



Provisional edition

Tuesday 30 September 2025, afternoon

Official report of debates

Opening of sitting No 31

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

Dear colleagues,

I remind you that, in order to be registered for the sitting, you should insert your badge when you take your seat, and keep it inserted for at least 30 seconds.

You should also insert your badge in order to speak or vote. To request the floor, please press the “request” button.

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.

This morning, dear colleagues, the Assembly held a ballot for the election of the Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly. The results are as follows.

Total number of members voting: 187.

Number of spoiled or blank ballot papers: 10.

Number of valid votes: 177.

Dr Despina CHATZIVASSILIOU is elected Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly for a term of office of five years which shall commence on 1 March 2026. Dr Despina CHATZIVASSILIOU, congratulations.

I want to say a few words on that.

It is with great joy that I warmly welcome the election of Dr Despina CHATZIVASSILIOU as Secretary General of our Assembly. On behalf of all members, I extend my heartfelt congratulations.

As President of the Parliamentary Assembly and as a compatriot who knows Dr Despina CHATZIVASSILIOU and her beautiful family, I take particular pride in this moment. She has had a distinguished career as a lawyer, as a dedicated member of the Secretariat and now as a Secretary General. We have known her for five years as a Secretary General and a successful one, since she was re-elected with such a high majority. She has been marking this career with professionalism, integrity and devotion to the values of our organisation.

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.

She is, as I once said, truly the institutional memory of our Parliamentary Assembly and her re-election is a clear sign of the trust and confidence we all place in her leadership.

Dear colleagues, Dr Despina CHATZIVASSILIOU's position is a clearly political one, and since she has been re-elected with such a high majority, some of us may soon be asking her for campaign tips.

Dr Despina CHATZIVASSILIOU, you may have the floor now.

Ms Despina CHATZIVASSILIOU (Secretary-General of the Parliamentary Assembly): Dear Presidents,

Dear leaders of the political groups,

Dear Chairperson and members of the Greek delegation,

Each and every member of the Parliamentary Assembly I cherish so much. Thank you wholeheartedly. In today's challenging time, your cross-party support, your unity around your elected Secretary General, it is a huge honour for me, but also a great responsibility. It is an honour and responsibility I want to share with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe staff, some hundred colleagues who do all this outstanding work which you recognise with your vote.

Allow me, Mr President, for once I have the chance to speak from this seat. I want to use one minute more to express my gratitude, not only to the Greek government that supported my candidature for a second term, but to the governments of all member states. Because without their support, I would not have been a unique candidate.

Dear Chairperson of the Committee of Ministers,

Dear Secretary General, "dear Alain" [spoken in French],

Thank you for the close co-operation to serve common objectives. I promise you all I will work at least as hard and at least with the same passion and commitment as I have done so far, with the support of all of you, to defend the values of our organisation and make the voice of this Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe as loud as possible.

Thank you again for your trust.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): I was telling Mr Alain BERSET – and this is something that you will all understand – the best period of a politician is the pre-election period while you are running. Most of the people believe that it is after, when you win, but it is while you are running.

So Ms Despina CHATZIVASSILIOU, you have a lot to do, and you have already done a lot. I know that the political leaders have asked for the floor for a minute to congratulate you, so I will start with Mr Frank SCHWABE from the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group.

Mr Frank SCHWABE (Germany, SOC): Dear Mr President,

Dear Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly,

Dear Ms Despina CHATZIVASSILIOU, congratulations for this, let's say, very good result. We have a lot of authoritarian leaders, maybe in the Council of Europe, who want to have such results, so congratulations for this. What we know is that, besides the question of what we do, it is important how we do it, and organising is not everything, but it's a lot, and you did it perfectly.

And I want to say that it is important that you get such a good result and such a good backup from us, because we have a kind of framework in this organisation and you are the one who keeps the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in a very important position, together with all the ones who are committed to the values of this organisation at the heart of Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. So thank you very much for this. We're looking forward to very good co-operation in the future. Congratulations again in the name of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group.

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

Mr Pablo HISPÁN for the floor.

Mr Pablo HISPÁN (Spain, EPP/CD): Thank you, President.

In this plenary where we have a lot of disagreement, we have someone who we agree is the best Secretary General in you.

Ms Despina CHATZIVASSILIOU, what I ask of you is that you be as professional, as honest a broker as you have been during your first mandate.

We are living in very troubled times. The situation of democracy is not easy. We are going to have a lot of debates, a lot of tough situations. But please, continue as you have done, as you have done during those years. And I'm sure that the decision that this Parliamentary Assembly has taken unanimously is the best decision that we could take.

So congratulations. And the best, I'm sure, is to come.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thanks to the leader of the Group of the European People's Party.

I know that Mr Zsolt NÉMETH, the leader of the European Conservatives, Patriots & Affiliates, has asked for the floor.

Mr Zsolt NÉMETH (Hungary, ECPA): Dear colleagues,

Congratulations to you, Ms Despina CHATZIVASSILIOU. You are the symbol of the civil service. You have been able to set a very high standard in this regard for the colleagues working in the organisation. I know that if you tell them anything, they will respect your position. I think this is the dream of everybody in every organisation. I hope that this kind of diplomatic - it may sound strange, civil service and diplomacy - but this kind of diplomatic ability of yours to harmonise opposing positions and trying to find the appropriate compromise will characterise your future activity.

Thank you very much for everything that you have done until now and we wish you a successful period ahead of you.

Thank you very much.

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

The leader of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, Mr Iulian BULAI.

Mr Iulian BULAI (Romania, ALDE): Thank you so much, President.

Dear Ms Despina CHATZIVASSILIOU,

On behalf of all the liberals from my group and from all the other groups, I congratulate you for your re-election. We are very happy for that.

And because I have forgotten the Greek I have learned during my theological studies during high school, I have asked artificial intelligence what your name means. And the answer is that it means the great lady of the house.

In other words, it is associated with the following values: dignity, authority, nobility.

Dear Ms Despina CHATZIVASSILIOU, your name became your destiny to the greater good of this house and Europe.

Thank you and congratulations.

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

And the only woman who is co-chairing a group, a political group, Ms Laura CASTEL, has the floor from the Group of the Unified European Left.

Ms Laura CASTEL (Spain, UEL): Well, dear Ms Despina CHATZIVASSILIOU, what can I say after all of these words? I totally agree, even about the sense of humour!

And of course, thank you for being beside us, for being so helpful and having this amazing team that I think shows how you work. You're brilliant and your team is brilliant. So thank you for being so available, helpful and I wish you energy because you have a lot of work to do.

And thank you. And thank you all for making the same decision.

Thank you.

Address: Communication from the Committee of Ministers

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): And on this happy note, we are going on with our agenda.

The next item of business is the communication from the Committee of Ministers to the Assembly, presented by Mr Ian BORG, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Tourism of Malta, President of the Committee of Ministers.

Dear Minister BORG, it is with great pleasure that we welcome you once again to our hemicycle.

Your presidency of the Committee of Ministers has been rich in events. It has given us the opportunity to discover Malta more closely, while also delivering on objectives and achieving tangible results. Not least the signing of the Valletta Protocol, the Third Additional Protocol to the Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters. This fourth Maltese presidency comes in challenging times, yet with genuine hope for what lies ahead. We look forward to hearing from you. Dear Minister, the floor is yours.

Mr Ian BORG (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Tourism of Malta, President of the Committee of Ministers): President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe,

Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly,

Secretary General of the Council of Europe,

Distinguished Members of the Parliamentary Assembly,

Excellencies,

Esteemed visitors,

It is a great honour to address this plenary again, in my capacity as President of the Committee of Ministers.

Much has transpired since the last Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe session in June.

A day after my last address to you, we witnessed a truly historic moment for our organisation: the visit of President ZELENSKYY to the Council of Europe, during which he signed the bilateral agreement establishing the Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine. A ceremony which I was honoured to preside over in the Committee of Ministers' room, that was followed by a rich exchange with President ZELENSKYY in this very Assembly.

It was a moment of defining clarity and historic weight.

A moment that proved politics can deliver justice, that accountability is possible, and that no one is above the law.

And shortly after this significant moment, that was widely reported in the media, raising our Council's visibility, the Committee of Ministers – together with the GT-TRIBUNAL – it established, moved swiftly, to discuss the next steps towards the creation of the Enlarged Partial Agreement.

The Committee of Ministers also acted promptly to decisively initiate work on a draft Convention establishing an International Claims Commission for Ukraine.

Following your Assembly's Opinion this week, the Committee is preparing to adopt this Convention and lay the groundwork for its opening for signature at the planned diplomatic conference in December.

This marks another significant advancement in the pursuit of justice for Ukraine, fully aligned with the priorities of Malta's Presidency.

Moreover, on 9 July, the Presidency together with the Consultation Group on the Children of Ukraine, held a High-Level Conference and a Special Hearing that exposed the harsh reality faced by Ukrainian children, especially those with disabilities.

These discussions, complemented by the Committee's retreat the following day, highlighted the urgent need for a people-centred recovery and reaffirmed the importance of the Council of Europe's Action Plan for Ukraine's Resilience, Recovery and Reconstruction.

In the face of sustained aggression by the Russian Federation, our resolve must remain firm, and our actions swift and decisive.

As Presidency, we will continue to actively support every effort towards securing a comprehensive, just, and lasting peace for Ukraine.

Distinguished colleagues,

A dire humanitarian crisis continues to unfold on our doorstep in Gaza, as innocent Palestinian civilians are enduring starvation and ever-increasing hardships.

We must not forget the brutal terrorist attacks that were carried out by Hamas against Israel in October 2023, which ignited this conflict, and the cycle of violence and destabilisation of the region that ensued.

