstruction of access to abortion and the debates on the right to maintenance are also a concrete example of regression in the area of women's rights.

Furthermore, symbolic initiatives such as the so-called "Year of the Family" clearly reflect an attempt to undermine women's achievements by portraying them as an attack on the family, with the intention of keeping women trapped in the shadow of the family. In this context, it is crucial to internalise the importance of women's health, safety and empowerment, as these are directly linked to the strengthening of society and the promotion of democracy.

The rise of the authoritarian right has turned women's bodies and lives into an ideological battleground. This erosion harms not only individual rights, but also democratic institutions and the rule of law.

This report is not just a diagnostic document, but a call for urgent action. The protection and advancement of women's rights are achievable through strengthened feminist solidarity and international cooperation.

Defending women's hard-won gains is a shared responsibility for all of us. It is therefore important that this report is widely discussed and adopted.

Thank you.

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

Ms Naomi CACHIA is next.

Ms Naomi CACHIA (Malta, SOC): Thank you, Mister President.

And thank you so much, Petra, for your outstanding work, as always.

The very fact that we need to have an urgent debate on women's rights underlines the worrying state of affairs that we are in, doesn't it? Women have achieved so much for gender equality. But we all know that what we have achieved is not certain. Especially in times of crises, women's rights are put in jeopardy and crises, we have had plenty. And within the context of wars and conflicts around the world, we must continue to use our voices to shed light on the suffering and disproportionate impact faced by women and girls in these regions.

But firstly, I do have to say, where are the men? Where are the men on the list of speakers? And while I do express my gratitude to the three gentlemen who have chosen to participate, I think this is indicative of the problem in a wider sense. Make no mistake, we will continue to fight for this cause, but it would be so much easier if we had our male counterparts by our side, actively participating, and on our side through this cause. Sometimes I start to wonder whether it makes sense to continue having such debates, especially if we are going to continue speaking amongst ourselves as women.

But, on the other hand, I think this Assembly is doing an excellent job in giving women parliamentarians a sense of community, a space to share experiences and create a support system, notably the Women@PACE platform. Because unfortunately, yes, harassment, discrimination, hate speech are things most of us have experienced. Which begs the question, if we as Members of Parliament, empowered women, are facing such situations in which we are harassed or discriminated against or made to feel like we are this big, just imagine what young girls, vulnerable women, women with disabilities and minorities have to face on a daily basis.

Data from the World Health Organization paints a devastating story. Nearly one in three women and girls worldwide will experience physical or sexual violence during their lifetime. And this, Mister President, is a crisis in and of itself. Doesn't every girl, every woman, everyone in this world deserve to feel safe? And if I do look at some of the legislation and initiatives Malta has enacted over the course of the past few years, a femicide bill, a ban on virginity testing, legislation to allow individuals to request information about a partner's history of violent behaviour, these are all very important steps and I commend them and I urge other countries to follow.

But they also represent a snapshot of the moment that we are living in, no? Legislation is enacted according to social realities. And the reality is that we have so much work ahead of us still. The reality is that when it comes to combating gender based and domestic violence, sexual health and reproductive rights and challenging stereotypes, we cannot rest. And we will not rest.

Thank you.

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

Ms Marija PETRUSHEVSKA, you have the floor.

Ms Marija PETRUSHEVSKA (North Macedonia, EPP/CD): Thank you, distinguished President.

Dear colleagues, Madames et Messieurs,

Let me begin by congratulating the rapporteur for her excellent job and excellent report. The Council of Europe has made significant progress across Europe in recent decades by championing many reforms: from combatting violence to promoting political participation.

Women's rights are human rights. Yet, does a Member State of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe know that by not complying with the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights and by obstructing European integration, it's undermining the progress, security and human rights of this institution – and Europe as a whole?

More women are serving in the Parliament and public office thanks to gender quotas and electoral reforms. Equality between men and women is no longer a distant goal, but an active commitment in legislation processes. Yet, despite these advantages, significant challenges remain. Progress is not linear. In some cases, we are witnessing backsliding.

Gender-based violence continues to plague society despite legal frameworks. Women across Europe still face domestic abuse and femicide. Victims of it often lack adequate protection, and the justice system is slow to respond.

So, what is our responsibility as parliamentarians and as citizens closely monitoring the implementation of the European Convention on Human Rights? We must promote political representation and leadership of women at all levels, ensure equal pay, economic security and safe workplaces. We must also address cyber violence and defend women's freedom of expression.

In conclusion, the progress made in advancing women's rights in Europe is real and meaningful, but it's far from complete. We have to jointly reaffirm our commitment to this goal, not only in words, but in action, to make sure that women in Europe live free from violence, free from discrimination, and free to lead.

Thank you.

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

Ms Victoria TIBLOM, you have the floor.

Ms Victoria TIBLOM (Sweden, ECPA): Thank you, Mister President.

Dear colleagues,

For decades, the advancement of women's rights has helped shape more democratic, just, and resilient societies. We've seen growing participation of women in all spheres of life, from parliaments to boardrooms, and this has made our democracies stronger and more representative.

But today, those rights are under sustained attack.

Across Europe and beyond, we are facing a coordinated backlash, political, ideological, and well-funded, aimed at rolling back hard-won gains. Anti-gender movements, often supported by foreign interests, target everything from reproductive rights to equal political participation. Online platforms amplify misogyny and silence inclusive voices, while the radicalisation of boys and young men spreads unchecked.

Let us be clear: female politicians are on the front lines of this backlash. They are disproportionately targeted by hate speech, threats, and acts of violence, online and offline. At the Assembly Conference of Speakers of Parliament this past March, we heard a clear warning: these attacks aim to intimidate women, obstruct their participation, and push them back into the private sphere. We must respond with systematic investigation, firm condemnation, and real protection.

Because attacks on women's rights are attacks on democracy.

We must reaffirm our commitment to the Istanbul Convention, to safe and legal access to abortion, to comprehensive sexual education, and to full and equal political representation. These are not privileges, these are rights. And defending them is not optional. It is our responsibility.

In 2025, we must not retreat. We must advance clearly, decisively, and unapologetically for the women and girls of today, and for the generations to come.

Thank you.

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

Ms Aysu BANKOĞLU.

Ms Aysu BANKOĞLU (Türkiye, SOC): Thank you, Mister President,

Dear colleagues,

I am pleased to speak today on a matter of urgency and principle: the state of women's rights in Europe. Europe has claimed for decades its leadership in human rights, equality and democracy. Yet for millions of women, rights remain uneven, conditional and vulnerable to political winds.

Yes, we've seen progress in access to education, health and legal protections. But let's be clear: progress is not permanent. From wage inequality to institutional violence, from attacks on bodily autonomy to underrepresentation in power, we still fail to deliver full justice for all women.

Türkiye's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention is a grave example. It marked not just a legal retreat, but a clear political statement: that women's safety can be sacrificed for ideological gain. The consequences are visible. Only last year, 448 women were murdered by men (most of them by partners or relatives). Courts issue mostly lenient sentences. The message? Women's lives are negotiable.

Alongside this, the government declared this year as the “Year of the Family”, framing women primarily as mothers. The focus is not empowerment, but reproduction. Policies encourage birth rates, not gender equality. Women are praised for caregiving but denied the conditions for autonomy. This erases our roles in society as citizens and individuals with dreams beyond the home.

Another issue is the gender pay gap in Europe, which is 12% percent and remains stubborn. Across our continent, women – especially migrant women – fill the lowest-paid jobs, often without contracts, protections or recognition. In terms of equal representation, women hold only 33% of parliamentary seats. True gender equality requires far more than this.

This is not accidental, dear colleagues. It is the outcome of patriarchal norms and autocratic governments shrinking public services, attacking feminist movements and policing women’s bodies.

We need action, not just words. Reaffirm and fully implement the Istanbul Convention. Enforce equal pay with real transparency, union protections and accountability. Centre migrant and working-class women in all gender equality strategies.

Colleagues, we must ask ourselves: what kind of Europe do we want? A Europe where rights exist only on paper or a Europe where equality is lived, felt and experienced by all?

It is possible; a feminist Europe is possible. But only if we fight for it together.

Let’s move from symbolic gestures to structural change.

Thank you.

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

Mr Georgios STAMATIS, you are next.

Mr Georgios STAMATIS (Greece, EPP/CD): Thank you, Mr President.

Allow me to speak in Greek, but in any case, I'm the first man, I think in this debate.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): I don't bother. We can listen in Greek.

Mr Georgios STAMATIS (Greece, EPP/CD)*: First of all, I'm delighted because my friend Mr Francesco VERDUCCI is here to support you with me. You, as women, and Ms Petra BAYR's narrative could be a manifesto in the future, from which nothing should be subtracted and nothing would need to be added and something which is going to guide us and steer us in the future. We have heard that women have the right to dispose of their bodies as they wish, for whatever reason they wish, at whatever time they wish.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Why do we have this report today? Because we need it. And why do we need it? Because, obviously, until now, a number of politicians in certain states have failed. And that's a paradox. Türkiye, a large country that we want alongside us as a democratic and liberal state, is the country which withdrew from the Istanbul Convention. Now, what message does that send to women when it comes to autonomy and the consequences of one's autonomy?

There are countries where we have not only minorities, migrant women who want to enter Europe. Just imagine a woman with a child with no husband, what sort of stigmatisation they would face in terms of their jobs, their homes and their neighbourhoods. It's not just the case of that woman being remunerated to the same extent as men. It's also the case of having the same opportunities as men, at not being killed. Femicide means being killed because they're women and unable to protect themselves. I think we should not forget this.

Ms Petra BAYR's sensitivity to this issue reminds us that we must not forget women who may not be able to have an abortion because society doesn't allow it, or women who have no access to healthcare. Women who are raped on a daily basis by their brothers, their father or their neighbours. And we're talking about a lot of women in this category in Europe. So we need to ensure that no man or no male ambition should be superior to our values.

It's no accident that we have this report today, and I call on everybody to vote in favour of it in Ms Petra BAYR's presence.

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

Thank you, Georgios. Edite ESTRELA, you have the floor, Edite.

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

Dear colleagues,

I congratulate the Rapporteur, thank you, dear Ms Petra BAYR. You did a very good job.

Even in our days, in any European country, in a robust democracy, it is not easy to be a woman. And if you are poor, without academic qualifications, living in a neighbourhood far from the workplace, it is much more difficult. It is very hard.

Despite progressive legislation, achievements and advances in equality, women's lives are still a daily test. Competence, success, ambition, power... are rarely considered attributes of women. And yet, they are the majority in universities, obtain the highest qualifications and come first in contests. But society is more demanding of women. No one questions the merit of men. Everyone questions the merit of women.

Invisible, silenced and distant from power, women are ignored by the media, especially by television channels. The media can help combat stereotypes and inequalities or promote them. It can help empower women or weaken them by associating them with motherhood, the weaker sex or decorative figures and devaluing their activity as competent and successful professionals.

Hate speech continues to be the main resource for intimidating and silencing women whenever they emerge from anonymity and gain visibility. Misogyny is used in political discourse and is amplified on social media, where insults and threats against women abound. Mr Donald TRUMP has used it in his political fight against Ms Hillary CLINTON and Ms Kamala HARRIS.

Speaking of the United States: who would have thought that an American president could ban the use of hundreds of words? President Trump banned words like abortion, discrimination, female, feminism, gender, inequality, and... women, to neutralise what the conservative movements call "gender ideology".

This is having negative consequences on political discourse in European countries. If we are serious about equality, we must stop treating these issues as side conversations. This is not a women's issue – it's a democratic one.

To conclude, women should not give up any of the rights that are granted to men. The right to speech, the right to public and media space, the right to participate and make decisions. And the right to make mistakes, which is granted to all human beings except women.

Thank you.

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

And now, Valérie PILLER CARRARD.

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

Dear colleagues,

So, my colleague Céline and I have a few of the same references, and I quote, "Never forget that all it takes is a political, economic or religious crisis for women's rights to be called into question. These rights can never be taken for granted. You must remain vigilant throughout your lives." Was Simone DE BEAUVOIR warning women, or was it a simple premonition?

Unfortunately, she may have had a gift for reading the future. In 2025, we should no longer be debating women's rights. These rights should be a reality. This discussion shouldn't even be taking place.

So it's true that when Simone DE BEAUVOIR was born in 1908, there was still a long way to go before women could be considered equal to men. They had no civic rights in many countries, indeed in most of the world, apart from Australia and Finland, which had introduced universal suffrage at the time. They couldn't work, couldn't open a bank account without their husband's authorisation, and had to obey him. There was no talk of equal pay, contraception or abortion rights.

For years, women have fought so that we could have rights, and in particular the right to be present in this Chamber, and here I would like to pay tribute to all these women who have worked for years to obtain certain rights. Their commitment is extraordinary and should also be commended. It's true that, thanks to them, we have made progress in a number of areas, and very fortunately so.