Meanwhile, the suffering of the hostages forcibly taken from their families continues, and we reiterate our call for their immediate and unconditional release.

We must also recall that international law demands restraint and proportionality from all parties to a conflict. Not as a suggestion, but as a lifeline. These principles are the vital guardrails that prevent suffering from spiraling into cruelty and protect human dignity amid devastation. And therefore we must collectively and urgently reaffirm these principles and demand they be upheld.

The suffering endured by children in this conflict cannot be overstated. Thousands of innocent children, who should be laughing and playing without fear – like most of our children have the privilege to do – are carrying wounds of loss, trauma and extreme hunger that no child should ever endure.

Equally urgent is the protection of journalists. Those courageous voices who risk everything to keep us informed by exposing the truth on the ground, and who are being killed in shocking numbers while doing their job.

Malta, speaking from its own experience, knows how crucial the life and the work of a journalist is, and has taken strong measures to strengthen their protection.

While recognising the deep complexity of this conflict, the Committee of Ministers stood united in a solemn minute of silence at the start of their meeting on 10 September – honouring the innocent lives lost in Gaza, while acknowledging the plight of the hostages and the suffering endured by all those affected by this conflict.

The Committee focused its expression of humanity around two of the Council's most sacred responsibilities: defending children and protecting journalists.

Because the Council of Europe cannot and must not look away when fundamental rights are under attack, especially in its immediate neighbourhood. Only through diplomacy and a steadfast commitment to dialogue can we pave the way for an immediate ceasefire, de-escalation, and ultimately a just and lasting peace that both the Israeli and Palestinian people deserve.

Reaffirming this principle, it is imperative that we also recognise and honour the moments when such efforts have borne fruit, where dialogue has paved the way for reconciliation and where hope has taken root.

Here, I commend the dedication of our Armenian and Azerbaijani colleagues, whose historic peace agreement in August represents a profound breakthrough after decades of enduring conflict.

This milestone not only renews hope for their peoples and the stability of their region but also serves as an inspiring testament to the transformative power of diplomacy, political courage and genuine commitment.

It reminds us all that even the most deep-seated divisions can be overcome in the pursuit of a just and lasting peace for the greater good.

As multilateralism faces unprecedented strain, this organisation stands at a critical crossroads.

Our greatest strength, and indeed our greatest responsibility, is to build and sustain trust among ourselves. That trust remains the cornerstone of all our shared efforts.

We should not allow disagreements, or firm positions shaped by past decisions, to divide us or deepen the cracks that challenge our unity. Instead, let us lean into dialogue, open, respectful and at times difficult conversations, that keep us connected and enable us to move forward together.

Let us engage with all member states of this organisation, not only to listen deeply and bridge differences, but also to better hold one another to the standards we have collectively set.

And we need to be present in the same rooms to do so.

Constructive dialogue and mutual accountability are not mutually exclusive. They are both essential to the integrity and credibility of our shared mission.

Malta's Presidency has been guided by this very conviction: that relevance stems from responsiveness, grounded in open dialogue, careful listening, and a clear understanding of the context in which we operate.

Our shared values must be reflected in collective action that responds to the realities we face together.

Through our Presidency priorities, we seek to shape a fairer and more inclusive European society where the rights and best interests of children are safeguarded, where equality and inclusion are widely promoted, and where women and young people are truly empowered to lead.

On 1 July, we hosted in Malta the first-ever Informal Conference of Ministers on the Protection of Children. This was held to mark the 15th Anniversary of the Council of Europe Lanzarote Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse.

There, ministers unanimously adopted a political declaration to strengthen prevention, accountability, and international cooperation – especially in the digital age, where new threats emerge every day.

Our goal must not be merely to react to harm after it occurs, but to act proactively to prevent it, with a view to meet both current and emerging challenges head-on.

These challenges recognise no borders, and they demand effective cross-border co-operation.

At the same time, new technologies are opening opportunities for more efficient judicial co-operation and mutual assistance across jurisdictions.

It is in this spirit that the Ministers of Justice of the Council of Europe member states convened in Valletta on 19 September for the Conference of Ministers of Justice on judicial co-operation and mutual assistance in criminal matters.

The Conference culminated in the unanimous adoption of a political declaration, a powerful roadmap that will guide our institutions, and will guide our practitioners to have collaborative efforts in the years ahead.

The new Valletta Protocol to the Council of Europe Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters was also opened for signatures and signed by 16 countries. This Protocol modernises mutual legal assistance procedures, empowering states to respond effectively to the fast-paced political, social, and technological changes we face today.

Dear colleagues, with your crucial support, we look forward to further signatures of this Protocol to be followed by ratifications. Together, we can turn these commitments into concrete actions, reinforcing our collective ability to strengthen judicial co-operation across Europe.

None of us is immune to the tsunami of disinformation out there that is increasingly aiming at undermining democratic institutions and processes.

To this end, and in support of the Secretary General's new Democratic Pact for Europe, I had the pleasure of hosting the High-Level Conference on Building Democratic Resilience to Disinformation in Malta on 17 September.

In a world clouded by disinformation and shadowed by foreign interference, Moldova's recent elections offered a powerful reminder: democracy can endure. Despite significant obstacles and efforts to sway the vote, the people stood firm – choosing Europe and sending a clear message that their democratic future is not for sale.

In this context, protecting our information space is as vital as protecting our borders. A free, independent, and responsible media remains our first line of defence to expose falsehoods, hold power to account, and also to inform citizens with integrity.

But we must go further. We need to equip people, especially our youth, not just to consume information critically, but to participate actively in shaping a democratic culture rooted in truth and accountability. This means investing in media literacy, civic education, and digital skills at all levels of society.

The Council of Europe has a vital role to play. Our standards, our monitoring bodies, and our ability to bring together governments, media actors, civil society, and independent experts make us uniquely placed to lead in this field.

Democracy flourishes when no one is left behind. True progress demands that women take their rightful place at the heart of political life, shaping policies with their leadership, insight, and strength. And just as crucial, young people must be given real power to influence the decisions that will define their futures, because inclusive leadership starts with empowering every generation.

To this end, Malta will host the Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth, next week, where we look forward to welcoming the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe youth rapporteurs to this important gathering. Together, we seek to adopt a Reference Framework on the Integration of a Youth Perspective, to place youth at the heart of European democracy.

But our mission cannot stop at the European borders. Democracy does not exist in isolation. To protect and renew it, we must work with international partners, build bridges and extend our efforts globally.

The Council of Europe's North-South Centre is a vital instrument in this work. With its closer alignment to the Neighbourhood Policy, it is reinforcing its role as Europe's bridge to the wider world. This is how we strengthen democracy: by defending it at home, championing it abroad, and rooting it unwaveringly in human rights and the rule of law.

Human rights and the rule of law are the very pillars on which the Council of Europe stands.

Reflecting this commitment, the Committee of Ministers, in its human rights formation, convened its third quarterly meeting from 15 to 17 September, adopting 45 critical decisions impacting 22 member states.

The credibility of the convention system rests on one essential principle: the full and effective implementation of the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights.

Every member state carries a solemn duty to uphold its obligations under the Convention without delay, without exception.

This includes taking all necessary implementing measures, including individual measures, where required in full respect of the Court's binding authority.

Upholding the Convention system is not optional: it is the foundation of our shared legal order. That responsibility is all the more profound this year, as we mark the 75th anniversary of the Convention. This milestone invites us not only to celebrate its achievements, but also to renew our collective commitment to defending the rights and freedoms it enshrines.

Finally, as this is my last address to this Assembly as President of the Committee of Ministers, allow me to share a personal reflection.

The work we do within the Council of Europe, within this Assembly, resonates far beyond these halls. It shapes the lives of individuals, families, and entire nations.

This is not just our duty, it is a profound responsibility.

We must never lose sight of the human stories behind our decisions.

Let us be the unwavering beacon of hope and humanity illuminating the path towards justice today, and lighting the way to a more peaceful and dignified tomorrow.

Thank you.

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

As you know, because you have done it before many times, it is the time for questions now. I will give the floor to speakers on behalf of political groups, starting with the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group.

It is Ms Lise CHRISTOFFERSEN to have the floor, please.

Ms Lise CHRISTOFFERSEN (Norway, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you.

Your Excellency,

A conventional system is not optional, you said. I asked the Secretary General the same question this morning about the level of suppression in Azerbaijan. More than 300 political prisoners, among them journalists and human rights activists. 76 colleagues in this Parliamentary Assembly are declared persona non grata. The authorities neither co-operate in monitoring procedures nor in election observations. They do not implement judgments from the European Court of Human Rights.

Are any efforts being made by the Committee of Ministers to bring this to an end and to make Azerbaijan fulfil their obligations as members of the Council of Europe?

Thank you.

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

Minister Ian BORG, would you like to respond?

Mr Ian BORG (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Tourism of Malta, President of the Committee of Ministers): Thank you, honourable Ms Lise CHRISTOFFERSEN, for your question.

The Committee of Ministers continues to underscore the need for Azerbaijan to respect and implement European Court of Human Rights judgments concerning human rights defenders, journalists and political activists.

As I just mentioned in my speech, it is the obligation of each and every member state.

The Council of Europe remains committed to supporting Azerbaijan in meeting its obligations on human rights, rule of law and democracy. And in doing so, the Committee of Ministers agreed to extend the Council of Europe Action Plan for Azerbaijan until 2026 in order to strengthen co-operation and uphold shared standards.

As a long-standing member, Azerbaijan has equal rights and obligations, but must fully respect its commitments like all other states, including by implementing all the final judgments of the Court.