But Simone DE BEAUVOIR's words resonate with disturbing intensity today. We are living through a period of successive, sometimes overlapping crises: armed conflicts on Europe's doorstep, economic instability, the rise of extremism, and the retreat of the rule of law in certain member countries. And with them, all too often, we see the same phenomenon: women's rights become the first silent victims of these upheavals.

Attempts to call into question the right to abortion, backward steps in sex education, domestic violence that still goes unpunished, persistent wage inequalities, attacks on feminist activists... These are not isolated events. They are warning signs of a downward spiral that we must refuse to activate.

Being a member of the Council of Europe today means defending the respect for human rights, equal rights for all, fighting against all forms of discrimination and ensuring security. It also means standing up for justice, dignity and equality. And it requires constant vigilance. Because women's rights are the barometer of democracy. Where they slip, all freedoms falter.

It's not enough to proclaim equality, it must be guaranteed, protected and reinforced. This means ambitious laws, concrete means, unfailing support and sufficient resources for associations, and above all, clear political will.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Valérie. And now is Baroness Shami CHAKRABARTI.

Baroness Shami CHAKRABARTI (United Kingdom, SOC): Mister Chairman,

Out of respect for the impeccable English spoken in this Chamber by so many members for whom it is not their mother tongue, I would like to attempt my remarks in French. Please excuse my accent and any other faux pas.

The position of women has undoubtedly improved in many respects over the last century, in the fields of education, work, property and political representation. But, I fear a major step backwards in recent years with serious consequences for women caused by cuts in relevant public services, open misogyny from some senior public officials, which legitimises violence at home and in the street, as well as the toxic manosphere of much of the internet left unregulated.

I hope that women's rights are not a principle contested in this Assembly on the basis of political or national affiliation.

I'm the first to note that in my own country, the UK, the Conservative Party has produced three female Prime Ministers and four female leaders, and the Labour Party, none. But we must also take into account the daily experience of millions of women who will never run for high office. Are they free from hunger and violence? Are they free to realise their potential?

Are we right to denounce the abuses committed against women on other continents, only to ignore those committed closer to home?

When we cut taxes and public spending, do we take into account the more severe impact of these cuts on women, their wealth, health and safety?

And will we choose not to shelter the emperors of big tech who believe themselves above democracy and the law? Will we tame this lawless digital continent and regulate it?

Let's support the report.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you. And now it is Mr Francesco VERDUCCI.

Francesco, you're next.

Mr Francesco VERDUCCI (Italy, SOC): When women's rights advance, it is all of society that advances; when they regress, we all collectively regress.

Women's empowerment is a disruptive and revolutionary force for change: it is a profound cultural transformation of a society's mentality, its way of being, and that is why it is so important and incisive. That is why it is capable of dismantling prejudices and stereotypes that are a legacy of feudal male domination, which has never been completely defeated, and which today, in the time of crisis in which we live, often resurfaces fiercely.

Femicide is never just a matter of news: it is the sickening symbol of a reactionary resurgence that wants to push women back to the margins of society, along with their freedom and self-determination.

In Europe, 50 million women suffer violence at home, at work, in public. Women are the primary victims of hate speech on the internet, which is a very serious form of discrimination. And, in many countries, there has been a regression in women's rights: in work, in pay, in the spaces of daily life, achievements of decades are under attack. Above all, Mr President, there is a political and ideological offensive against the very concept of women's empowerment.

The Trump administration, at the head of what used to be a great democracy, has erased words like "feminism", "gender equality," and, indeed, "women's empowerment" from all its documents by executive order. If something can no longer be named, it is because you want to erase it, annihilate it.

All the women who were in charge of the U.S. federal government's rights programmes were fired. The programme to combat gender discrimination in the workplace has been cancelled. Programmes for the sexual and reproductive rights of millions of women and girls have been cancelled.

And all this will have devastating consequences: it will be the weakest and poorest women who will pay the price.

So yes, Chairman, it is urgent that our Assembly take a stand today, and I thank Ms Petra BAYR and the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination for this report.

It is urgent that we continue to work with the United Nations, with associations, with all parliaments to not go backwards.

I have always believed that women's way of thinking, what we call "The Thought of the Difference" is at the core of our humanism.

And today, when all this is threatened, it is time for renewed awareness and new battles.

Thank you, President.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Francesco [spoken in Italian].

Ms Bisera KOSTADINOVSKA-STOJCHEVSKA is next.

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

Poverty, gender pay gap, violence, hate speech, stereotyping, are just one of the few concepts easily associated with women.

One in three women around the world experience violence.

Only one in six women reports violence, including sexual violence, to the police.

One third of victims never talk about it to anyone.

One woman or girl is killed by someone in her own family every 11 minutes.

Over 200 million women and girls in 30 countries have undergone female genital mutilation. 71% of all human trafficking involves women and girls – mainly for sexual exploitation.

Women and girls suffer the most during violent conflict due to inequality and discrimination.

They are more at risk of sexual violence, exploitation and trafficking during war.

One in five female refugees and internally displaced people and have experienced sexual violence in countries affected by conflict.

Over 1.2 billion women and girls live in places where safe access to abortion is restricted.

12 million girls under 18 are married each year.

130 million girls remain out of school worldwide.

Almost one in four women experienced food insecurity in 2024.

It could take another 286 years to remove discriminatory laws for women and girls.

Women earn just 77 cents for every dollar men earn.

Women spend at least twice as much time as men on domestic work, and when all work, both paid and unpaid, is considered, women work longer hours than men.

Over 2.7 billion women don't have the same work opportunities as men, with laws restricting the types of jobs they can do.

Less than 15% of landholders worldwide are women, despite most women in the global south working in agriculture.

The estimated global gender pay gap is estimated at 22%, with women earning around 78% of what men are paid.

Nearly 82 million women around the world don't have any legal protection against discrimination in the workplace.

Women make up just 25% of parliamentarians worldwide.

For every female film character, there are 2.24 men.

Women are 47% more likely to suffer severe injuries in car crashes because safety features are designed for men.

Women's rights and equality with men in public and professional life as overarching principles remain broadly uncontested. Besides the slow pace of progress and the fragmentation of political consensus on gender equality, there are new challenges and opportunities stemming from ongoing political, social, economic and technological developments. Today, violence against women also occurs online, with cyberviolence often aimed at women. Trends such as the rise of new digital technologies and AI, social debate on the meaning of gender roles, or increased awareness of the EU's demographic crisis, define a new social and political context in which women's rights need to be reaffirmed.

Fighting for women's rights means you're fighting authoritarianism. And when you take away women's freedom of expression and association, it brings down whole communities, no matter people's gender. The fact that women's rights are human rights is not just a slogan, it's a lived reality.

The time for half-measures is over: it is time for governments to act now to ensure women have an equal seat at every table where power is exercised. And that is why this report is very timely and perfectly aimed at achieving equality. Thank you Ms Petra BAYR!

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): You have four minutes now.

Ms Hripsime GRIGORYAN is next.

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

I want to start with thanking Petra for this timely and necessary report. But even more, I want to thank you, Petra and all our colleagues here for their genuine commitment and their everyday work towards women's rights and equality. Even in our region, traditionally seen as a pioneer for women's rights, for equality, we see a huge backslide in recent years.

What is more concerning is that we have evidence that these attacks are well organised and well funded. A report from 2021 informs us that over €700 million was directed to anti-gender-equality activity within the European Union. Imagine how much good we could have done with this money.

I cannot but agree with you, Petra, that this whole debate is about power, equality, women's equal representation and being in decision-making positions would never bring to such democratic backsliding, to such increased threats to security, to these many conflicts and eventually the wars we're surrounded by today. Undeniably, there is a strong correlation and interdependency between democracy and women's rights, between security and women's rights. Hence, these attacks on women's rights are attacks on democracy.

The report states that erosion of women's rights is witnessed in polarised societies in a time of cultural wars and ideological tensions. I think we also need to add here the wars, the armed conflicts, to the factors contributing to the rise of masculine culture and making it easy to promote ideas of women's traditional roles. So my conclusion here is that we need to fight harder for democracy and peace in order not to allow polarisation and backsliding of equality and women's rights.

The second aspect I want to draw your attention to is the social norms. Every act we do, every behaviour we follow, is rooted in the approach we have towards any given issue. If under representation of women or violence against women are not seen as negative phenomena that need to be combated, then certainly taking actions to combat these negative phenomena will simply not be seen as a priority or even anything worth fighting for. So it will almost be impossible to either get funding or support for combating this. So I would want to attach great attention to raising awareness about this, informing our societies, talking about this and lobbying for solutions that we see. And here I want to recognise the role of the Council of Europe's Gender Equality Commission for working on narratives to raise awareness about women's rights.

Concluding, I want to express my wholehearted support for each and every point in the call, in the recommendations in the resolution, and finish with a quote that to me summarises the philosophy and the message of the resolution. Let us take steps to "transform our commitments into tangible change", as simple as it is.

And finally, my body, my rights.

Thank you very much.

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

And the last on my list is Ms Yuliia OVCHYNNYKOVA. Yuliia.

Ms Yuliia OVCHYNNYKOVA (Ukraine, ALDE): Thank you very much, Mister President.

Dear colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, thank you very much, Madam Rapporteur, for excellent work. Very, very important. But gender equality is not only a founding principle of the Council of Europe, it's a cornerstone of modern democracy. It's enshrined in our core legal instrument, from the European Convention of Human Rights to the Istanbul Convention. And through this mandate of the Parliamentary Assembly, we carry the responsibility to ensure that the principle is not just an aspiration, but a lived reality across all our Member States.

Over the past decades, Europe has taken meaningful steps forward in many of our countries. Women today are more empowered, better educated and more visible in public life than ever before. Legal protection against discrimination has been strengthened. Women's health, labour rights and political representatives are increasingly favoured at our institutions.

So the Istanbul Convention, a landmark initiative of the Council of Europe, remains a pillar of our fight against violence toward women and domestic abuse. And thanks to this mechanism for gender quotas, access to higher education to support women in all spheres. And in Ukraine this progress is visible in the very difficult time of our period.

Amidst the full-scale war, Ukrainian women have risen as defenders, decision-makers, community leaders, drone operators. And to tell the truth, give us a unique possibility and warm power that we live, that we definitely win in this terrible war. And despite the Istanbul Convention, of course we have a lot of challenges and problems. But it's very happy that we have the possibility to work together with our Member States, to fight together.

But progress is not guaranteed, it's not linear. It requires vision, political will and solidarity. And the Council of Europe must continue to survive as a beacon of human rights, a defender of dignity and a driver of gender equality. Let us wield warm power together and we will definitely win together.

Thank you very much.

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

And now I will call rapporteur Ms Petra BAYR to respond to the debate.

Petra, you have 3 minutes.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, Rapporteur): Thank you very much.

Of course, due to time constraints, I will not respond to everybody, but thank you very much for this really fruitful and rich debate.

And let me start with Ms Céline THIÉBAULT-MARTINEZ, also thanking you for your valuable additions and amendments to this report. And you are absolutely right, equality is not cherry on the cream. Equality is something for every day and that's exactly what makes the substance of civilisation – equality.

To Ms Albana VOKSHI, I just wanted to respond that yes, indeed, as politicians we are especially targeted. And I think that the #NotInMyParliament initiative of our former president Ms Liliane MAURY PASQUIER is really worth rethinking and re-establishing, because we also as parliamentarians, of course, have problems, have concerns.

Ms Béatrice FRESKO-ROLFO, I want to just tell you that when you say that, thank you for mentioning the roadmap, but also to say that we still have a long way to go. I think that you especially are a role model to show that a single individual MP can really go this way in their own country. And I really appreciate how many successes and how many important steps forward have been done in Monaco in recent years. So thank you very much for your work.

And also because Ms Sevilay ÇELENK, and not only Ms Sevilay ÇELENK, but also Ms Aysu BANKOĞLU mentioned Türkiye. Yes indeed, especially in the country which withdrew from the Istanbul Convention, which is the gold standard of combating violence against women, I'm really happy to see that there is this very strong feminist civil society movement that really speaks out within and outside the Parliament. But I think that you are really very strong and that's important.

And also men were mentioned. And yes indeed, we need men as allies and as those who work together with us for a fair world.

I would like to contrast the only voice that was against the report and Ms Martina KEMPF was against abortion *per se* because she thinks it's illegal *per se*. And let me quote Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights". And also the equating of the rights of the born and unborn is legally not appropriate. Beside that we made development and progress in our society and in our history, and that the right to self-determination of women should be a general right.

And I also want to congratulate and cheer Ms Victoria TIBLOM from the European Conservatives, Patriots & Affiliates, thanks a lot for your opinion. I wish you a long breath and good nerves so that you really can also have these debates about self-determination of women within your political group. I think it's really important to convince people and also your colleagues.

And finally, let me thank Ms Elodie FISCHER and Mr Giorgio LODDO for their important work and contribution and support, as always.

Thanks a lot.

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

And now we'll ask the Chairperson of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination , Catia POLIDORI, would you like to take the floor for 3 minutes?

Ms Catia POLIDORI (Italy, EPP/CD, Chairperson of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination): Thank you, Mister Chair.

Dear colleagues,

A few months ago, a large delegation from this Assembly, including our President, participated in the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women in New York.

Confronted once again with the alarming state of women's rights globally, and the real backlash against them, we recognised the urgency of taking a strong stance.

That's why we are here now, the Council of Europe cannot come back from the United Nations without a strong answer.

Promoting human rights is a never-ending process. On the one hand, this is because we continue to face real and persistent obstacles. On the other, crucially, because no achievement in this field is ever guaranteed or permanent.

This is exactly the reality we are witnessing in recent years. Women's rights are increasingly being called into question, whether for budgetary constraints, a resurgence of outdated views on the role of women in society, or the influence of external actors, trying to sow division and discord.

But let us be clear, we will not be intimidated. Equality and women's rights remain top priorities for us. Gender equality is a pillar of democracy. There can be no true democracy if half the population lacks equal access to political participation and representation. The same is true of human rights, they only really exist if they are accessible to all, equally.

The objective of the resolution presented by our colleague Ms Petra BAYR, and thank you Petra for your excellent job, and strongly supported by our entire Committee, is threefold.

First, it serves as a warning that women's rights are under systematic threat and must be actively defended. Second, it issues a call to action to our counterparts in national parliaments, and to all those in positions of political, institutional, or decision-making authority. It calls them to reaffirm their commitments and intensify efforts toward gender equality. Third, the resolution lays out a clear path forward.

How do we protect the rights that have been won? By going on the offensive. By demanding more. By aiming high to ensure we achieve outcomes worthy of our values.

Equality between women and men remains a value we all hold dear, and it can unite us once again, today.

Dear colleagues, I call on you, first and foremost the men among us, and then of course the women, to extend a hand to our sisters whose rights are under threat because of war, in Europe and beyond.

Don't throw this opportunity to make the voice of this Assembly heard just because you don't like a paragraph. Have the courage. Vote in favour of this important resolution.

Vote: Women's rights in Europe – Progress and challenges

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): And with Catia's speech, the debate is closed.

The Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination in Document 16211 has presented a draft resolution to which two amendments have been tabled.

I understand that the Chairperson of the Committee wishes to propose to the Assembly that Amendments 1 and 2 to the draft resolution, which were unanimously approved by the Committee, be declared as definitely approved. Is that so, Catia?

Ms Catia POLIDORI (Italy, EPP/CD, Chairperson of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination): Yes.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Yes. If no one objects. Does anyone object?

Yes, please. Would you like to take the floor?

Mr Adam BALTEN (Germany, ECPA): When will the vote start? Right away?

So then, according to the rules of procedure, according to Article 42.3, I challenge the quorum. Pursuant to Article 42.2, I request the verification of the quorum. Thank you.

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

As you have heard, there is a request to ascertain the number of members present. If a quorum is not present, the vote on the business before the assembly will be postponed.

I need to know if the request is supported by at least one sixth of the representatives authorised to vote, that is 49 members from at least five national delegations. Will those who wish to support the request please stand up?

Quiet, colleagues. Quiet.

So, dear colleagues,

It is obvious you miss it. It is obvious that the requirements to call for a quorum are not met. As I have already read to you. We therefore return to the main debate.

And we were interrupted where I was saying that if there are no objections. So we have seen the objection and I'm going now to approve what Ms Catia POLIDORI said, that the amendments would be considered as approved.

We will now proceed to vote on the draft resolution contained in Document 16211, as amended. A simple majority is required. The vote is open. The vote is closed. I call for the result to be displayed.

The draft resolution in Document 16211, as amended, is adopted.

Dear colleagues,

The next item of business this afternoon is a debate on "Promoting inclusive participation in parliamentary life: gender equality, accessibility and inclusive policies". Document 16183, presented by Ms Maryna BARDINA on behalf of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination. We need a minute to change rapporteurs.

Debate: Promoting inclusive participation in parliamentary life: gender equality, accessibility and inclusive policies

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): So, dear colleagues, good to continue the day.

On the important other file. It's the debate on "Promoting inclusive participation in parliamentary life: gender equality, accessibility and inclusive policies". So it is Document 16183 that will be presented by Ms Maryna BARDINA, on behalf of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination. And I inform you that the debate is expected to end at around 5:30 p.m.

So, I call Ms Maryna BARDINA, rapporteur. You will have seven minutes now and three minutes in the end. Please.

Ms Maryna BARDINA (Ukraine, ALDE, Rapporteur): Thank you, thank you very much.

Madam Chair,

Ladies and gentlemen, honourable colleagues,

It's a privilege to speak to you on a subject that touches the core of democracy and good governance, promoting inclusive participation in parliamentary life. You know, today I see very many young people on the balcony of the Assembly, and I hope that they will find today's discussion about women's rights in Europe, about women's and equal participation in parliamentary life, very useful for them. Because I suppose that everything we do here, we do for future generations. And then when they come to their national parliament, or maybe somebody of them will become members of a parliamentary assembly, it will make their life easier.

So their presence here inspired me to tell you a story that when I was first elected to the Ukrainian Parliament, I began to reflect on how my colleagues who were pregnant at that time managed both their motherhood and parliamentary duties, especially after giving birth. Many of them returned to work within the first month of the baby's life. They actively participated in committee work, in parliamentary discussions, in voting, and they even continued breastfeeding during this period. At that time, the parliament was not properly adapted to their needs. There were no special facilities.

Yet despite these challenges, they managed to balance both motherhood and parliamentary work. When I became a mum, I started to draft a strategy for our national parliament on what has to be done in parliament facilities and procedures to make it possible to combine both motherhood and parliamentary responsibilities.

Another experience I would also like to share with you today is about my colleague who uses a wheelchair. The parliament was not adequately accessible for people with disabilities, but thanks to her mandate and persistence, changes were introduced gradually and making the building more inclusive and accessible.

When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the number of people with disabilities increased significantly, both civilians and military personnel, unfortunately. Today, I believe it is our responsibility to ensure that these people can live with dignity, and if one day they are elected as members of parliament, the spaces, rules and working conditions must be fully adapted to their needs.

The people who elected us expect us to do our job effectively and represent their interests, independent of our private situations, our private lives. That's why it's essential to create inclusive working conditions, not only for people with disabilities, but also for parents who wish to combine parliamentary work with parenthood. The same principle should apply to parliamentary staff.

Everyone should have the right to organise their life and career in a way that works for them. This is what I mean by inclusive participation in parliamentary life. When people, regardless of their sex, age or physical condition, are able to do their job because they choose to do so, there should be no barriers, no obstacles in their way.

As I mentioned, my national parliament continues to promote inclusivity. Its buildings are equipped with accessibility features. The official website is adapted for people with visual impairments, and discussions are underway about allowing MPs to attend sessions with infants.

In this report, I have considered the question of inclusiveness by focusing on gender equality, accessibility and inclusive policies and attitudes. The draft resolution makes a strong, clear recommendation and let me go through them briefly. So first of them is to set goals and track progress. First, it calls on member states to promote gender parity in political representation by setting measurable goals, collecting intersectional data, supporting women's networks and engaging male allies in driving change. The second is to reform infrastructure and procedures. Parliament should ensure their spaces and practices are accessible from physical infrastructure to parental leave, breastfeeding facilities and flexible procedures like proxy or remote voting. Internal policies must promote work-life balance and offer support to underrepresented groups. The third goal is to address political culture. Infrastructure alone is not enough. We must address the culture of politics. The draft resolution calls for codes of conduct to prevent harassment and sexist behaviour, mandatory training on gender equality and inclusion, mechanisms for reporting and responding to misconduct and programmes to engage male allies in building inclusive parliaments.

So, last but not least, changes inside the political parties. Political parties are the gatekeepers of parliamentary life. The draft resolution recommends that parties reform their internal rules to ensure diverse candidate lists, support mentorship programmes for women and publish data on gender representation at every level. The Parliamentary Assembly itself also should take steps towards inclusivity. That is why it's necessary to take steps such as conducting internal audits, improving accessibility for persons with disabilities and promoting online participation for members with caregiving responsibilities, including caring for children under the age of three. At the same time, I want to thank the Assembly for its flexibility during this report's preparation. As a mum in parliament, I really felt the conditions were comfortable when preparing it.

So to conclude, the journey towards gender parity requires the joint effort of the government to provide an institutional framework, parliament to reform legislation, internal procedures and infrastructure, parties to ensure equal opportunity and inclusivity within their structure and of course, civil society to keep demanding change and offering support.

Dear colleagues, I urge you to support this report and its recommendations and not stop there, but actively implement them in your national parliaments as well as here within the walls of our Assembly.

Thank you for your attention.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Then we go to the speakers on behalf of the political groups.

And we start with Mr Georgios STAMATIS, the Group of the European People's Party.

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

Dear colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

In 2023, when there was the ceremony for the Greek parliament taking up its seats, we had the opportunity to invite someone. I invited my wife and I was asked whether she had become an MP. So I chose as my accompanying person one of my staff instead who was a disabled person and a friend who was also disabled and had a guide dog. It was the first time that inside the parliament it was clear that disabled people need to be present and have rights throughout life. There has to be a decision, do we want these people present in political life? So that we can not only change their lives but the lives of others.

I am delighted that this report gives us the opportunity to see that this affects all citizens and disabled people may become MPs and parents and citizens alike. And above all women with children, born within marriage or out of wedlock, may, in parliament, have the possibility of representing women and the people who voted for them and exercise their maternal rights at the same time.

So I'd like to congratulate the rapporteur and the Chair of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination because there is a need to demonstrate to all countries how inclusive spaces are essential and that starts, first and foremost, with our parliaments and this Assembly which is a temple of democracy.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

The next speaker from European Conservatives, Patriots & Affiliates, Martina KEMPF.

Ms Martina KEMPF (Germany, ECPA, Spokesperson for the group): Dear Mr President, dear Members of Parliament,

I would like to comment as follows on the report "Promoting inclusive participation in parliamentary life". Making parliament buildings wheelchair accessible should be a matter, of course. Avoiding late parliamentary sessions due to family issues, as called for here, is likely to be difficult in national parliaments for organizational reasons. We reject the call to set gender equality targets for political representation. This goes too far for our group.

The selection of politicians must be based on competence and experience and not on gender. In addition, a gender requirement in elections by the people is also impractical, because if you have a majority voting system for constituencies, then the candidate who has received the most votes is automatically elected there, regardless of gender. Gender-based interference in the internal democratic process of the parties would be an interference in democracy. The experience of our party, Alternative for Germany, also shows that far fewer women are politically active and party members in this party. It is possible that some women simply lack interest in politics. In the Bundestag elections, it was also not uncommon for fewer women than men to stand as candidates in our party. Otherwise, there is no shortage of women in political leadership positions in Europe, if you think of Ms MELONI in Italy, Dr Alice WEIDEL as co-chair of the largest German opposition party or Marine LE PEN, who wants to run for president. In the latter case, however, her candidacy is being hampered by dubious legal proceedings.

Finally, the supporters of this document should simply set a good example and allow the inclusion they want to apply to normally elected parties as well. In other words, democratic practices should also apply to Germany's largest opposition party, Alternative for Germany. And this party should not be excluded from chairing committees and from a sufficiently large meeting room. As a final point, we reject the commissioning of gender chairs to carry out further studies on the subject of the report if the taxpayer is to provide the money for this. Our citizens in Europe have far more important problems than those addressed in this report. For example, many do not know how to pay their electricity bills. The concerns of these citizens should have priority, and that is why we want to reject the report.

Thank you.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): The next speaker is Stephanie KRISPER, on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.

Ms Stephanie KRISPER (Austria, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Madam President [spoken in French].

Dear colleagues,

I want to start by thanking the rapporteur for the truly timely and necessary resolution. It is not about modernising rules and procedures. It's about making democracy real, to make it accessible, fair and equal for everyone. It's about recognising that political participation must reflect the people we serve, not just the privileged group that can afford it.

I want to start especially for my colleague, Ms Martina KEMPF, who spoke before by highlighting one key element in the resolution – the role of political parties. As you said, the gatekeeper of political life. Because it starts with who gets on the list, who is dominated, who's mentored, who's encouraged to lead. If parties are not inclusive in their representation, Madam KEMPF, no building or voting system will fix that. And without inclusive representation, the voices in the political party will be too weak to implement working conditions that enable mothers to balance political responsibility with parenting, persons with disabilities to face no barriers, etc.