Despite challenges, we believe that open, constructive dialogue and joint efforts can lead to meaningful results which are beneficial for the people of Azerbaijan. Such a matter was also discussed yesterday at the Joint Committee meeting. The Committee of Ministers, with all member states represented in the room, recognises the value of dialogue and engagement to ensure that concerns are communicated directly to those they affect.

The peace agreement reached between the leaders of the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan at the White House last month demonstrates the commitment of both countries towards peace and stability. As the distinguished Armenian Prime Minister noted this morning, this agreement represents a long process made possible through the engagement of both sides. And so in this forum, we should ensure that the two sides can report on their respective efforts. I was also very pleased to meet the Armenian Prime Minister over lunch today, and to hear first-hand of their commitment to implementing this crucial agreement.

In our national capacity, Malta will continue supporting deeper engagement between these two countries.

We encourage them to uphold this level of commitment towards further stability, security and also reciprocal prosperity for both people, the people of Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Thank you.

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

Next is the speaker on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party, Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS.

Is Emanuelis around?

So the leader of the party, Mr Pablo HISPÁN. Pablo, you have the floor.

Mr Pablo HISPÁN (Spain, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Hello.

I want to ask you about the immigration situation in Malta and how you deal with this issue of migration and this question that is one of the toughest issues for all of Europe that we need to face. So I ask you, which new path are you going to take?

Thank you.

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

Minister, would you like to respond?

Mr Ian BORG (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Tourism of Malta, President of the Committee of Ministers): Thank you.

Well, yes. Irregular migration remains a sensitive and global challenge that no nation, no member state can be equipped to address alone. It calls for genuine co-operation, and not only across Europe, but also with countries of origin and transit to tackle the root causes.

We are doing our part both within other fora like the European Union, but also by keeping the best of engagement with North African countries in order to co-operate together in this regard.

Our first obligation, which our coast guards are fulfilling on a daily basis, is to save people's lives at sea. And it's also a fact that focusing solely on the final journey overlooks the broader complex realities that cause this phenomenon: conflict, poverty, instability, human rights violations. But it's also true that people want to move to a better place, like our ancestors did in the past. And therefore our organisation is, yes, assisting member states through guidance and training tools. The Council of Europe Migration Action Plan on Protecting Vulnerable Persons in the context of the respective policies strengthens guidance and assistance. But ultimately we should do more with the countries of origin.

There was a new recommendation that is being developed to address migrant smuggling in line also with the commitment that our leaders took at the Reykjavik Summit. And looking ahead, co-operation among authorities is needed to reduce the abuse of the asylum system and ensure that those needing protection in Europe receive the necessary support.

On our part, Malta hosts the Training Institute on Migration Capacity Partnership for the Mediterranean that was created with the International Centre for Migration Policy Development and partners to strengthen migration management. It provides accredited needs-based training for southern partner countries with human rights mainstreamed across all courses. And as I mentioned initially as a response to the question, our foremost priority must be to protect human life. And that is why I commend our coast guards, but not only Malta's coast guards, Greeks, Italians and other southern European countries where our coast guards leave their home on a daily basis in order to fulfil our obligation to save people's lives at sea.

Thank you.

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

On behalf of the European Conservatives, Patriots & Affiliates, Sir Christopher CHOPE.

Sir Christopher CHOPE (United Kingdom, ECPA, Spokesperson for the group): Minister,

The Advisory Committee on the Appointment of Judges is accountable to the Committee of Ministers.

Will the Committee of Ministers therefore investigate the failure of its Advisory Committee to supply clear and accurate information about the Hungarian list of candidates to members of the Parliamentary Assembly's Committee on the Election of Judges at its last meeting, the consequence of which was that none of the three Hungarian candidates was interviewed. They were left waiting outside the room for some two hours.

That is a direct consequence of the failures, in my view, of the Ad hoc committee.

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

Minister, would you like to respond?

Mr Ian BORG (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Tourism of Malta, President of the Committee of Ministers): I thank the Honourable Sir Christopher CHOPE for his question.

I have the short answer and the longer one.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): I prefer the short one.

Mr Ian BORG (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Tourism of Malta, President of the Committee of Ministers): I think the President just gave his direction.

So, whilst I truly thank you for this important question on the procedure for the election of judges to the European Court of Human Rights, I'm sure that you are very much aware that the competence to elect judges to the Strasbourg Court belongs exclusively to the Parliamentary Assembly. And therefore, here as President of the Committee of Ministers, we are not involved in the advisory board. But I do appreciate your question and I thank you for that.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): And how would the longer one sound Minister?

Thank you so much on behalf of Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK.

Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK (Ukraine, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Minister BORG,

What practical outcomes do you expect from the Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth that will happen next week in Malta?

And also you mentioned a truly historical moment that happened during the June session visit of President Volodymyr ZELENSKYI and the establishment of the Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression Against Ukraine.

How do you assess the progress that happened between June and October? And is it enough to reach the practical goal of the establishment of the Special Tribunal? Thank you.

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

Minister, would you like to respond?

Mr Ian BORG (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Tourism of Malta, President of the Committee of Ministers): Thank you, Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK, for your two questions.

Yes, youth have a lot to offer and they are truly catalysts for change. But by engaging them in democratic processes, societies ensure that decision-making evolves with the changing needs to meet contemporary challenges.

Eleven years ago, my country, my government lowered the voting age to 16 at the local level in 2014. And then it was rolled out to all elections, including the general election and the European Parliament later on. So we are proud to be the first country in Europe to allow 16- and 17-year-olds to serve as mayors and deputy mayors. This is a relatively new development that was introduced last year and continues to show our trust in the young ones. Mind you, I was also elected by my hometown as Mayor at the age of 19 and I hope I have managed to contribute towards the development of my community since then.

And therefore I commend your Assembly for strengthening its focus on youth, including through the introduction of youth rapporteurs, a responsibility we are proud to see held by our own Head of Delegation. I can see her over there in front of me. Thank you, Ms Naomi CACHIA.

We also look forward to adopting the Advisory Council on Youth's preference framework on the integration of a youth perspective next week in Malta. And at the conference the ministers are also expected to adopt a declaration setting out the main orientations for European youth policy in the years to come, building also on the Council of Europe Youth Sector Strategy 2030.

With regards to the Special Tribunal, from the onset of Russia's war of aggression, Malta stood firmly with the Ukrainian people. I don't need to repeat it, but yes, we are militarily neutral in our constitution, but we are not politically silent and of course we took a clear position in the EU when serving on the Security Council in the years 2023 and 2024 and by chairing the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe last year and now also as a key priority at the Council of Europe.

So we are and we will continue to contribute in this organisation efforts to combat impunity and ensure accountability and justice for Ukraine. In June, I mentioned in my speech, the Committee of Ministers authorised the establishment of an enlarged partial agreement on the Management Committee of the Special Tribunal. I think I extended my stay here by 24 hours in order to do it. The day after, the President signed together with the Secretary General the setting up of the Special Tribunal here in this building. And this was possible because we were ready, we were agile in advancing the discussions and advancing the signature. Because just a month before in Luxembourg, the Council of Ministers received the letter by the President. So, most of the other points I have written down here, were mentioned in my speech. So for the sake of the other members, I will stop here and we remain committed to seeing this tribunal set up.

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

On behalf of the Group of the Unified European Left, Mr Berdan ÖZTÜRK.

Mr Berdan ÖZTÜRK (Türkiye, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, President.

Dear Minister,

As you know, about 10 days ago, the Committee granted another extension to Türkiye for the implementation of the Court's judgment on the right to hope.

This judgement was rendered in 2014 with regard to Mr Abdullah ÖCALAN, and if it is implemented, it will affect many other political prisoners.

In your view, does this not undermine the credibility of the Court and the reputation of the Council of Europe?

Thank you.

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

Minister, would you like to respond?

Mr Ian BORG (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Tourism of Malta, President of the Committee of Ministers): Thank you, Mr. President.

I thank also honourable Mr Berdan ÖZTÜRK for his question and I acknowledge also the various correspondences that I received on this topic as well.

At its last Human Rights meeting in September, the Committee of Ministers examined the Gurban group of cases which concern the "right to hope", that is the provision of a mechanism to persons sentenced to life imprisonment allowing for review of the sentence after a certain minimum term.

In that case, the Committee adopted an Interim Resolution expressing deep regret that the legislative or other measures to align Turkish law with the requirements of the Convention have not been yet adopted. It further exhorted the authorities to take the necessary measures without further delay. The Committee invited the Turkish authorities to provide information on the progress in this group of cases by the end of June 2026, next year, at the latest.

Regarding the case of Selahattin DEMIRTAŞ, the Committee has expressed profound concern about his detention. The Committee decided to revert to the examination of individual measures at its next meeting in December. At the same time, the Committee expressed great concern that the Constitutional Court has still not examined the applicants' complaints and exhorted, once again, the authorities to ensure the applicants' immediate release, for example by exploring alternative measures to detention pending the appellate proceedings.

Given Turkish Government long-standing non-implementation of the ECHR judgements, the Maltese Presidency and the Committee of Ministers is fully committed, as I mentioned already before, to implement all decisions of the European Court of Human Rights through all the mechanisms at their disposal.

These mechanisms include formal and informal elements: the procedures in the Committee of Ministers on the one hand, and political, technical contacts on the other.

When it comes to strengthening the tools at our disposal, I refer to the Declaration, once again, of the last Summit meeting in Reykjavík. Annex IV of that Declaration was devoted to the Convention system and it also called on the Committee of Ministers to continue their work enhancing the tools available in the supervision of the execution of judgements. This work resulted in the Committee's decision on 7th February 2024. It adopted enhanced tools for use in its supervision of the execution of judgements and also noted other initiatives are underway, including the launch of a network of national coordinators aiming to enhance capacity to execute the Court's judgements, which took place in Helsinki, in June of last year.

The Committee was also mindful that there remained work to be done and decided to review the progress made in due course.

In order to reinforce institutional dialogue, in November 2024, the Luxembourg Presidency of the Committee organised the first meeting with the President of the Court and the Secretary General of the Court on general issues related to the execution of judgements. Malta will follow. In the meantime, the next exchange of views with the President of the Court will take place on 15 October in a new format, which will allow us to spend more time on these important issues.

Finally, let me note that member States are the first guardians of the Convention system. Only we, as member States, can be responsible for the execution of the Court's judgements.

Thank you.

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

And that concludes the speakers on behalf of political groups. I will now give the floor to colleagues in groups of three. First is Mr Zoltán BÓNA.

Mr Zoltán BÓNA (Hungary, ECPA): Thank you very much.

Dear colleagues,

In an era when climate anxiety is increasingly present among young people, and also taking into consideration the recent rulings and opinions of the relevant international courts (including the European Court of Human Rights and the International Court of Justice), what is the role of the Council of Europe in mitigating climate change?

Thank you very much.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): And next is Ms Bisera KOSTADINOVSKA-STOJCHEVSKA, Bisera.

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

Thank you for the comprehensive approach of the work carried out by the Committee under Malta's Presidency.

In your remarks, you highlighted efforts to build a more inclusive European society where equality is actively promoted. Yet, recent developments across Europe suggest that these fundamental principles are increasingly under threat. So, while greatly commending Malta's efforts, could you elaborate with this Assembly on how the Committee of Ministers is addressing these challenges, and how Malta's Presidency is ensuring that no one is left behind?

Thank you.

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

Next is Ms Cristina Gabriella DUMITRESCU.

I see that you have inserted your buds. Then you have to press the button or change the mic.

Ms Cristina Gabriella DUMITRESCU (Romania, ECPA): Thank you, Mister President.

The subject of my question is about how Serbia complied since 2008 with the requirements of Resolution 1632 concerning the situation of national minorities in Vojvodina and the Romanian ethnic minority in Serbia.

What concrete measures has the government of Serbia taken, in particular with regard to eliminating regional differences in the use of the minority language, facilitating access to education, press and public administration in the mother tongue for Romanians living in Eastern Serbia, as well as religious freedom and access to religious service in the Romanian language?

Thank you.

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

Mr Ian BORG (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Tourism of Malta, President of the Committee of Ministers): Thank you.

So, on the first question, when it comes to climate change, well, environmental protection is also a shared responsibility. The triple planetary crisis (pollution, climate change and biodiversity loss) represents a set of cross-cutting challenges that demand co-ordinated action from all countries, both within the Council of Europe and also beyond, because it affects everyone, and also between the various levels of government.

The Committee of Ministers acknowledges the growing climate anxiety across generations and also knows the importance of recent international legal developments on states' climate obligations. The Council has long linked human rights and environmental protection with the Reykjavik Declaration, reinforcing urgency in this area.

Within the Committee of Ministers. I can tell this Parliamentary Assembly that in the government structure and the Rapporteur Group on Human Rights as well as the Committee of Ministers in its human rights format, Member States are discussing environmental issues. Concrete steps include a new study on legal instruments, the recent adoption of the Convention on the Protection of the Environment through Criminal Law which will be open for signature soon in December this year, and the first Council of Europe Strategy on the Environment with an action plan.

At the same time, one must take into account the diverse realities and the specific circumstances of each and every member state, including their resources, availability, geographical characteristics, etc. And this organisation remains committed to playing a leading role in addressing climate change, including consideration of a new steering committee on the environment. This is currently being reviewed at a technical level. In this context, we believe it is crucial to amplify the voices of young people who are leading the charge as passionate climate activists.

On the second question that I received about the Maltese Presidency, and thank you for the question, I mentioned in my address that Malta has placed the protection of human dignity and the fight against all forms of violence and discrimination, the promotion of equality and inclusion, as all very, very central priorities. We have been determined to address the harmful narratives that fuel exclusion and marginalisation through

initiatives such as the IDAHOT+ Forum, the Annual Conference of the Gender Equality Commission, the launch of No Hate Speech Week and high-level discussions on trafficking and hate crime. And we have been working with partners across the Council of Europe to raise awareness and to drive practical action to tackle these challenges.

At the same time, we are committed to empowering young people and strengthening the foundations of democracy and the rule of law. Youth participation is essential and Malta is also leading efforts to embed the Reykjavík Summit's commitment to a youth perspective in Council of Europe deliberations. As I mentioned before, we are hosting the Conference of Specialised Ministers responsible for Youth next week.

And, as I mentioned in my speech, this means also that we are supporting building resilience, countering disinformation and valuing our cultural heritage. Anyway, much has been said about investing in media literacy and civic education. I'm trying not to be repetitive and to leave more time for other members.

I already mentioned the Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Children marking the 15th anniversary of the Lanzarote Convention. So these were all steps and actions placing the protection of human dignity at the core of our presidency priorities.

Last question about Serbia's lack of respect for the minority rights of Romanians. The upheavals of European history have shown that the protection of national minorities is essential. It's essential for our stability, it's essential for our security, for peace to last on our continent. And the Council of Europe's action regarding national minorities includes standard setting, among other things, intergovernmental co-operation, activities for the development and consolidation of democratic stability, confidence-building measures and most importantly in this domain, the Council of Europe Framework Convention, with 38 member states, is the first legally-binding multilateral instrument devoted to the protection of national minorities worldwide. The implementation of the Convention is monitored by the Advisory Committee, which is a highly respected body in the international sphere of minority protection. Its work has contributed to improving dialogue between governmental agencies and national minorities. It has also prompted the adoption of new laws devoted to the protection of national minorities and encouraged states to improve their non-discrimination legislation and also practices. In February this year, the Advisory Committee adopted its Fifth Opinion on the implementation of the Framework Convention by Serbia. The opinion was made public in May of this year and can be consulted by anyone interested. Last week the opinion was also presented to the Council of Ministers Rapporteur Group on Human Rights. The Rapporteur Group will soon examine the draft resolution on the implementation of the Framework Convention by Serbia which will eventually be adopted by the Committee of Ministers at a later date.

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

Now that we have reached the end of the questions, there are three more, but we don't have the time, unfortunately, I want to warmly thank you for your contribution, for answering questions that my colleagues raised. Of course we will meet next week in Malta, but I hope you, leaving this hemicycle, can repeat what my dear Ms Francesca CAMILLERI VETTIGER, your Ambassador, said yesterday to the Joint Committee that you will miss it.

Thank you so much.

Debate: The Parliamentary Assembly should support Kazakhstan to continue its democratic reforms

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

The next item of business this afternoon is the debate on the report titled "The Parliamentary Assembly should support Kazakhstan to continue its democratic reforms". The document is under the number 16245 and it will be presented by the leader of the European Conservatives, Patriots & Affiliates, Mr Zsolt NÉMETH, on behalf of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy.

And we will have a statement by Mr Maulen ASHIMBAYEV, the Chairman of the Senate of Kazakhstan. So, please remain seated until Mr Zsolt NÉMETH and the speaker of the Senate of Kazakhstan will take their place.

I repeat the title of the next item, "The Parliamentary Assembly should support Kazakhstan to continue its democratic reforms". And I call Mr Zsolt NÉMETH, rapporteur, to take the floor. Dear Zsolt, you have 7 minutes now and three minutes at the end to reply to the debate. You have the floor.

Mr Zsolt NÉMETH (Hungary, ECPA, Rapporteur): Mister President,

First of all, I would like to congratulate our newly elected Secretary General in front of our guests as well.

Mister Speaker of the Senate of Kazakhstan, dear colleagues,

I am honoured to stand before you today to open this debate on the relationship between the Parliamentary Assembly and Kazakhstan, a country of great importance at the crossroads of Europe and Asia.

This debate comes at a decisive moment. Our continent is facing a profound geopolitical transformation. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has shaken the security architecture that we thought stable. Alliances between states are being reshaped. The global balance of power is shifting, and all this happens not in Europe's favour.

In such times, engaging with our partners, especially in the neighbourhood, is not a luxury. It is a strategic necessity. And I am very glad now that we have been informed that President Kassym-Jomart TOKAYEV, just the other day, had a meeting with President Volodymyr ZELENSKYY, and they have been able to negotiate the possibility of having possible future peace talks on the invitation of Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan is a very important partner to us, with its size, its location, its resources and its aspirations. Kazakhstan matters not only to Central Asia, but to the whole world and obviously to Europe. The relations of this Assembly with Kazakhstan have been established more than 20 years ago, but it has rarely been the focus of attention. The last report dates back to 2017. This was the reason why I considered it important to update the Assembly on the development the country has undergone since then, under Kazakhstan's new leadership.

As you know, after 2019 and 2022, there have been very important internal changes in Kazakhstan. President Kassym-Jomart TOKAYEV has taken over the presidency. We have witnessed a series of reforms that modernised the political system and aligned it with international standards. In 2022, the country abolished the death penalty, a historic step long advocated by the Assembly. Constitutional reforms have strengthened the role of Parliament, the independence of institutions and the accountability of the executive. Anti-corruption measures, judicial reforms and efforts to expand political pluralism are moving forward. These are not cosmetic changes. They are real examples that show the country's determination to move in the right direction towards European values. And much of this progress is also the result of co-operation with our organisation.