While inclusive representation in political parties can take some time, because of the power dynamics in political parties being difficult to reach this aim, other issues raised in the report are simply simple to fix. And that takes me to the issue of accessibility. My colleague from ALDE, Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK, made me aware of the fact that Ukraine has adapted its parliamentary buildings for persons with reduced mobility, with ramps, call buttons, elevators and hydraulic platforms, and that MPs with disabilities have designated voting places in the chamber. So I can say that the issue of accessibility is, by the rapporteur of Ukraine, more raised to the attention of us other Member State representatives.

It is still too often in our countries the case that disabled politicians face barriers before before they are elected and are treated also then differently to others once in their parliament or council, including not being able to sit with their political party and facing physical and mental barriers from others. For the colleagues concerned, it is, as a colleague yesterday who is concerned, phrased it very diplomatically, exhausting. I would say it's unacceptable.

Therefore, I hope further work will happen to focus more on equality for disabled politicians in the future also regarding this building. But for today, let's make sure this resolution is not just adopted, but implemented. Let's build parliaments where women, parents, people with disabilities and all underrepresented groups are not just allowed in, but are empowered to take part and lead.

Thank you.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): The next one. On behalf of UEL, Mr Emmanuel FERNANDES.

Mr Emmanuel FERNANDES (France, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Madam President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The report we are examining today brings us to the subject of democracy. If there's one area in which we must constantly strive for perfection, it's the real, concrete implementation of democracy, particularly within the institution in which we sit.

How can we claim to be democratic when more than half the population is excluded, or in any case, when the conditions are not in place for more than half the population to have access to our institutions, and therefore to democracy? An institution that does not make every effort to ensure the full participation of women, people with disabilities and minorities cannot consider itself a fully fledged democracy.

We are confiscating and preventing a whole section of the population from gaining access to power. Many of us experience what this report highlights on a daily basis. Parliaments are still designed for able-bodied men, who are often white and part of the bourgeois elite. This reality cuts across all Council of Europe member states and is systemic.

How can we explain the fact that in 2023, MEP Leïla CHAIBI was unable to have her maternity leave recognised by the European Parliament? At the time, she deplored, and I quote: "This Parliament is basically made for men, and it does not take into account what a woman of childbearing age needs, and wants to have a child, and who could be elected. No remote voting, no proxy voting, no substitution possible. The same applies to an MP in the French parliament, my colleague Mathilde HIGNET, at the French National Assembly in 2022. In fact, she has tabled a bill to enable her to be deputised during parental leave. As if becoming a mother disqualified you from being elected. As if we refuse to admit that a deputy can be a deputy and be of childbearing age."

In France, it was only on 12 March of this year that voting by the so-called "sit-stand" procedure at the Assemblée Nationale was abolished. A tradition, yes, but a complete absurdity for people with disabilities. This reform was passed unanimously and sent out a strong signal, but it is far from sufficient. To this day, you still have to stand up when the President of the French National Assembly enters. Another tradition, another barrier. Inclusion cannot be partial; it must be total.

And let's make no mistake about it. We are debating this at a time when the rise of the far right, of anti-gender and reactionary movements and all forms of conservatism threaten even the most fundamental rights.

My group, the Group of the Unified European Left, thanks and congratulates Mrs Maryna BARDINA for this essential report, whose resolutions we support, and which reminds us of a requirement we should all share. It's high time that our parliaments resemble our people. It's time for power to be opened up to those who have always been excluded from it. It's time for elected representatives to truly embody democracy in conditions of pure and perfect equality and with genuine plurality.

Thank you very much.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): The speaker on behalf of the SOC group is Ms Luz MARTINEZ SEIJO.

Ms Luz MARTINEZ SEIJO (Spain, SOC, Spokesperson for the group)*: Thank you, President. Thank you, Ms Maryna BARDINA.

Undoubtedly, this report addresses a number of crucial aspects to foster inclusive participation in parliamentary life. But we should begin by ensuring that parliaments are genuinely equal in terms of representation and ensuring that 50% of parliamentarians are women, such as myself. But they are not because, unfortunately, most parliaments continue to avoid genuine gender equality and parity. Democracy should be inclusive and representative of the whole of society, and not just one part of it. Therefore, this report is relevant as it highlights the urgent need for transforming our parliamentary institutions so they genuinely reflect the diversity and needs of all citizens, male and female alike.

I take special pride in speaking on behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group, who carry equality in our DNA and defending progress on equality and inclusion policies because we are advancing in equality. The under-representation of women in European parliaments indeed continues to be a significant hurdle for democracy. Therefore, it's essential to establish clear gender parity goals in terms of political representation. We in Spain adopted this by law. Not just parity, which was achieved some years ago, but we've also made progress on other issues. This is the way parliaments must adopt specific measures such as gender quotas and support programmes for women parliamentarians, especially those from under-represented groups.

It's also essential to promote networks of women parliamentarians and involve male politicians so that we work hand-in-hand in eliminating detrimental practices and stereotypes.

Physical accessibility to parliamentary buildings is another major challenge to guarantee the participation of persons with disabilities and people with reduced mobility. Therefore, there's a need to co-operate with NGOs and agree on improvements and establish – why not? – appropriate spaces for childcare and breastfeeding, therefore facilitating the participation of mothers and fathers in parliamentary life. It's still incredible that these measures are not more extensive already.

To foster conciliation, parliaments must also adopt internal policies, regulating working hours and allowing for online voting when necessary. We in Spain have this guaranteed and have for some time.

And especially important is the fight against sexism, harassment and gender violence in parliaments. It does exist, and it's completely contrary to human rights. So, zero tolerance, clear codes of conduct and proper whistleblowing mechanisms accompanied by appropriate penalties.

This report affords us a clear roadmap to advance towards a more inclusive and more representative democracy. It is our responsibility as political leaders to implement these recommendations and work together to construct a future in which all citizens, regardless of gender, disability or family situation may fully take part in parliamentary life.

Thank you.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

That concludes the list of speakers on behalf of the political groups. And we go for the list of speakers, first Aysu BANKOĞLU.

Ms Aysu BANKOĞLU (Türkiye, SOC): Thank you, Madam President.

I would like to thank Ms Maryna BARDINA for her excellent report and for highlighting the urgent need to make our parliaments truly inclusive, also for those of us who fight to be heard and listened to in political spaces.

As Youth Rapporteur, I must emphasise that age is still one of the biggest barriers to political participation. In most parliaments across Europe, youth representation remains symbolic at best. Too often, young people are treated as future leaders when, in fact, some are already leaders today.

Young people, especially young women, young LGBTI persons and youth with disabilities, face intersecting forms of discrimination. These are not just theoretical barriers. They are daily realities: inaccessible buildings, unpaid internships, party networks that shut us out and online abuse that targets our identity more than our ideas.

Political parties bear an important part of the responsibility for the current situation and should act accordingly. They are the gatekeepers to democratic institutions, and without youth-friendly reforms, such as mentoring schemes and funding for young candidates, diversity will remain a slogan, not a standard.

There is also a growing need to link political inclusion with civic education. Youth often feel disconnected, not because they do not care, but because they have never been taught how to navigate or influence the system. More investment is needed in political literacy, especially for marginalised youth.

But let's call it by its name, this report refers to the "tendency to mistrust very young politicians, while at the same time, ageism against older persons in decision-making institutions is not uncommon". We need to address ageism on both sides of the spectrum: ageism against young people and against older persons. We all need to participate in political and parliamentary life and defend our views and our rights. This is just the basis of democracy.

That is why I would like to highlight the importance of intergenerational solidarity. Inclusion is not just about making space; it is about sharing power. We need to move beyond tokenism and ensure that young people are sitting at the table where decisions are made.

Let us remember that inclusive parliaments are not just a democratic ideal; they are a democratic necessity.

As a young voice in this Assembly, I call on all of us to move beyond good intentions. Let's commit to building parliaments where every person, regardless of gender, age, disability, background or identity, can belong, participate and lead.

Thank you.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Perfect timing also. So then, next speaker, Rónán MULLEN.

Mr Rónán MULLEN (Ireland, EPP/CD): Thank you very much, Madam Vice-President.

In Bunreacht na hÉireann, the Irish Constitution, Article 41.2 says something quite shocking. It says the state recognises that by her life within the home, a woman gives to the state support without which the common good cannot be achieved. If that were not shocking enough, in the next part, it goes on to commit the state to ensure that mothers shall not be required by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home. And if that were not shocking enough, last year, when this was put to a referendum, the Irish people voted resoundingly to maintain that clause in our constitution.

And they did that not because they think that the duties of parenting should be confined to mothers alone. But they recognised a hypocrisy of a state that goes on and on about diversity, but which has never managed to sincerely fulfil its obligations to mothers and fathers in terms of the vital duties that they have in the home.

And therefore, in approaching today's debate, we should remember that to achieve true work-life balance, legislators must recognise the importance of family time. The informal work done by parents is a positive asset for society, a valuable, freely given contribution that befits the whole economy, but which we never seem to value enough. Current policies focus too much on employment and efficiency, neglecting parent well-being and freedom.

And therefore, I think we should shift away from thinking too much about gender quotas, which overlook the burden of unpaid care work, to more family-conscious policies that support shared responsibilities. Because without that, we risk expecting women to do it all without real support. The labour market must adapt to the needs of mothers, not the other way around. And the needs of fathers, through flexible work arrangements, adapted maternity and paternity leave, enhanced parental leave, and diverse childcare options.

Parenting should not be seen as a barrier, but as a precious gift and a vital responsibility. Therefore, I think we should get away from symbolic equality ideas to substantive fairness. To not be focused unduly on shallow measurement tools and percentages, but actually on what men and women want when given a proper choice.

We in our parliament have a long way to go yet. We have had a forum on family-friendly and inclusive parliament, but until such time as we're looking at proxy voting and at better and more reasonable working hours for parliamentarians and those who support them, we're not making the progress we need.

"Thank you very much" [spoken in Irish].

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Continue the debate, next one is Ms Alexandra SCHOOS.

Ms Alexandra SCHOOS (Luxembourg, ECPA): Madam President,

Dear colleagues,

On behalf of my party, I welcome this debate. But let me say clearly, inclusion is not about ticking boxes. It's not about enforcing one model across 46 countries. Inclusion must reflect who we are: our identities, our traditions, our languages, and our democratic choices.

In Luxembourg, we have taken concrete steps to make political life more accessible. From ballot design and polling stations, to adapting our Parliament, we've worked with civil society and disability organisations to make sure people are not excluded. That's subsidiarity in action.

Today, 21 out of 60 MPs in our Parliament are women. That's progress. I want however to be clear on this point, as a woman, we shouldn't push women into politics through quotas or artificial targets. They should enter because they choose to, because they're motivated, qualified and want to shape public life on their own terms. That's what genuine equality means. Freedom of choice, not forced representation.

In Luxembourg, we've identified a real legal gap. Right now, pregnant and breastfeeding MPs are in a grey zone when it comes to parental rights. That's unacceptable. So we are proposing concrete reforms: parental leave written into our rules and full pay during leave. We also want to make our parliament more family-friendly, with breastfeeding rooms, childcare spaces, even allowing infants into plenary sessions when needed. In Luxembourg, we have taken small, but meaningful steps, like allowing remote participation for MPs who are pregnant or ill. This isn't ideology. It's practicality. And it's backed by our new Constitution.

But while we support equal rights, we must also speak honestly. Inclusion must not become a tool for ideological conformity. In my party, we believe in fairness, yes. But we also believe in reality, biological reality, cultural identity, and the importance of democratic pluralism. So let's be clear, inspiration is welcome, imposition is not.

Every country must remain free to shape inclusion according to its own values and realities. That's what democratic legitimacy demands. Because in the end, inclusion is not just about access. It's about meaningful participation. That means civic education. It means open debate. And it means empowering every generation to shape Europe's future with confidence and responsibility. And let us strengthen trust in democracy by making our parliaments more accessible, more responsive and more connected to the people they serve.

Colleagues, democracy is not made stronger by consensus alone. It is made stronger by listening, by disagreement, and by the freedom to decide for ourselves.

Let us build inclusive institutions, but let us also defend the values that make inclusion worth having: dignity, diversity and democratic freedom.

Thank you.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Next speaker is Ms Larysa BILOZIR.

Ms Larysa BILOZIR (Ukraine, ALDE): Madam President,

Dear colleagues,

Firstly thank you to the rapporteur, our colleague Ms Maryna BARDINA, for bringing reality into this assembly. This report speaks the truth plainly and with the weight of lived experience behind it. I especially appreciate this report, the most pragmatic report I have ever seen on this issue, that it was authored by Ukrainian women because we know what transformation look like when women are trusted, trusted when institutions adopt.