Let us look at the broader picture. Kazakhstan is a country that bridges Europe and Asia. It borders Russia and China, and it plays a growing role in the geopolitics of energy, minerals, security and connectivity. In today's fractured world, the fact that Kazakhstan is opening up towards Europe, and in particular towards the Council of Europe, is of immense value.

Engaging with Kazakhstan means strengthening stability in Central Asia. It means building a bridge of dialogue across regions. It means promoting the values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law in a part of the world where these values need encouragement.

This is not just about Kazakhstan's domestic reforms. It is about the role this country can play in ensuring peace, stability and prosperity in the wider neighbourhood.

Of course, challenges remain. Kazakhstan itself acknowledges that reforms are a process, not an endpoint. But colleagues, we should view the challenges not as reasons for disengagement, but as opportunities for co-operation. Kazakhstan has signalled clearly that it wants to advance and that it welcomes our expertise and support. We should take this invitation seriously.

What is our role then, as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe? We are not there to lecture, but to accompany. We are not there to impose, but to inspire. Through our conventions, our legal standards, institutions like the Venice Commission, and our parliamentary dialogue, we can provide precisely the tools Kazakhstan needs to make its reform irreversible.

In this respect, I would like to underline three priorities:

Strengthening parliamentary dialogue. Our Assembly is a political body, a community of parliamentarians. Expanding our contacts with the Kazakh parliament will reinforce mutual understanding and democratic practice.

Second, deepening engagement. The Council of Europe should systematically encourage Kazakhstan to accede to more conventions and to participate fully in our programmes and networks.

Three, supporting reform implementation. Our co-operation programme should be focused on practical results in line with Kazakhstan's own reform agenda.

Colleagues, let me conclude. The story of Kazakhstan is a story in the making. It is a story of an old and young nation strategically positioned with clear aspirations to modernise and democratise. It is also a story where Europe, and especially this Assembly, can play a decisive role. Let us therefore approach Kazakhstan with both encouragement and high expectations. Let us recognise its achievements, accompany its reforms and anchor it more firmly within the European family of values.

This is in Kazakhstan's interests. It is in our interests, and it is in the interest of stability and peace across the continent.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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

I would now like to welcome Mr Maulen ASHIMBAYEV, the Chairman of the Senate of Kazakhstan, to make a statement.

Dear Chairman, you have the floor. Please proceed to the rostrum.

Mr Maulen ASHIMBAYEV (Chairman of the Senate of Kazakhstan): Mr President, excellencies, distinguished members of the Parliamentary Assembly, ladies and gentlemen,

It's a great honour to address you today in Strasbourg, the city where the Council of Europe was founded, and over 70 decades ago laid the foundation for an institution essential to safeguarding human rights, democracy and the rule of law across Europe and beyond.

Allow me to thank the President of the Parliamentary Assembly Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS, the rapporteur Mr Zsolt NÉMETH, and all members of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy for preparing the report on the democratic reforms in Kazakhstan. We deeply appreciate your professionalism and objective approach.

The document reflects the depth of our partnership with the Council of Europe, providing a balanced assessment of the progress achieved in political reforms and the challenges that remain.

The Council of Europe is a significant partner for Kazakhstan in the European space. Over the years, Kazakhstan and the Council of Europe have built strong and constructive co-operation founded on shared values and approaches.

Our collaboration with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe also continues to deepen. Last year we marked the 20th anniversary of the co-operation agreement between the parliament of Kazakhstan and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Today, we can confidently describe this partnership as dynamic and forward looking.

Earlier today, in a joint statement with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe President Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS, we once again confirmed our commitment to strengthening this productive partnership in advancing democracy and human rights.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are proud that Kazakhstan is a party to key Council of Europe conventions and is working toward accession to several others, including the Istanbul Convention.

We are also close to completing the domestic procedures required to become a full member of the Convention on Cybercrime.

Kazakhstan is a full member of the Venice Commission and the Group of States Against Corruption (GRECO).

Furthermore, our country holds observer status in several other bodies.

This successful collaboration continuing through the Neighbourhood Co-operation Priorities with Kazakhstan 2024-2027, covering justice reform, anti-corruption policy, human rights and democratic governance. These areas are fully aligned with our national reform priorities. We view this programme as a roadmap for further aligning our institutions and legislation with European standards on human rights and the rule of law. In this regard, I wish to thank the Council of Europe and the Parliamentary Assembly for their meaningful contribution to our country's political development.

Esteemed members of the Parliamentary Assembly,

Since 2019, under the leadership of President Kassym-Jomart TOKAYEV, Kazakhstan has entered a new stage of transformation, implementing an ambitious programme of political reforms. We are committed to building a just Kazakhstan founded on an open, balanced and democratic political system, a market economy and an effective social protection system.

To achieve this, in 2022, we enacted constitutional amendments. The President's powers are now limited to a single seven-year term without the possibility of re-election. The president may not be a member of any political party, and close relatives are prohibited from holding senior positions in government or the quasi-public sector.

The party system has become more open and competitive. The threshold for registering new parties has been reduced fourfold. The electoral threshold for political parties in the Mäjilis, the lower house of parliament, was lowered from 7 to 5%.

The institution of the parliamentary opposition has been enshrined, strengthening political pluralism and parliamentary oversight.

We also introduced direct elections for 'akims', mayors of villages, districts and cities.

Kazakhstan is now consistently pursuing decentralisation, transferring certain powers, budgets and tax revenues from the central to local level. This has strengthened the financial sustainability of the regions and improves the effectiveness of local governance.

Significant changes are also underway in the judicial system. Three independent cassation courts for civil, administrative and criminal cases have begun work. The authority of jury trials has been significantly expanded. In 2023, we established the Constitutional Court, giving citizens the right to directly challenge acts of public authorities that violate their rights. Thus, we are consistently building a state governed by the rule of law.

In the context of ongoing reforms, I want to emphasise Kazakhstan's commitment to human rights protection. Kazakhstan is a party to over 70 universal international human rights treaties.

In 2021, Kazakhstan ratified the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, fully abolishing the death penalty.

Furthermore, Kazakhstan is implementing a zero tolerance policy toward torture, ill treatment and has significantly strengthened its national preventive mechanism.

We are creating conditions to realise freedom of assembly, freedom of speech and the development of civil society.

A key area is the promotion of inclusive policies and the protection of the rights of people with disabilities.

Kazakhstan continues its policy of ensuring gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Special attention is paid to combating domestic violence. Last year, we adopted legislation significantly tightening criminal penalties for such offences.

All these initiatives reflect our firm commitment to building a just and inclusive society in line with international standards.

In this regard, I want to underscore that Kazakhstan has decisively and irreversibly embarked on the path of democratic transformation.

Of course, democratic reforms is a complex and lengthy process and challenges remain, as the report rightly notes. But we are determined and will continue along this path. This is the fundamental policy of our President Kassym-Jomart TOKAYEV.

Today, democratic institutions and values under increasing attack worldwide and certain forces seek to question the effectiveness of democratic systems. In these circumstances, Kazakhstan has clearly defined its long-term development priorities, the rule of law, the protection of human rights, the creation of an inclusive society and the democratisation of governance through transparent procedures and a system of checks and balances.

Therefore, we believe that our priorities and values largely converge. This provides a strong foundation for long-term and fruitful co-operation between Kazakhstan and the countries of Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Political reforms in our country are a continuous process and are not yet complete, a point rightly noted in the report. These reforms continue in line with the real conditions and needs of our society. In this context, I wish to highlight that in his annual address to the nation in September, the President of Kazakhstan proposed an additional political reform, a transition to unicameral parliament. President Kassym-Jomart TOKAYEV emphasised that this issue should undergo broad public and expert discussion over the course of a year. The final decision will then be made at a nationwide referendum in 2027, reflecting the opinion of the entire population.

This initiative is a logical continuation of Kazakhstan's consistent policy of strengthening representative institutions. Should it be adopted in the referendum, a parliament with expanded powers will play a key role in Kazakhstan's political system. This represents another important step in forming a modern democratic political system in Kazakhstan.

Esteemed members of the Parliamentary Assembly,

We highly value our partnership with the Council of Europe and the Parliamentary Assembly and are confident that open dialogue and the exchange of experience will contribute to Kazakhstan's continued successful development across many areas.

We welcome the Parliamentary Assembly's constructive approach and its willingness to support Kazakhstan on its reform path.

The report not only acknowledges the progress achieved, but also identifies areas requiring further work, offering a structured and strategic framework for our co-operation.

The parliament of Kazakhstan is ready to deepen its engagement with the Council of Europe and its Parliamentary Assembly.

We are convinced that our dialogue will also help strengthen stability and security while promoting shared values in the entire Central Asian region.

In conclusion, allow me once again to thank the members of the Parliamentary Assembly for your openness and constructive engagement.

We remain committed to further productive co-operation.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Dear Chairman of the Senate of Kazakhstan, I want to thank you warmly for your address to our hemicycle. And we follow with great interest the changes that have been decided to take place and that are already taking place in your country.

Now we're going to enter the debate of the report that Mr Zsolt NÉMETH presented to us just before your speech. And I would give the floor to the speakers on behalf of the political groups first.

The first is Mr Axel KASSEGGER from the European Conservatives, Patriots & Affiliates. Axel, you have the floor.

Mr Axel KASSEGGER (Austria, ECPA, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you very much, Mr President. I would like to thank Mr Zsolt NÉMETH for this excellent report. It is a report that sheds light on a whole host of different aspects. A report that is well-balanced and welcomes the positive developments in Kazakhstan to date. However, the report also encompasses other voices, including critical ones. A report that also clearly

identifies upcoming challenges. Kazakhstan is the largest landlocked country in the world. Kazakhstan highly reliant on oil and gas. Since the collapse of the terrible communist regime in 1991, Kazakhstan has been a politically stable country in the region and also a bridge-builder in many directions.

If you read the report, Kazakhstan has implemented extremely sound reforms, especially since 2019. To mention but a few, the abolition of the death penalty, the strengthening of the powers of parliament and local authorities, beefing up the independence of the Human Rights Commissioner and making it easier to set up political parties.

Of course, and this is also mentioned in the report, there are still some challenges for Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan is well on the way but, as colleagues have said, Kazakhstan has not yet reached its goal, nor can we expect it to. But Kazakhstan is on the right track. That is why we will be voting in favour of this report. Thank you very much.

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

On behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, Lord Michael GERMAN.

Lord Michael GERMAN (United Kingdom, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you very much, Mr President.

Thank you, Mr Maulen ASHIMBAYEV, for your detailed discussion with us and informing us of what is happening currently in Kazakhstan.

This report which is before us and your statement clearly shows that Kazakhstan is building towards democratic reform. But as you might expect, of course, and as explained, there is some road still yet to travel. Given the position of this vast country, and there was a statistic given at lunchtime at the opening which said that Kazakhstan has a 7 500-kilometre border with Russia, which for simplicity's sake is the same distance as between Strasbourg and New York, that gives us some idea of the size of this country which is at the centre of the world. And its desire for democratic reform has been explained here today. So, the Council of Europe must give Kazakhstan every assistance it can to complete this journey.

Having a democratic heart at the centre of the world is important for us in Europe just as much as it is for them. Now there's much in the way of support which this body can provide to build on the foundations which have now been set and some of the important issues laid out just before us just now, notably, for example, the registration of new political parties so that a genuine opposition can be created, a level playing field which the media can operate on and the legislation which is on the way for gender inequality issues. These are issues, of course, which they're taking head on.

And I wanted to conclude by saying we mustn't forget in all this the gigantic strides which have already been made. Kazakhstan, as a former Soviet republic, is now ahead of the curve and moving at pace. They deserve our best wishes and congratulations for what they have achieved so far, looking west towards our democracies for a model on how they want their country to proceed.

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

Thank you, Lord Michael GERMAN.

On behalf of the Group of the Unified European Left, the co-Chair of the Party, Ms Laura CASTEL. Laura.

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

Let me thank the rapporteur for this report on Kazakhstan.

But dear colleagues, even though the positive developments over the past years, this Assembly and other international bodies, such as OSCE/ODHIR, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Freedom House or United Nations have documented systemic political oppression, violations of fundamental rights, rule of law and media freedom.

That's why any positive assessment must be accompanied by: real reforms, credible investigations and the repeal of laws that enable politically motivated prosecutions, guarantees of peaceful assembly, improvements in media freedom, ending the harassment of civil society, and the misuse of justice for political reprisal.

Is in this sense that we should condemn the refusal to register opposition parties, the misuse of financial control to silence critics, the imprisonment of opposition politicians and journalists, and the violent crackdown on the January 2022 protests.

But, we call on Kazakhstan to comply fully with its international obligations.

We are aware of the government's good will to take this path. And we would like to stress that in Almaty is established the UN Regional Centre for Sustainable Development Goals for Central Asia and Afghanistan, and the initiative launched by the European Union and United Nations Development Programme to provide educational opportunities to Afghan women in Central Asia.

Regarding this, we call on Council of Europe member states to support and co-operate with this issue, but at the same time, we encourage Kazakhstan to ratify and fully implement the Istanbul Convention.

We have several instruments that can help to achieve this important goal, such as the parliamentary network Women Free from Violence, in the Equality Committee, that could organise, for example, a peer-to-peer exchange of views, or seminars, to support to the development of the role of the Parliamentarians in the fight against violence against women, or the role of parliamentarians in implementing and monitoring the Istanbul Convention.

So, in a nutshell, the Assembly should regularly assess the situation in Kazakhstan, and its adherence to the values of the Council of Europe. And this report is important, not only for the government, but also for the civil society, and that is why any positive assessment must remain conditional on a real and measurable progress in the reform agenda.

Thank you very much.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Ms Laura CASTEL, you were one minute and five seconds, so next time I will cut your time. But okay, it is on behalf of the political groups. I have to be more flexible and I believe that colleagues understand that. And I am always treating all political group leaders or representatives the same. So now, on behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens, Mr Max LUCKS. Max, you have the floor.

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

Thank you, Mr Zsolt NÉMETH, for this report on the partnership between the Council of Europe and Kazakhstan, which is a great opportunity.

It opens up avenues towards the strengthening of democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights. That is why we in the Socialists, Democrats and Greens (SOC) Group want to make sure that this co-operation is constructive. For us, constructive means recognising the progress that has been made without losing sight of shortcomings.

We continue to see a lot of serious challenges in Kazakhstan, for example in the restriction of political freedoms, the persecution and imprisonment of opposition voices and the jeopardising of digital rights through surveillance measures. The circumvention of international obligations and sanctions is also a problem that requires our attention. Remember the 2022 protests: more than 200 people were killed during these protests. To this day, no serious investigation has taken place. To date, there has been no word of apology from President Kassym-Jomart TOQAYEV.

Our position must therefore be clear: we want partnership but partnership is not a blank cheque, but a combination of support for reforms with a clear stance against human rights violations and the oppression of the opposition. And, of course, we have to reach out a helping hand, but if things have gone awry we need to say so and demand accountability. It is only through this balance that co-operation with Kazakhstan remains credible. And only through this balance can we have credible co-operation with Kazakhstan. And that's the only sound premise for real co-operation, for genuine development. And that is why we in the SOC Group would like to table a number of amendments.

Thank you very much.

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

And now, on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party, Mr Christophe BRICO. Christophe.

Mr Christophe BRICO (Monaco, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mr President.

Thank you to Mr Zsolt NÉMETH for his report and to the President Maulen ASHIMBAYEV, for his speech. Thank you very much.

Kazakhstan, perhaps we should remember, is a country that is quite far from us. It is mainly an Asian country, with the Russian Federation on one side and the People's Republic of China on the other. Two states which, I think it's fair to say, are not great democracies. I think we can all agree on that.

That makes the work that has been done since 2022, in fact over the last three years, all the more extraordinary. In three years, the number of reforms and the direction in which this country is heading are quite simply extraordinary and, I believe, few countries among us would have been able to implement so many reforms in such a short space of time. I think it's important to highlight that.

Culturally, this is a country that is quite far removed from our own, with values that are quite different from our own. However, they choose to come to us, they choose to adhere to the values that we adhere to here and it seems to me that before being maximalist in the demands that we make here, we should give Kazakhstan, and the Kazakh population for that matter, time to experience these reforms, to internalise them and to see what will become of them, because we are talking about three years. Only three years. So, personally, I congratulate the incredible work done by the Kazakh authorities and, as far as I'm concerned, as long as things continue in this direction, you can count on my support.

Thank you very much.

Ms Arusyak JULHAKYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Dear colleagues, the next on our list is Ms Biruté VĖSAITĖ.

The floor is yours, please.

Ms Biruté VĖSAITĖ (Lithuania, SOC): Thank you, Madam President.

The Council of Europe is strong when we work in dialogue. Kazakhstan is an important partner in Central Asia. We congratulate Kazakhstan on its steps to promote human rights. We welcome reforms and we note progress. The death penalty has been abolished, the Constitutional Court is back and local mayors have been elected. These are real steps for human rights. They mean more dignity, more justice and a bigger voice for its citizens.

Parliaments build trust. The agreement between the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Parliament of Kazakhstan is a bridge. We encourage more visits, more debates and joint work. Parliamentary diplomacy helps reforms to be real, not only on paper. We are aware of Kazakhstan's efforts to de-centralise power. As members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, we support equal rights, freedom of the media and justice for victims, so that democracy can flourish and contribute to making Central Asia an area free of political prisoners.

Lithuania always stands for solidarity and fairness. We underline the needs for women's rights and the Istanbul Convention. We recall that free media and civil society must be respected and we believe reforms must continue with real results for people. We encourage Kazakhstan to go forward with reforms, to work with the Council of Europe and to listen to the voices of its citizens. This is the way to build trust, stability and democracy.

Colleagues, let us continue this work together, for democracy and for trust.

Thank you.

Ms Arusyak JULHAKYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Now I ask Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN to take the floor. The floor is yours, Mr VARDANYAN.

Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD): Thank you, Madam Chair.

First of all, let me congratulate the rapporteur, Mr Zsolt NÉMETH, for the very balanced report.

I would like to say that it is a crucial step not only for our Parliamentary Assembly, but also for Kazakhstan to have such a balanced resolution on further democratic developments.

Europe is a geographical notion, but the Council of Europe is something about values, something about democracy, something about responsibility. This is not just an elite club for privileges which are given for granted. This is first of all responsibility, responsibility and responsibility. The participation and the willingness of Kazakhstan to be closer to the Council of Europe should be appreciated. We should take into account that Kazakhstan has both the willingness and ability to take these responsibilities on.

We do believe that the Council of Europe would be a proper forum for enhancing further development of democracy, rule of law and human rights in Kazakhstan.

We understand that there is no ideal democracy in the Council of Europe. There is no situation when your democracy is ideal in any country. But we should do our best to improve democratic developments. We should do our best to increase the protection of human rights. We should do our best to take the relevant place in this very important organisation, which is not only about democracy, rule of law and human rights. This is about the general mindset, democratic mindset, which is quite important for all of us.