I speak today as a member of parliament, but also as a mother of three children, dared to give birth to a child during the wartime, as well as Maryna did, as Ms Lisa YASKO, and as well as Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA, just recently in a bomb shelter gave birth to a beautiful son. And Ukrainian women have held this country together. They command military units, they run municipalities, they evacuate their families under fire and return to draft laws. We often discuss equality in theoretical terms, childcare, flexible schedules, inclusive buildings. But for many of us these are daily decisions, between work-life balance and exhaustion.

That's why I fully support the provisions in this report that call for remote participation during emergencies, because war doesn't wait for quorums, that call for childcare facilities within parliaments, because many of us bring our children with us, because we have no other choice. And I remember the first day after full-fledged invasion, when we came here, nine women without men from delegation because they had to stay at home to protect our country. And I remember how we shared with Maryna one jacket. And actually after I had the speech, my children were loved into the hemicycle. And I thanked Ms Despina CHATZIVASSILIOU that did it for me. And actually a lot of you colleagues approached me that day and proposed to welcome my children. And actually a former head of the Secretariat of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development welcomed my children for two years.

And I know that Madam Secretary General Despina also welcomed children from a Ukrainian family. And actually she also established a school for my children. So thank you for your humanity and solidarity. Especially for those women with a big heart. This resolution does something rare, it doesn't idealise women's

participation. It identifies the real obstacle, rigid schedule, toxic debate, lack of support. And it offers practical solutions, proxy-voting, parent-friendly hours, breastfeeding rooms, zero tolerance to harassment. Inclusive parliaments do not lower the bar, they raise the standards. Because when you design institutions around care, around diversity, around responsibility, you build systems that reflect the people we serve in our countries.

Thank you.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): The next one is Naomi CACHIA.

Ms Naomi CACHIA (Malta, SOC): Thank you, Madam President.

Thank you, rapporteur for the report.

We are making reference also to gender equality in national parliament. And the challenge here, I guess, is twofold. It's getting more women to parliament and safeguarding the women in parliament.

I come from a country which has recently enacted constitutional amendments which allocate additional seats to the under-represented sex as a temporary measure to get more women in parliament and give them the visibility and exposure required to get them at the decision-making table on their own steam. Which has evoked obviously many different opinions and I will not delve into it now as I think it deserves its own discussion. But, in the run up to the introduction of these amendments, I remember we had described gender quotas as a necessary evil, and even that, although we did say that with the best of intentions, now I do say to myself, really, evil? No wonder a lot of people have come to resent almost the women who were elected via quota, because words matter and really need to work harder to change the narrative.

But speaking also about accessibility and infrastructure, which the resolution and the memorandum refer to, I make reference to our own parliamentary building back home. A new, very imposing modern building right at the entrance of our historical capital city, which turns 10 years old this year. And I know several of you have already visited, and quite clearly, Madam President, it was designed by men for men. I have no other way of putting this. And even worse, by men who believe, or seem to believe that, that they or other men do not have any parental responsibilities, because no allocation was made for family rooms or childcare facilities when designing this brand new modern building. And so, we have had to provide childcare facilities for our MPs in a separate building. But it is obviously so exhausting to see how the very basics are not an integral part of our planning even today. It is so disheartening to see that the building housing our highest institution doesn't, at face value, represent what our society should be, which is inclusive. And I don't tend to believe that this alone is a factor that hinders women or men from entering political life. It just makes life that much more difficult.

Something that the report doesn't mention, but I believe can be very important in this context, is mental health services within our parliamentary structures. This is something I truly believe in. And we need to set an example. We do speak about work-life balance, we speak about prioritising mental health at work. Parliament is our workplace. Parliamentarians are humans, humans with very stressful, very demanding jobs. And we need to recognise mental health as well as a factor in the full participation in the accessibility and inclusivity in parliamentary life. And so we need to push for the introduction of policies or services specifically aimed at supporting the well-being of Members of Parliament and staff, being access to counselling, mental health awareness training and peer support networks.

But well done to the rapporteur and thank you so much.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Next speaker, Ms Edite ESTRELA.

Ms Edite ESTRELA (Portugal, SOC): Thank you, Chairperson.

I congratulate Ms Maryna BARDINA for this important report, which addresses a critical gap in our democratic systems: the persistent under-representation of women in our parliaments.

Parliaments remain male-dominated spaces – not just in numbers, but in culture, in rules, in assumptions. Women, especially mothers, still face structural barriers: the lack of childcare, rigid scheduling, and the expectation that political work must come before family. These are not neutral inconveniences – they are mechanisms of exclusion.

This resolution also recognises that we don't all experience politics the same way. Women from under-represented groups, disabled people, carers – too often we are left out, or expected to fit into systems that were never built for us.

I especially welcome the call to engage men as allies. But let's be clear: this is not about women waiting for permission. It's about power – who holds it, who shares it, and who is still fighting to be heard.

Let's be honest: our institutions were not built with women in mind. When there's no childcare, no breastfeeding space, no flexibility for care responsibilities – who gets pushed out? And who is still expected to sacrifice everything for a seat at the table?

Dear Colleagues,

Democracy cannot function effectively when half the population remains underrepresented, particularly in leadership roles.

I urge you: support gender parity laws. Push for childcare in every parliament. Demand codes of conduct that protect women from harassment. And men – yes, especially my male colleagues – step up. Don't just say you support gender equality. Use your power to dismantle the systems that benefit you.

Thank you.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): The next speaker is Yuriy KAMELCHUK.

Mr Yuriy KAMELCHUK (Ukraine, EPP/CD): Dear Chair,

Distinguished colleagues,

Today, we face a critical challenge to make our parliaments truly open and inclusive for all members of society.

When we talk about democracy, human rights and the rule of law, we must acknowledge a persistent gap: many of our parliamentary institutions still do not fully represent the diversity of the people they serve. Representation is not only a question of numbers, it is about real access, safety and the genuine ability to participate equally.

We cannot talk about inclusion without first addressing gender. Across Europe, women remain underrepresented in political life. They face structural barriers: unequal access to funding, underrepresentation in leadership roles, and too often, harassment in both physical and digital spaces.

These challenges are not abstract, they are lived realities. And yet, progress is possible. Even in the midst of war, Ukraine has implemented a 40% gender quota in local elections. Today, women lead 24% of ministerial portfolios in Ukraine's Cabinet. Women also head 22% of our diplomatic missions abroad. At the local level, women comprise around 35% of leadership roles, and in smaller communities, this rises to over 41%. These numbers reflect our national determination to build a more inclusive, representative democracy even in the most difficult of circumstances.

But inclusion goes beyond gender. True democracy must embrace people with disabilities, young people, parents, national minorities and migrants. To do so, we must recognise that our institutions were not originally designed for such diversity, and therefore require comprehensive redesign.

It requires adapting physical spaces with ramps and accessible infrastructure, enabling flexible and remote participation to accommodate care-giving responsibilities, and enforcing zero tolerance for harassment and discrimination through transparent and fair mechanisms.

Inclusion is not about charity. It's not about special treatment. It's about fairness. It's about justice. It's about making sure that those who want to serve their countries and are elected to do so can participate fully and equally.

Let's take responsibility for changing that. Let's open the door wider. Let's make our parliaments fit for everyone.

Thank you.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): And the next speaker is Meryem GÖKA.

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

Dear President and colleagues,

It's an honour to speak on behalf of Türkiye and the AK Parti Women's Branch, the world's largest political women's organisation with nearly 6 million members. I thank the rapporteurs for acknowledging Türkiye's positive practices, including nursery facilities in parliament, which promote inclusive political participation.

Over the past two decades, Türkiye has made significant strides in advancing women's rights and representation. One of our most transformative reforms came in 2014, when we lifted the headscarf ban. Until then, women theoretically had the right to stand for office. But in practice, this right applied only to certain women. This change was not just symbolic. It restored equal participation for all women, regardless of belief or appearance. While we take pride in these advances, inclusion must be a shared effort across Europe.

Yet many European countries still preach equality while erecting new barriers, especially for Muslim women. In several countries, women wearing headscarves remain excluded from public roles, including positions in teaching, public administration and internships. The UN Human Rights Council defines this exclusion as a triple penalty: for being women, for belonging to an ethnic minority and for being visibly Muslim. So this is actually institutional discrimination. It silences voices, limits potential and contradicts the very ideals of inclusion we seek to uphold in this Assembly.

Dear colleagues,

In 2025, Türkiye declared the year of the family. Recognising that no democracy can thrive without strong social foundations, we believe women's empowerment must respect identity and motherhood, not force a choice between career and caregiving. That's why we offer structural solutions, flexible work options, paid maternity leave, public child care and targeted social assistance, over 60% of which directly benefits women.

So we observe with concern the rise of cultural currents in Europe that promote gender indeterminacy, radical individualism and anti-family ideologies, under the guise of progress. These approaches alienate children from parents, citizens from their roots and individuals from their biological and spiritual realities. Türkiye does not only criticise, it offers a model, a family-based, culturally-grounded, inclusive democracy where women can be leaders and mothers without being forced to choose, where children are raised in security, not confusion, and where participation begins at home in a spirit of care, dignity and shared responsibility.

Let us not mistake uniformity for unity, and let us celebrate diversity not just in identity, but also in values and tradition.

Thank you.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): The next speaker is Victoria TIBLOM.

Ms Victoria TIBLOM (Sweden, ECPA): Thank you, Madam President.

Honourable colleagues,

Promoting inclusive participation in parliamentary life is not only a question of fairness, it is a fundamental pillar of a healthy, functioning democracy. When politics reflects the diversity of our societies, our decisions become more legitimate, more just, and ultimately more effective.

Gender equality, accessibility, and inclusive policies must be more than buzzwords. They should guide our practical actions. We must actively remove the barriers, both structural and cultural, that still hinder participation by women, persons with disabilities, and underrepresented groups.

For example, accessible childcare, like we have in the Swedish parliament, flexible working conditions, and family-friendly political structures are crucial. When political life is compatible with family life, we open the doors wider for women and men alike to participate equally.

However, while I strongly support measures that facilitate greater involvement of women in politics, I also believe that representation must be built on merit, not mandates. Gender quotas may have good intentions, but they risk undermining individual agency and reducing complex identities to statistics.

Instead of quotas, let us empower individuals through education, mentorship, and structural reform. Let's ensure that aspiring politicians from all backgrounds, regardless of gender, have the tools, support, and access they need to run for office and to serve with dignity.

True inclusion comes not from ticking boxes, but from transforming systems. This is our shared responsibility, to create parliamentary institutions where everyone has a real and equal opportunity to participate, contribute, and lead.

Thank you.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): And next we have Flordeliz OSLER from Canada.

Ms Flordeliz OSLER (Canada): Dear colleagues,

Thank you to the rapporteur, Ms BARDINA, for this constructive report, which highlights the need for better inclusion and accessibility and highlights that the under-representation of women in parliamentary life undermines democratic institutions and processes.

Canada is a strong advocate for empowering women to be equal decision makers and agents of change in all spheres of public life. The example, the Senate of Canada, is an appointed chamber and has been comprised of at least 50% of women since 2020. There are currently 57 women in the Senate, representing 54% of all senators, and we bring a diversity of experiences, perspectives and knowledge to our chamber. Two months ago, Canada held a federal election, which resulted in 104 women elected to the House of Commons, representing 30% of all MPs. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, this number is only a few points higher than the global average percentage of women in national parliaments, which currently stands at 27%.

And while advancements have been made to increase women's participation in politics, as well as making parliaments more inclusive overall, much remains to be done. Faced with this reality, we must ask ourselves: what is preventing women and other under-represented groups from entering politics? I fully agree with the report's approach to these questions. It encourages us to use the tools already at our disposal to promote inclusive democratic institutions.

In the Canadian Parliament, for example, we have several initiatives aimed at improving inclusion and experiences in politics. In 2019, the first-ever parental leave programme for members of the House of Commons was created. And in 2021, the Senate modified its Ethics and Conflict of Interest Code to include a new framework for addressing cases of harassment.

In closing, in order for our democratic institutions to reflect the societies we represent, we must strive to ensure that our institutions are inclusive, supportive and free from any form of discrimination.

Esteemed colleagues, thank you for your attention.

Merci. Miigwetch.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Next speaker is Ms Valérie PILLER CARRARD.

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

Dear colleagues,

I would like to begin by thanking Ms Maryna BARDINA for this important work on the report "Promoting inclusive participation in parliamentary life: gender equality, accessibility and inclusive policies".

Today, I take the floor to defend an essential democratic requirement: that of fair and inclusive representation of women in our parliaments. Because, let's face it, a parliament without women is neither representative, nor legitimate, nor complete.

The report of our Commission on Equality and Non-Discrimination is unequivocal: the under-representation of women in parliamentary life weakens our institutions and compromises the very foundations of democracy.

Parity is not a luxury, it's a right. And it is a condition of good governance.