I would like to say that I hope that this resolution would be a milestone for Kazakhstan for building a new democracy, for promotion of human rights and for maintaining the rule of law.

Thank you.

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

Ms Boriana ÅBERG (Sweden, EPP/CD): Madam President, dear colleagues,

Kazakhstan is one of the pillars of stability in the Eurasian region.

This role has become even more significant given the increasingly tense geopolitical climate, particularly as Russia continues its unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine.

I share the conclusions that our Parliamentary Assembly's co-operation with Kazakhstan must continue, based on the values of the Council of Europe, encouraging and supporting Kazakhstan and its paths towards democratic reforms.

I also share the concerns raised in the report, but I would like to rather highlight the positive developments.

Shortly after the January protest, President Kassym-Jomart TOKAYEV presented an ambitious new reform agenda to democratise the political system. These reforms aim to decentralise power both geographically and institutionally, as well as to democratise and improve the electoral system.

Reforms to the electoral process have already been implemented.

Further steps have been taken to improve the situation of women and to counter gender-based discrimination. At the same time, significant challenges remain in what is still a highly patriarchal society. In 2017, physical violence against women was downgraded from a crime to an administrative offence. But in 2024, violence against women was once again criminalised. The expressed aim of continuing to align the legislation and subsequently acceding to the Istanbul Convention is an important step to prevent and combat violence against women.

It is encouraging that Kazakhstan has sought support for its democratic reforms. Now is the right moment to deepen the Council of Europe's engagement and ensure sustained progress.

Thank you.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): And the next speaker, Mr István HOLLIK.

Mr István HOLLIK (Hungary, ECPA): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Dear Colleagues,

Kazakhstan, as the largest landlocked country in the world, plays a unique role in the Eurasian region. Due to its geopolitical position, it serves as a bridge between Russia, China and Europe.

The changes in the global economy have further increased the importance of this position.

Therefore, Kazakhstan is not merely a regional actor.

We acknowledge the political and legal reforms presented in the report, which demonstrate Kazakhstan's commitment to democratic transformation, the rule of law, and the protection of human rights. The abolition of the death penalty, the constitutional changes, and the opening of the electoral system are all significant steps on the path of democratic development.

At the heart of these reforms lies democratic transformation: constitutional and electoral amendments strengthening the protection of human rights and enhancing governmental transparency. The abolition of the death penalty in 2022 was a particularly important milestone.

I would like to emphasise a special thanks to rapporteur Mr Zsolt NÉMETH, who has clearly presented not only the developments in Kazakhstan, but also the broader transition in world politics.

We agree with the rapporteur's conclusion that these reforms not only serve Kazakhstan's internal stability, but also strengthen the security and the co-operation opportunities of the entire region. It is therefore both right and timely that the Council of Europe seeks a closer partnership with Kazakhstan.

Thank you very much.

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

Mr Mehmet AKALIN (Türkiye, ALDE): Thank you, Madam Chair.

First of all, I would like to thank the rapporteur for this resolution.

Dear colleagues,

Kazakhstan today stands before this assembly as a nation in transition, one that has chosen the difficult but necessary path of democratic reform. I am pleased to voice my support for the resolution on Kazakhstan. In recent years, it has taken meaningful steps to strengthen governance, expand freedoms and build a more transparent and inclusive society.

A central milestone was the 2022 constitutional referendum, where more than 77% of citizens voted for the reforms, reducing presidential powers, strengthening parliament and limiting the presidency to a single term. This represents a clear move towards accountable governance in a region where power has often been overly centralised. Transparency has advanced through tighter rules on political financing and more open procurement processes, signalling a commitment to fighting corruption and building trust between citizens and state.

On freedom of speech, Kazakhstan has decriminalised defamation and expanded protection for independent media, giving journalists greater space to work without fear. Inclusivity has also improved, stronger laws against domestic violence, expanded programmes for women's participation and policies safeguarding minority rights reflect a broader vision of democracy that protects the vulnerable.

Colleagues, no democratic journey is complete, but Kazakhstan's progress is real and deserving of recognition. By encouraging these reforms, we can help ensure the road to democracy continues and that Kazakhstan becomes not just a neighbour, but a partner in safeguarding our shared values.

Thank you.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you. Next speaker, Mr Koloman BRENNER.

Mr Koloman BRENNER (Hungary, NR): Thank you, Madam President,

Dear colleagues,

At times like these, in historic times, it is particularly important that we uphold European values. Because our citizens believe in welfare and rights and it is only through these values that we can support them. The Council of Europe stands for these values, for human rights, for civic rights and for balance.

I would like to point out that this well-founded and balanced report by Mr NÉMETH also guides us in the right direction. This is particularly important for us because of geopolitical changes, where the world order is being completely transformed after World War II. Look at Europe and Asia. And Kazakhstan plays a particularly important role in this geopolitical context. That is why it is important that we continue with these efforts and with this dialogue. We need to have a dialogue amongst equals. I emphasise that, amongst equals.

I personally had the great honour to visit Almaty in my former function as Chairman of the German Minorities in Europe, at the invitation of the Council of the Peoples of Kazakhstan.

Previously I was to visit Chair of the German minorities in Europe and we went to Almaty, where we had the great opportunity to meet with the representatives of the people in Kazakhstan. So I can only wish you all the best in your direction of travel, going in the right direction. I would also like to call on my colleagues to support this balanced and sound report, also as a signal that even in such historic times we must stand up for our values and reach out to our friends in Kazakhstan. I would warmly encourage our Kazakh friends to study the conventions of the Council of Europe and Charter for Regional or Minority Languages carefully. Thank you.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): The next speaker is Mr Jan Filip LIBICKI.

Mr Jan Filip LIBICKI (Poland, EPP/CD): Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Dear colleagues,

Today we reflect on the future of Kazakhstan, a country advancing along the path of democratic reforms, respect for human rights and the rule of law. These efforts matter not only domestically, but also internationally.

We commend the authorities for a policy of zero tolerance towards violence against women and children, ill treatment and corruption. This shows that protecting human dignity is a state priority.

Preventive measures against torture are equally important: proof that Kazakhstan takes its obligations seriously.

At the same time, civil society is beginning to strengthen as a guarantor of transparency and accountability.

We value that Kazakhstan is opening space for its growth while seeking regional co-operation.

Kazakhstan remains a key partner. We encourage continued co-operation, including accession to Council of Europe conventions and the development of new areas of partnership.

I would also stress Kazakhstan's role in fostering inter-ethnic harmony and national unity. The Assembly of People of Kazakhstan is a unique model that promotes dialogue, respect and tolerance - foundations of stability.

Distinguished colleagues,

Kazakhstan has already advanced foreign, political and economic modernisation.

Today we can say it's not only declaring but implementing reforms to build a fair and modern state.

Our task is to support these efforts for the benefit of Kazakhstan and the wider community.

Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

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

Mr Nicos TORNARITIS (Cyprus, EPP/CD): Madam Chair,

Dear colleagues,

Kazakhstan is an important pillar of stability in the Eurasian region. We welcome its commitment to democratic reform, co-operation with European institutions and the abolition of the death penalty. Recent reforms and the 2024-2027 priorities show real progress in governance, human rights and judicial reform.

Still, challenges remain: ensuring pluralism, judicial independence, free expression and a strong civil society. Our role is to engage Kazakhstan as a partner offering dialogue and support to help achieve lasting reforms that improve the lives of their citizens. Therefore, we strongly support the draft resolution before us.

Thank you very much.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): The next speaker is Mr Roland Rino BÜCHEL.

Mr Roland Rino BÜCHEL (Switzerland, ALDE): Madam Vice-President, members of the Assembly,

In recent years, Kazakhstan has made great efforts to overhaul and modernise its political system and strengthen its democratic institutions. These efforts are reflected in the improvement of electoral procedures and the expansion of political representation, the bolstering of the multi-party system and the strengthening of Parliament. Of particular importance to me is the commitment to greater transparency. All these steps show that Kazakhstan is on the way to greater openness and democracy. However, that will require consistency and stamina. Democracy is an ongoing process.

As you know, I come from Switzerland. Our fight for independence and freedom and, thus, the democratic development of my country, began in the 13th century. Believe me, the people in my country know that such a long journey is not without its challenges. But through dialogue, respect for diversity and a willingness to compromise, it is possible to achieve and maintain long-term stability. And that is the case of Kazakhstan, which became independent after the collapse of the Soviet Union on 16 December 1991.

There are 700 years separating our two declarations of independence. Kazakhstan is 1,000 times the size of the three original cantons of Switzerland at the time, 65 times the size of Switzerland today, and more than four times the size of France.

Today, the country is now at a turning point. The democratic reforms that have been initiated deserve our support. I am convinced that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe will respect the time that it takes to achieve stability, justice and peace and do its bit to achieve that end.

Thank you.

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

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, ECPA): [Speaks in Ukrainian].

I just addressed the Kazakhs in the Ukrainian language and believe me, Kazakhs will understand me! Why? Because we have a lot in common. And most importantly, both for Cossacks and for Kazakhs, freedom is the most important.

Yes, Kazakhstan stands between two empires, China and Russia. And this is a very dangerous place to be. And the shadow of Sergey LAVROV's impact is lying on Kazakhstan. We know this.

Yes, geography can be a curse, but it shouldn't be the sentence, because values know no borders; freedom knows no borders. Kazakhstan should not accept the future written in Moscow or Beijing.

I heard today many call Kazakhstan a bridge between Russia, China, Europe.