Indeed, equal participation of women and men in all areas of social and professional life is a human rights issue. As demonstrated by the experience of our Assembly, where parity has almost been achieved, positive obligations in terms of women's representation in parliaments are effective and can help to make parliaments more inclusive.

In my own country, Switzerland, despite great strides in recent decades, women still occupy just 37% of seats in the federal parliament. At cantonal level, the proportion is slightly lower at 33%. For many Swiss women, entering politics is a struggle, and the challenges of reconciling family and professional life are huge. Indeed, my country is hardly an example when it comes to family policy, and there's still a long way to go. As in other countries, the under-representation of women in parliamentary life weakens democratic institutions and processes.

We can no longer accept that, in our European parliaments, women remain largely in the minority in positions of power. We can no longer tolerate the fact that family constraints, lack of childcare facilities, inaccessible locations or, worse still, ordinary sexism and online violence, discourage women's involvement in political life.

To encourage equal representation, which is essential for good governance, a series of measures need to be put in place to promote equality between men and women, as well as accessibility to parliaments, measures that have the advantage of including people with disabilities or reduced mobility.

Amongst measures to promote women's participation, I would quote the official authorisation to access the workplace with young children or to breastfeed on parliamentary premises, and the possible introduction of alternate or proxy voting procedures.

In the 21st century, accessibility and inclusion are democratic imperatives. Dear colleagues, I therefore invite you to support this report: it is high time that our parliaments faithfully reflect the societies they represent. State legislatures must become inclusive workplaces, free from any form of discrimination.

Thank you.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): The next speaker I have on the list is José María SÁNCHEZ GARCÍA. He's absent.

Next is Esther PEÑA. Absent.

And then finally observer, Canada, Salma ZAHID.

Ms Salma ZAHID (Canada): Thank you, dear colleagues,

I would first like to thank the rapporteur, Ms BARDINA, for this important report.

Last March, the global community gathered at the UN headquarters in New York to mark the 30th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women, the conference that led to the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The Beijing document called on governments to remove obstacles to gender equality and the empowerment of women. Thirty years after its adoption, despite advancements that have been made towards gender equality, we must acknowledge that progress has been too slow and the gains uneven.

At the current rate, the UN has reported that gender equality in the highest positions of power will not be reached for another 130 years. In Canada, following our election last April, more women were elected to the House of Commons than ever, now accounting for 104 members, or 30% of all MPs. Gender parity was achieved among federal cabinet ministers for the first time in 2015, a practice that was maintained following the 2019, 2021 and 2025 federal elections.

While efforts have been made to make parliaments more inclusive, we must acknowledge that we remain a long way from true gender equality and inclusivity. In 2019, Canada's House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women presented a report entitled "*Elect Her: A Roadmap for Improving the Representation of Women in Canadian Politics*".

The report highlighted seven factors that may deter women from participating in electoral politics, many of which echo the findings of Ms Maryna BARDINA's report. Among these obstacles was the lack of family-friendly work environments. The committee report noted that such initiatives as parental leave, support for childcare, as well as some changes to internal policies could have a positive effect on all members of Parliament. In recent years, the Parliament of Canada has adopted various measures in line with the report findings.

For instance, a few months following the tabling of the report, the House of Commons adopted flexible maternity and parental arrangements. As well, the report identified the possibility of participating remotely in parliamentary work as a way to foster inclusive, family-friendly and gender-sensitive workplaces. In July 2020, Canada's House of Commons held its first hybrid sitting where members could participate in person or by the video conference. This flexibility is important because childcare, taking care of family members and other responsibilities can affect the ability of members and women in particular to participate in parliament in person. We need the voices of women at the decision-making tables.

Thank you.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

It was pleasant that all who wanted to speak had the floor.

And now that concludes the list of speakers.

I call now, Madam rapporteur, BARDINA, to reply. You have 3 minutes, please.

Ms Maryna BARDINA (Ukraine, ALDE, Rapporteur): Dear colleagues,

Thank you very much for all your comments.

I'm really inspired by this discussion and I want to focus one more time that this report is about the right of everyone to do their parliamentary work. So if a person decides to become a parent and do parliamentary work, he or she can do it. If a person with disabilities wants to continue their career, he or she has to do it because we, as parliamentarians, our national parliaments, our assemblies, have created appropriate conditions have created appropriate facilities. I suppose this is extremely important, and this is the basic right we can create for people.

I just want to make comments on some issues and say to Ms Naomi CACHIA, who mentioned mental health, that I'm sure the breastfeeding room, for example, in my parliament could reduce stress levels I felt, you know, and can make the combination of my motherhood and my parliament work easier.

Other colleagues mentioned parental and maternity leave. When I wanted to start my maternity leave and was interested in the procedure, I understood that men wrote the procedure and decided and voted on how women have to start their maternity leave. Thanks to my Ukrainian colleagues, we changed the rules, and it has become comfortable for women. I'm really proud of my Ukrainian male colleagues because they usually say to me, "Maryna, you know, equality is a win-win process because we all have different experiences. And while we produce legislation, we exchange these experiences and make best practices for people to live". If parliament starts to implement this inclusiveness, we can show our societies that it is normal, that everywhere in public and private life, people have to feel this comfort.

And Larysa, thanks really for the jacket you shared with me at the beginning of the full-scale invasion when we came to Strasbourg. To explain, colleagues, it was not a moment to think about suits, it was a moment to come here to explain to you, to tell you what was happening in Ukraine at that time. Thank you very much.

Thank you, my dear Committee Secretariat Ms Catia POLIDORI, for your help in the preparation of this report. And I really hope we have no obstacles today to support inclusiveness.

Thank you.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Does the Chairperson of the Committee, Ms Catia POLIDORI, wish to speak for three minutes, please.

Ms Catia POLIDORI (Italy, EPP/CD, Chairperson of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination): Thank you, Madame President.

Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to remind you that this report was unanimously adopted at the meeting of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination held in Paris on 10 May.

I would like to warmly thank our colleague Ms Maryna BARDINA for her work in preparing this report. I would also like to thank all the members who took the floor to support this report, including our Committee's Youth Rapporteur.

As Ms Maryna BARDINA reminds us in her report, our national parliaments should be inclusive workplaces, free from sexism, racism, ageism, ableism and any other form of discrimination. This should be [reflected] in their internal rules and regulations, which should provide appropriate mechanisms and tools to prevent and address discrimination, through adequate reporting and sanction procedures.

All these points are included in the draft resolution, which I urge you to support.

I would like to draw your attention to a few important points in the draft resolution, including the need to set a target for gender parity in political representation in national parliaments, to carry out an assessment of the situation at a national level, and to draw up a strategic plan to achieve this goal through specific measures.

In Resolution 2111 (2016), the Assembly already supported the principle of parity as the ultimate goal of political representation.

Cultural factors play a decisive role in women's participation in the political life of their country. Education and training are essential: they enable the acquisition of the skills needed to challenge persistent stereotypes that stand in the way of genuine parity.

Political parties also have an essential role to play in improving women's political representation. They are the guardians of access to elected office. Their choices largely determine the final outcome of elections in terms of balanced representation between women and men. The draft resolution before you also makes a significant number of recommendations to improve the situation.

Finally, I'd like to say a few words about the importance of making our parliaments accessible to people with disabilities and reduced mobility, whether they be members of parliament, staff or visitors. Accessibility to parliamentary buildings and work is a matter of justice.

We must all promote inclusive participation in parliamentary life. I call on you to support this report and vote in favour of the draft resolution, to send a strong message to our Member States: accessibility and inclusion are democratic imperatives, more so than ever in the 21st century!

Vote: Promoting inclusive participation in parliamentary life: gender equality, accessibility and inclusive policies

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Chair POLIDORI.

The debate is now closed.

The Committee has presented a draft resolution to which no amendment has been tabled. So we will proceed to the vote on the draft resolution, contained in Document 16183. A simple majority is required.

I open the vote.

The vote is closed.

We see the result, we can *declare that the resolution is adopted*.

Current affairs debate: A call for the immediate release of persons facing politically motivated persecution in Georgia

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

We are about to start.

The next item of business this afternoon is a current affairs debate on "A call for the immediate release of persons facing politically motivated persecution in Georgia".

Speaking time is limited to three minutes for all members except the first speaker chosen by the Bureau.

The debate is expected to end at around 6:15 p.m. I call Mr Stephen GETHINS. Dear Stephen you have seven minutes now and three minutes to reply. You have the floor.

Mr Stephen GETHINS (United Kingdom, ALDE): Thank you so much, Mister President, and thank you to you and your colleagues for time here today.

This is a serious debate for us, but a particular serious debate for our friends in Georgia and our beloved *Sakartvelo*.

The Convention and the rights that we enjoy are not simply as a result of us living on the continent of Europe. Being a state in Europe does not make you a member and does not grant you rights, as Russia and Belarus are well aware. That's why we as parliamentarians are here today. The conventions affect the lives of our citizens to whom we are accountable in the normal, democratic way.

But there's a condition. Last night, President ZELENSKY and his outstanding contribution to this Chamber told us that there is one condition to membership, but it's an important one, a crucially important one, it's that we stand for democracy and human rights. And we should guard that condition absolutely jealously. Indeed, we all, regardless of whether we agree with each other or not, have a responsibility to do that. Now, Georgian leaders have told their people that they want to accede on the European path and that EU membership and continued membership of this place is, and I quote, a top priority. Well, Mister President, no wonder. The Council of Europe, the European Union, have built a period of unprecedented peace and prosperity across Europe. They've made us wealthier, fairer, safer, and both are needed more than ever. And that's sometimes difficult, and sometimes, at times, we forget that.

But you don't get into a club for nothing. You must respect democracy. That's hard sometimes, and we all know that. We're politicians. We know that respecting democracy and the democratic process can be difficult. The path is hard, but it's worth it. Now colleagues, the jailing of opponents and suppressing dissent is the opposite of what this place stands for, and we must stand against it and send a message that, yes, all European states are welcome, but they must abide by the rules. And in that regard, Mister President, I recall our Resolution 2600 earlier on this year that called for the immediate release of political prisoners and also expressed the concerns of this Chamber of arrests and the abuse of of legal processes in Georgia. And that's worthwhile remembering today.

We must allow all our Georgian colleagues to engage in democratic politics and also to allow them to engage with this place and with the Council of Europe without any fear or favour whatsoever. Can I say and put it on the record that if anyone is punished for attending the Council of Europe and engaging with elected politicians from across Europe, we must treat that with the utmost seriousness.

But let's not forget the price that many Georgians are paying for their engagement in the democratic politics and the exercising of rights that so many of us take for granted. There must not be politically motivated prosecution, including for Mr Zurab JAPARIDZE, Mr Nikanor MELIA, Mr Nika GVARAMIA, Mr Mamuka KHAZARADZE, Mr Giorgi VASHADZE, Mr Badri JAPARIDZE and other persons who are facing politically motivated prosecution in Georgia.

Let me recall the words of Ms Marta KOS, the EU Commissioner for Enlargement, that the arrest of opposition voices is an attack at Georgia's democratic foundations, which are being eroded by the day. That's serious and we should take it seriously. Ms Anitta HIPPER, a spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy at the EU, said the politically motivated persecution and arrests of opposition leaders go against basic democratic values. These are authoritarian tactics, opposite of what we expect from an EU candidate country.

There must be inclusive dialogue, and that's something that the UK and the OSCE have called for. Inclusive dialogue, political parties, civil society, peaceful and democratic solutions which are so precious to all of us in this place.

Friends, our rights, our European rights and this is a lesson of history, and you've often recounted history, Mister President, and quite right, too. Our rights that we take for granted are hard-won, but they are the foundations of a democratic Europe. Europeans, on the whole, enjoy greater democratic and other rights than at any other point in history. But it's fragile. And if we turn a blind eye to them there, where does it end? We cannot afford to turn a blind eye to the suppression of these rights anywhere in Europe.

Nobody knows better about that than our Ukrainian friends, who at this very moment are spilling their blood in their own country to defend their rights, their democratic rights, and defend their democracy. And last night, President ZELENSKYY said, an awful lot, thank you to us. The thanks should have been the other way around. And I say thank you to our Ukrainian friends because you give us that example, and I'm grateful to you. Democracy is fragile. These rights are fragile.

So in terms of Georgia, we have a responsibility to our friends in Georgia and all those who aspire to the rights that we enjoy. So today I'm asking colleagues that we must make a stand and ensure that these rights, these democratic rights are defended. And where better to do so than in this place, a place that for decades has defended democracy and our human rights across our shared continent, regardless of our differences.

Mister President, thank you for your time today. And thank you to those colleagues as well.

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

Yes, you're absolutely right: democracy is hard. But the lack of democracy is even harder.

So I open the list.

On behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS. Eerik, you have the floor.

Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS (Estonia, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister President.

And dear colleagues,

My speech will not be for the faint-hearted, but neither is the situation in Georgia today. And my question to you is: what else needs to happen in Georgia before we actually stand up and do something about it? I would, of course, also like to ask you to call the events with the right words. We use the word "democratic backsliding". It's not democratic backsliding. What we are watching in real time is a Russian-style – probably also Russia-directed, Russia-assisted – takeover of Georgia. It's a state capture by an oligarchic autocratic regime inspired and controlled by Moscow that is unfolding under our watch.

The Georgian people have been demonstrating peacefully for more than 200 days now, under European flags. None of their demands and requests have been met. None. And what have we done? In January, this Assembly ratified the credentials of the Georgian delegations conditionally, and there were four main conditions: release political prisoners, reverse the repression of civil society, investigate police violence and, most importantly, announce new parliamentary elections.

And what has been the response? Well, the Georgian Dream Delegation left the Assembly because their feelings were hurt, and the regime has escalated. There is no compliance whatsoever. Just the opposite. Bidzina IVANISHVILI and his so-called government are dragging Georgia 180 degrees in the opposite direction, from democracy towards dictatorship. Georgian Dream is rapidly consolidating authoritarian power. This week alone, seven opposition leaders were arrested and sentenced, banned from political activity, which means they can't participate in elections. Some of them were mentioned. I'll mention one more. Givi TARGAMADZE, who has already been sentenced in absentia in Belarus, who is charged in Russia, who was almost blown up by Kadyrovites, Chechens, is now facing criminal charges in Georgia. Those are the friends of the regime.

So, let's be absolutely clear. If we do not respond now, we will be complicit. Silence is no longer neutrality. Silence is betrayal. So we call for immediate targeted sanctions against all Georgian Dream officials, ministers, MPs, judges, police, and their enablers and their families. We call on decent officials, civil servants and police officers in Georgia: resign, and join the people. We call for an interstate case against Georgia, just like in the European Court of Human Rights. Just like what was done against the black colonels of Greece

once for grave violations. Because Georgia is on the brink of becoming the next captive nation. Just like Belarus is today, and half of Europe was before. And this would be a victory for Russia and the *Russkiy Mir*, and a defeat for Europe and this Assembly.

Thank you very much.

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

On behalf of the Group of the Unified European Left, it is the Co-Chair of the party, Mr George LOUCAIDES.

George, I didn't have the opportunity until now to congratulate you on your election as the Co-Chair of the Group of the Unified European Left. I wish you all the best and I'm sure that we'll have a very a good and fruitful co-operation.

I will call my colleagues to applaud your election as a leader. You have the floor.

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

Let me start by saying that it would have been more constructive if our interventions today were heard by the Georgian delegation, giving them the opportunity to respond. Our position has always been to promote dialogue and inclusivity. Without such engagement, how can we ensure that both statutory organs act in synergy, not unilaterally, when addressing clear violations by a member state?

In January, the majority of the Assembly sanctioned the Georgian delegation and challenged their credentials. Despite our assessment that the irregularities of these elections were no different from previous elections, we called for new ones. The delegation then withdrew. My group opposed this approach, warning it would lead to deadlock. Which, regrettably, is where we stand now.

However, it is important to remember that the October 2024 parliamentary elections in Georgia sparked widespread public unrest. While opposition parties denounced the vote as fraudulent, the government maintained that it was conducted lawfully. Protests followed, some of which did involve violence. The Ministry of Internal Affairs reported over 100 injured officers and dozens of cases of arson and assault on public buildings. These events are serious, and it is acceptable that they will be investigated and prosecuted within the law. At the same time, credible reports by the public defender, Human Rights Watch and the Council of Europe Commission for Human Rights point to disproportionate use of force by police, including beatings, mass arrests and alleged torture of detainees. Over 400 individuals were detained in connection with these protests, and dozens remain in custody. There is growing concern about politically motivated prosecutions targeting figures such as Mr Mikheil SAKASHVILI, Mr Nika GVARAMIA, Mr Zurab JAPARIDZE and Ms Mzia AMAGLOBELI.

We must uphold the principle of equal justice. Violence by protesters cannot justify systemic repression. Nor can public protesters, nor can repression or public order concerns, excuse violations of Article 5 or 10 of the Convention. Georgia, like all Council of Europe member states, is obliged to safeguard the right to peaceful assembly, fair trial and humane treatment in detention.

We also note that criticism towards Georgia is at times intensified by geopolitical considerations. The country's current non-alignment posture must not result in unequal scrutiny compared to other member states. Human rights must be upheld universally but assessed consistently. We therefore call for the immediate release of all individuals held without evidence of violent conduct, access to independent medical care for Mr Mikheil SAKASHVILI, independent investigations into all allegations of abuse and the repeal of legislation that undermines freedoms of expression and association.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Extra time was a gift for your election, thank you.

Petra BAYR on behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you very much.

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's 2024 Democracy Index, Georgia recorded the fourth-largest deterioration in democracy worldwide and the sharpest decline in the South Caucasus region. For over 200 days, ongoing protests have been taking place, demanding new elections. The government led by Georgian

Dream (GD) has responded with a series of repressive measures, such as restrictive legislative changes, increased criminal prosecution and sometimes harsh penalties against demonstrators, civil society and prominent opposition figures. The names have already been quoted.

There are weak signs yet that the protests will lead to political change. Nevertheless, a core group of 1 000 to 2 000 people continues to mobilise every evening for protests around the parliament building. However, there have been numerous arrests. The most prominent case to date was that of Mzia AMAGLOBELI, a founder and director of the independent media outlets Batumelebi and Netgazeti. She was arrested for putting up a protest sticker and allegedly slapping a police officer in Batumi.

The GD has passed numerous laws aimed at taking a more restrictive approach to protesters. These include increasing fines and prison sentences, and even the introduction of new criminal offences such as treason. In December 2024, for example, the administrative fine for blocking a road was increased from the equivalent of €180 to €1 800, which is simply intended to distract people from speaking out for their fundamental rights. Our answer must be a clear one: there are red lines inherent in our common values, and to imprison people because they want to enjoy their fundamental human rights, like freedom of expression and freedom of speech, is definitely a no-go.

It was a reminder of all the preconditions we have taken to have the Georgian delegation back in our Assembly. And the problem is that there are no positive signs at all at the moment. So I'm really not very hopeful that there will be a fundamental change and that the Georgian delegation will come back soon. But we should not give up hope and try to put even more pressure on them, to have new elections, to investigate all the violent actions against activists and peaceful demonstrators, and of course, to release all political prisoners.

Thank you very much.

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

On behalf of the European People's Party, Mr Tekke PANMAN.

Mr Tekke PANMAN (Netherlands, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Chair.

Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues,

Let me begin by sharing a personal experience. Last year, on 26 October, I had the privilege of serving as an OSCE election observer in Georgia. What I saw was a country of extraordinary beauty, filled with warm and welcoming people. It is no surprise to me that so many wish to represent Georgia, to lead it forward, and to guide it toward a brighter future.

The Georgian Dream party promised its people a modern, European future. Across the country, the European flag became a powerful symbol of hope – a reminder of what Georgia aspires to be. A modern European country is built on respect for human rights, freedom of speech, and a robust democratic process.

But the path to democracy is not always smooth. The election process was marred by intimidation and other unfair practices – a reality that has been thoroughly discussed here. Since those elections, we have seen democratic values and human rights come under even greater pressure. Journalists and opposition members have faced intimidation and imprisonment simply for expressing their opinions.

Let me be clear: silencing voices is not a sign of strength. It is a sign of weakness and uncertainty. Strong leaders are not afraid of dialogue. Strong leaders do not fear the voices of their people. They welcome debate because they know that a free society is a stronger society.

To the leaders of Georgia, I ask: do you want your citizens to live in fear, bowing to power? Or do you aspire to be honoured and respected, guiding your country toward a future of freedom and prosperity?

Remember, the people are not blind to the choices before them. They deserve leaders who have the courage to admit mistakes, to release those unjustly imprisoned, and to embrace the principles that define a modern, democratic society.

Let us stand together for a free and democratic Georgia.

Thank you.

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

Mr Perran MOON is next.

Mr Perran MOON (United Kingdom, SOC): "Thank you" [spoken in Cornish]. Thank you, Mister President.

I rise to speak on this matter of grave concern.

I was going to be speaking specifically about the politically motivated detention of Mr Zurab JAPARIDZE and Mr Nikanor MELIA. But while the world's attention has been grasped by events in the Middle East, the discredited Georgian government has used this moment to escalate the suppression of democracy in that country. It is now crystal clear that the detentions of Mr Zurab JAPARIDZE and Mr Nikanor MELIA on minor procedural charges are part of a much broader campaign of repression. In fact, six opposition leaders have been arrested in the last few weeks.

As Mr Zurab JAPARIDZE was led away in handcuffs, he declared, "in the end, we will win". That is the spirit of a man who believes in freedom even when he was silenced by force. That is the voice of a man who needs to be heard across this hemicycle and throughout Europe. And these arrests can no longer be described as isolated. We must add to the list of political prisoners Mr Nika GVARAMIA, the third opposition leader detained. And then on Wednesday last week, in London, I met Mr Badri JAPARIDZE, leader of the opposition Lelo party, who outlined to me the laws that have been passed to restrict media freedom, civil society and the right to peaceful assembly. Mr Badri JAPARIDZE told me that he, too, was heading back to Tbilisi to face what he felt was a minor jumped-up charge from a kangaroo court, from which he was expecting a fine. Instead, on Monday this week, Mr Badri JAPARIDZE, along with his co-leader of the Lelo party, Mr Mamuka KHAZARADZE, were sentenced to eight months imprisonment and barred from holding public office for two years.

These are not just opposition figures. They are symbols of Georgia's democratic aspirations and the growing resistance to orchestrated authoritarianism. Friends, I have to tell you that time is fast running out, and the time for us to act is now. We are well into the eleventh hour for Georgia. If we are serious about supporting those who bravely resist political persecution in Georgia, we must target those responsible for this repression not just with words, but with actions. That means freezing their assets, restricting access to Western education and institutions and denying them the luxury of holidays and safe haven abroad while they dismantle democracy at home. The so-called Foreign Agents Registration Act criminalises unregistered NGOs, while the Successor Parties law effectively bans opposition parties ahead of the October municipal elections.

The United Kingdom has responded with sanctions targeting judges, ministers and police chiefs complicit in corruption and repression. It can be done, but we must apply pressure. The curtain on the democratic future of Georgia is being drawn.

As members of this Assembly, we have a duty not to look away. The Georgian people are pleading for our help. We must stand in solidarity with them. We must call for the immediate release of all political prisoners in Georgia. At the moment when the Georgian people need us most, let us not turn our backs on them.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Perran. Mr Christophe BRICO is next.

Christophe? Where's Christophe? He's not here?

Okay, then I will go to Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO. Oleksii, I see that you have moved to the centre. Is it related to President ZELENSKY's visit or it just happened?

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, ECPA): President, it's just to see you better.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): I'm so honoured. Thank you, Oleksii.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, ECPA): Thank you.

My dear colleagues,

We are now discussing an extremely important issue – Georgia. And yesterday, here in this hall, we welcomed the President of Ukraine, Mr Volodymyr ZELENSKY. Who spoke, who made an address. But before this, who signed the agreement about establishing a Special Tribunal? A really historical moment, a tribunal for aggression.

But you know what? There are six countries from member states which did not sign this agreement. And one of these six countries is Georgia. And Georgia is the victim of Russian aggression itself. 20% of Georgian territories are occupied by Russia, almost the same number as in Ukraine. Georgia was an even earlier victim of the Moscow regime, of the Kremlin, than we were. And after this, Georgia is not supporting the tribunal against Russian aggression. Can you imagine this?

So the question is, for whom does the Georgian government really work? Who are their masters when they jail opposition leaders? It is not the voice of the Georgian people speaking. It is the Kremlin whispering. Georgian people deserve leaders who stand shoulder to shoulder with them, not with Mr Vladimir PUTIN. And that's exactly what's happening right now. Yes, there is a part of the blame on all of us.

In 2008, it was a moment when Ukraine and Georgia were standing at the doors of NATO. And NATO said, "yes, we will let you in, but we don't know when". Many people did not understand what happened. Mr Vladimir PUTIN understood clearly. And from 2008, he started the war against Georgia, then against Ukraine. He is destroying these countries. He's trying to kill all of us. He's trying to occupy these countries. And now he's taking Georgia in a hybrid way because his tanks are too busy in Ukraine. But that's why it's not tanks, but it's puppets. It's Russian agents who are doing this attack on Georgia. It's not Mr Bidzina IVANISHVILI, we should call him "Lukashvili" because he is doing Belarus from Georgia. It's exactly the way of Belarus, which lost democracy at first and then statehood, and now it's in reality occupied country.

That's exactly what's happening with Georgia right now. Just several months ago, we met here with Mr Giorgi VASHADZE, other Georgian leaders who are now in jail. Now in jail! Just imagine, my dear colleagues, we met with them, we shook hands with them, we said to them, "Long Live Georgia" [in Georgian]. And now these people are in jail.

We need to do everything we can to save Georgia from Moscow. To give Georgia back to the Georgian people. "Long Live Georgia" [in Georgian].

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): I'm not sure that I understand the last two words. Do I need to know? I mean, the last two words, you said something in your language.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, ECPA): In Georgian, it means "Long live Georgia!"

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): "Long live Georgia". Okay.

Because I remember last time that you said something in another language, it was a bit problematic.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, ECPA): I know many languages, like you, President!

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): So, my dear Leslie, Lord Leslie GRIFFITHS has the floor now. I haven't heard from you for a long time now.

Lord Leslie GRIFFITHS (United Kingdom, SOC): President and members,

I have to say that passion plus facts have spoken for themselves. I'm a Welshman. Any invitation to make a speech, I accept with alacrity. I can usually fill any amount of time, but on this occasion, I'm more than happy to rest my case that I might have made, in the words that have been made, and in the passion that has been shared.

Following Oleksii... Where's he gone, by the way? You see, we have a principle.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): He moved to the left. I don't know where he is now, I'll tell him later.

Lord Leslie GRIFFITHS (United Kingdom, SOC): It's simply that when we have a debate in the House of Lords, all speakers are obliged to stay throughout the debate. So I just looked expectantly. But for all of that, the words have been said.

We've had three meetings with Georgian delegations that I've been part of in the last, well, since this year began. And on each occasion, I start by asking what's happened since the last time? And it gets worse and worse. And all I can say is that I dread coming in September, October, to meet them again and to ask them once more what's been happening. There are local elections coming up about that time, and who knows what's going to happen to that if a similar depredation of powers and opportunities and freedoms happens between now and then?

My perplexity about this Council, which I feel so honoured to be part of, has always been, how do we take our fine words and put them into action? In many cases, I understand the needs of bureaucracy and all the rest of it, but there come moments when things are happening so fast and people are suffering so greatly that all our fine words and all our overflow of powerful emotion are not enough.

So I wonder whether we can take those four things that Mr KROSS mentioned in his speech, whether we can distil the energy that was in my in my colleague, brother MOON here and Oleksii, the absent one, in his speech, so that we can add objectives to passion, to energise a course of action that will, by September, October, allow us to see something that may have happened for the better.

You'll notice, Mister President, that with 11 seconds left, I forbear to fill my allotted spot.

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

It is always very interesting to hear you.

And now, my dear Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS. Emanuelis, you have the floor.

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

After yesterday's huge historical day, it's really a pity to have today our final meeting related to our dear Georgia and Georgian friends. And I would like to repeat all the names who are now in prison and they were just with us a few months ago. Just mention, my dear Lord.

Mamuka KHAZARADZE, Badri JAPARIDZE, Zurab JAPARIDZE, Nika GVARAMIA, Nika MELIA, Giorgi VASHADZE. And tomorrow Givi TARGAMADZE is invited to this unlawful, fake commission to investigate what they did tens and tens of years ago. And actually, they have an idea, even prove their activities in our Parliamentary Assembly. Wow.

I'm coming back to Mr Pablo HISPÁN, Mr Iulian BULAI, and a few other of you present during the last elections. And who is responsible? Who produced the paper that the elections were free and fair? Who are those criminals? The criminals are in the OSCE team, I'm sorry to say. Who produced the paper and tried to influence the European Parliament? Our final observations, NATO Parliamentary Assembly remarks; I remember every detail. I was the Chair of the Election Observation Mission during the first election of Georgian Dream from the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly side. And the same guys who are operating now inside the OSCE are producing fake... from my point of view, I'm a very polite guy, but this time, it's too much.

Elections were not free and not fair. I saw TV cameras with Ms Denise O'HARA and going in every place – Georgian Dream TV cameras in every public poll station. It was like that. And we are just making fake final resolutions that the election was free and fair, when Russian influence agents are taking over Georgia and bringing Georgia back to Belarusian dictatorship, or to the Russian side. All those guys were tens and tens of years inside of Georgia presenting a pro-European view. And now they are arrested. All those guys were pro-Ukrainian, for the liberation of Ukraine, and now they're arrested. So all those parties of Georgia – and we are based on a party system – are eliminated. And Georgian Dream is only one Belarusian-type, Lukashenko-type party.

So, in this case, we should say all together that we will think how Europe will react. The European Union should react, Lithuania will chair the European Union in 2027. I don't think that we will be positive about Georgia's entry to Europe. And we will close the question if until this time Georgia will not make any sign and immediately liberate those fantastic patriots of Europe, patriots of Georgia, patriots of Ukraine. Immediately release them from jail.

Thank you.

And last one. I'm sorry. I would like to say congratulations to Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO – we should say, with her newborn boy, it's the best answer to the regime in Moscow. Mariia MEZENTSEVA, who was with us for years and years, has a new boy. His name is actually Teo.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Teodor, like mine. Thank you, thank you for reminding us. We all send our best wishes to Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO. But listen, my dear Emanuelis, you are the... You don't like the expression the oldest member. You are the more mature, how do you call it? I mean, the one who is here for more than 30 years, and you are experienced and you are a noble man.

So, let me tell you this. Next week, I'm going to participate in the OSCE meeting in Porto. What should I respond when they tell me a colleague of yours called us criminals and you didn't react? I think that it would be good to withdraw this description of criminals. They may have made mistakes, but criminals, it's a bit heavy. Would you like to say a few words on that?

Thank you.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD): You'd like to transform me from a politician to a diplomat. That's a wrong move.

So I would like to say that they did everything against our will, of our Parliamentary Assembly, NATO and the European Parliament, to create an image that elections were free and fair. The last elections in Georgia were not free or fair. And I would like to say that I have some, let's say, using the politest language, they have some doubts in their observation missions, especially after their move to Azerbaijan. If you remember how they were against, they isolated us.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): If this Assembly is cooperating with criminals, it's not good for the Assembly.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD): Okay, I apologise for this word, but I continue to say that they did not do the best job during the elections, thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): I didn't ask to withdraw anything from the rest. Thank you so much, Emanuelis, thanks for understanding.

And now the last speaker in our list is Albana VOKSHI, Albana.

Ms Albana VOKSHI (Albania, EPP/CD): Thank you, dear President, dear colleagues, my dear friend, Emanuelis.

From my experience, dictators and authoritarians organise perfect elections. Everything happens before people go to the boxes. The most violated elections, those that are not free and fair, are organised by dictators. This is my personal impression.

Grave and alarming news continues to reach us from Georgia. Only in the past week, four democratic opposition leaders were thrown behind bars. Not for committing crimes, but for declining to appear before the so-called Investigative Commission. That has nothing to do with the rule of law and everything to do with political persecution.

In Georgia today, the institution of accountability has been hijacked into instruments of repression. Let us not forget the third president of Georgia, Mr Mikheil SAAKASHVILI, who served as Vice-President of this Assembly, still remains in political imprisonment for the first consecutive years. His case is not isolated. Other prominent opposition figures, Mamuka KHAZARADZE, Nika GVARAMIA, Nika MELIA, Zurab JAPARIDZE, Badri JAPARIDZE, Giorgi VASHADZE, have all faced detentions in recent months. Their only offence? Daring to challenge the regime and defend democracy.

The chair of the main opposition party, Ms Tina BOKUCHAVA, one of the most excellent active opposition women leaders, has been targeted with terror. Her husband was violently abducted, her children were threatened. This is not politics, this is persecution. And we have to call this as it is. And if we continue to look away, it will not be long before every opposition leader in Georgia will be behind bars and parties will shrink and cease to exist, and there won't be an opposition.

Worse still, we now learn that the so-called Investigative Commission plans to persecute Georgian MPs for their participation in this Assembly, for coming here, for meeting us, for exercising their democratic duties. So when politicians are criminalised for speaking to this chamber, in the heart of European democracy, then what can we call it? It is authoritarianism that shouts.

The European Parliament, in its June 2024 resolution, has sounded the alarm. It has demanded immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners, the repeal of repressive FARA laws, the holding of new free and fair parliamentary elections and the call for targeting sanctions. It has also denounced the politically motivated persecution of journalists like Mzia AMAGLOBELI.

The authoritarian path of Georgian Dream must be confronted, not appeased. The Georgian people have not given up. They have stood up in the streets, in squares, online and offline for over 200 days. They protest not only for their rights, but the real European dream. They deserve more than our speeches and statements. They deserve solidarity and action.

Let us not allow silence to be our complicity. Let us rise the moment before democracy in Georgia becomes only a memory.

Thank you.

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

And with Ms Albana VOKSHI's speech, we conclude the list of speakers.

And I will give now... It's a point of order? Okay.

Mr Damien COTTIER (Switzerland, ALDE): Point of order, Mister President.

That's a very important debate and a very worrying situation. And unfortunately, this Assembly could not show how worried it is, because many of our colleagues who wanted to attend this debate and speak were not able to do so, because you know how the parliamentary agendas are on Thursday evening.

So, can I please ask you, Mr President, and the Table Office, in the future, for such a debate, such an important debate like this one, that we don't do it on Thursday evening, but rather on Thursday morning or Wednesday?

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Dear Damien, I fully agree that the hemicycle should have more of our parliamentarians, of our colleagues.

But allow me to say that we all know that we gather four times a year. We are here from Monday to Friday, and we should be here from Monday to Friday. When, and I see no ambassadors around, when I say to the ambassadors, and I repeatedly said the last month that only 16 ambassadors out of 46 participated in the annual meeting of the Committee of Ministers, then I have to complain, or I have to point out, that we should be here.

Thank you for what you have said. But of course, I will talk with the Presidential Committee this evening about what you have just raised. But I wanted to express my opinion. We have to be here, and tomorrow morning we have to be here. So now I'm going to give Mr Stephen GETHINS the floor for 3 minutes to respond to the debate.

Stephen.

Mr Stephen GETHINS (United Kingdom, ALDE): Thank you, Mister President.

Can I firstly thank all colleagues who have made very powerful contributions?

If I may, I'm going to start with the words that you, Mister President, used. Democracy is hard, but a lack of democracy is harder. That was an important point to start off with and one which speaks to why we're talking about this today.

We've heard about what's going on in Georgia. We're worried about what's going on in Georgia. If I may, I will mention my two United Kingdom colleagues, Lord Leslie GRIFFITHS and Mr Perran MOON, who both made incredibly powerful speeches, but including the point that something must be done and we must continue to monitor the situation in Georgia, we owe that at least to our colleagues in the country.

Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS made a very powerful speech. Mister KROSS, you know that Estonia knows what the price is of a lack of democracy. Estonia knows the price of Russian aggression and invasion. And I have to say he made a very, very good speech in talking about those Georgian protesters who protest under the European flag that I proudly wear today, and they deserve to have us standing alongside them.

Mister George LOUCAIDES, you talked about the violence. Ms Petra BAYR, about the decline in democracy. Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO talked about Georgia being the first victim of Russian aggression. All powerful points and all incredibly important reminders for each and every one of us. Georgia's a proud country. It's a wonderful country, as a number of colleagues have reflected upon here, as Mr Tekke PANMAN reflected on from his experiences in Georgia. And as my colleague says, and he does mean it, I spent some happy times working in Georgia, *gaumarjos sakartvelos*, long live Georgia is important, but also long live Europe.

It was the poet Mikhail LERMONTOV, who, when he thought of his links between the Scottish Highlands and between his native Caucasus, talked about the connectivity between the two, and I believe in that connectivity between these different European states. So when a proud nation like Georgia is struggling, it deserves our attention, it deserves to be on our radar. And I would call for all of us to continue to keep an eye on this, that we must bring it forward. Mr Damien COTTIER was right to raise his points. It's unfortunate, but I know there are a number of my colleagues with constituency commitments and others.

But finally, if I've quoted LERMONTOV, let me quote Robert BURNS. Robert BURNS, I was reminded because I've been using his pen today, was Scotland's national poet, and he said, "a man's a man for a' that". Very basically a translation, we're all the same. And we're all the same, and therefore, when one of us in Europe is struggling, then we all struggle. And that's why this continues to be important.

Thank you, Mister President.

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

Dear colleagues,

I remind you that at the end of a current affairs debate, the Assembly is not asked to decide upon a text, but the matter may be referred by the Bureau to the responsible committee for a report. The Assembly will hold its next public sitting tomorrow at 10 a.m. with the agenda approved by the Assembly.

I just want to remind you that we have initiated, some months ago, the free debate on Friday morning. Everybody can take the floor and speak on the matter that he or she believes is important to be heard in this Assembly.

Thank you so much.

The sitting is adjourned.

The sitting is closed at 6:30 p.m.