No. Kazakhstan is not a bridge where imperial armies are marching. Kazakhstan is a home for Kazakh people. That's the most important. I'm sure that Kazakh people can choose their own destiny and their own way. This is the way to a free world Kazakhs belong to. So "let's Go, Kazakhstan!" [spoken in Kazakh]; stand together with the free world. This is the only way to survive in this world today.

And I am sure this way will benefit all Kazakh people everywhere. "Let's Go, Kazakhstan!" [spoken in Kazakh].

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

And the final speaker in this debate is Mr Patrick CASEY.

Mr Patrick CASEY (Ireland, ALDE): Thank you, Madam Chair.

At this pivotal moment in our European journey, we must confront the sobering reality: democracy, even within Europe, is fragile. It's not fragile because it has failed, but because it is under sustained pressure from rising authoritarianism, disinformation and internal democratic erosion. In such times, our commitment to democratic principles must be steadfast, and our support for those striving to uphold them must be resolute.

Kazakhstan presents a compelling case. A nation of strategic importance and rich in resources, it has long operated under authoritarian governance. Yet following the tragic events of January 2022, now remembered as Bloody January, the President has initiated a series of reforms aimed at building a new and fair Kazakhstan. These reforms include limiting presidential power, strengthening parliamentary authority, and proposing a transition to legislators elected through party lists. While these steps represent meaningful progress, election irregularities persist, civil society remains constrained, and human rights challenges endure.

However, Kazakhstan's government's willingness to engage with international partners, including the Council of Europe, signals a genuine openness to reform. This is diplomacy with purpose, supporting reform, demanding accountability and promoting transparency. Democracy is not defined by perfection, but by progress. It is built through dialogue, accountability and the courage to change.

Kazakhstan's journey reminds us that even in the most challenging environments, reform is possible. But it requires support, our support. Therefore, I urge this Assembly to act with determination and let us extend the principles and constructive support to Kazakhstan's reformed efforts. Let us reaffirm our commitment to a Europe that is not only made up of nations, but of community values. And let us ensure that the democratic spirit remains the guiding light of our European project.

Thank you.

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

I call Mr Zsolt NÉMETH, rapporteur, to reply. You have three minutes.

Mr Zsolt NÉMETH (Hungary, ECPA, Rapporteur): Dear colleagues,

Thank you very much for your contributions to this debate. It was very lively and frank. The arguments exchanged reflect the impressions of my fact-finding mission, which I have included in my report. The rationale behind it: our Assembly was not created to applaud perfect democracies. It was established to accompany societies on their journey towards democracy, human rights and the rule of law. And that is exactly the case here. Kazakhstan is an old nation – maybe a young state – navigating a very complex geopolitical environment.

Despite this, it has chosen to move closer to Europe, above all by abolishing the death penalty. But similarly important is the adoption of the constitutional reforms, the strong parliamentary character of the country, and engaging more actively with our conventions and our programmes. These are clear signs of the political will of the present leadership headed by President TOKAYEV.

If we disengage, others will fill the vacuum. Actors who do not share our values. Therefore, it is in our very strategic interest to engage with Kazakhstan. Advocating for closer ties with Kazakhstan does not mean turning a blind eye to the things that need improvement. It means committing to partnership by acknowledging progress and setting, at the same time, clear expectations.

Yes, this is an investment in Kazakhstan's democratic journey with the Council of Europe, and in particular, the Parliamentary Assembly as a trusted partner and strategic contribution for stability in a region in our neighbourhood.

The presence of Mr Maulen ASHIMBAYEV at our debate was a very strong gesture on behalf of Kazakhstan. It was, and it is, an open hand towards us. And I believe that we have to accept this open hand. That's why I would like to thank the whole delegation very much for coming to Strasbourg. Thank you for your contributions, and I hope we will be able to follow the decisions of the Committee, which was considering very carefully the different elements and arguments which need to be reflected in our deliberations.

Thank you very much for your attention. Thank you very much.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, I share the gratitude for the participation.

Does the chair of the Committee want to speak?

Please. Three minutes.

Mr Bertrand BOUYX (France, ALDE, Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): Madam President,

Ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy, I would like to thank my colleague Mr Zsolt NÉMETH for the work he has done to present this excellent report.

I would also like to thank the colleagues who have just spoken for their comments on the debate. Today's debate clearly shows that our Assembly is attentive not only to what is happening in Europe, but also in its immediate neighbourhood. Kazakhstan, at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, occupies a strategic position. Its moving closer towards Europe is not just a bilateral issue, but one of regional stability and democratic security for our continent as a whole.

Over the past few years, our country has taken some major steps forward, which were mentioned in your speeches. One of the most important of these was the abolition of the death penalty, but the increased commitment to our organisation is also a remarkable development.

Of course, there is still a long way to go, as you have all pointed out. Our Assembly has made it clear that further progress is expected. But these challenges must be seen as opportunities for enhanced co-operation. Kazakhstan has very clearly expressed its desire to continue with the reforms and to move forward with us. The Council of Europe has unique tools to support this process and strengthen democratic security, including in our neighbourhood. Our commitment is beneficial not only for Kazakhstan but also for the stability of the region and, therefore, for Europe itself.

In conclusion, on behalf of the Committee, I would like to reaffirm our full support for this report. It embodies the necessary balance, firmness about our values and openness to constructive co-operation.

I would like once again to congratulate Mr Zsolt NÉMETH on behalf of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy for his excellent work.

Thank you very much for your attention.

Vote: The Parliamentary Assembly should support Kazakhstan to continue its democratic reforms

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Committee Chair Mr Bertrand BOUYX.

Then we move to the votes and consideration of amendments.

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

First, the unanimous approval of amendments.

I understand that Amendments 6 and 7 to the draft resolution were unanimously approved by the Committee. However, given that Amendment 6 would lapse if Amendment 4 is adopted, it must be considered according to the usual procedure. Therefore, only Amendment 7 can be agreed under the unanimous procedure.

Mister Chair, do you wish to propose that Amendment 7 be agreed on unanimously?

Mr Bertrand BOUYX (France, ALDE, Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): Yes.

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

So we consider Amendment 7 to be approved and it will not be called.

Then we go for the amendments - starting from number 1, I call Mr Max LUCKS to support Amendment 1. 30 seconds.

Mr Max LUCKS (Germany, SOC): Thank you, Ms President.

Kazakhstan remains a key pillar of stability in the Central Asia region and we are very grateful for that. But we must also address serious security concerns we have.

This amendment records our resolution 2540 highlighting, the sharp increase in microchip imports to Kazakhstan and the onward exports to Russia as well as the large scale oil flows from Russia. Supporting this amendment strengthens our resolution and it would follow the position of the European Commission and the position of the United States.

Thank you.

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

Does anyone wish to speak against.

(Do you have a name?)

Please, Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN, please.

(He's not present.)

Push the card. Okay. It doesn't show in the system.

Try the next one.

Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD): Okay, thank you. I'm sorry about this technical issue.

I am against this amendment because I don't think that it's a good practice to quote another resolution. In this case, we will start to quote the Convention or the necessary instruments in each and every resolution. That was the first reason. The second, I think that information is outdated. The third, it might be actually somehow apart from the general context of what the resolution was intended, and at the end of the day, why are we mentioning crude oil and India in this resolution?

So I'm against.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): And what is the opinion of the Committee on the amendment?

Mr Bertrand BOUYX (France, ALDE, Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): *This amendment was rejected.*

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

I shall put the amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

Amendment is 62 in favour, 67 against, 2 abstentions. So it is rejected.

We move for Amendment 2.

Mr Max LUCKS, please.

Mr Max LUCKS (Germany, SOC): Thank you very much.

I present Amendment 2 to our resolution, which acknowledged Kazakhstan's progress in democratic reforms, notably the abolition of the death penalty in 2022.

However, this amendment also address serious concerns regarding recent developments.

Leaked documents from the Chinese company Geedge Networks reveal that Kazakhstan has acquired and deployed advanced internet censorship and surveillance infrastructure, including deep packet inspection, real time monitoring and VPN (virtual private network) detection. These capabilities severely restrict free expression and digital rights.

So please follow this amendment.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you. Does anyone wish to speak against the Amendment? Oh yes, Ms Elisabetta GARDINI.

Ms Elisabetta GARDINI (Italy, ECPA): Yes, we are against because the amendment cites credible reports on digital censorship infrastructure imported from China. But there is no independent evidence of these allegations.

On the contrary, the Kazakh authorities have already denied them. We must rely on facts, not on allegations or simple hearsay.

Thank you.

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

What is the opinion of the Committee Chair, please?

Mr Bertrand BOUYX (France, ALDE, Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): This amendment was rejected, Madam President.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you. So we go for the vote.

The vote is open.

I close the vote.

The result is 63 in favour, 62 against, four abstentions. So this amendment is passed.

Passed.

I move now to Amendment 3. Mr Max LUCKS.

Mr Max LUCKS (Germany, SOC): First of all,

Allow me, please, to welcome the comprehensive co-operation between Kazakhstan and the Council of Europe under the Neighbourhood Co-operation Priorities.

This amendment stresses the need for tangible progress, injustice reform, anti-corruption matters and the promotion of human rights.

It particularly calls for the release of 39 political prisoners.

Let's use our power here in the Assembly to help these political prisoners in our co-operation with Kazakhstan.

Please support this amendment.

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

Does anyone wish to speak against Amendment 3?

Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN, please.

Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD): Once again. Okay, okay.

Actually, paragraph 5 of the resolution already addresses this issue in more general terms and actually mentions the challenges we have. So there is no need to amend. And this is not adding any value to this resolution, so I'm against.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): And what is the opinion of the Committee?

Mr Bertrand BOUYX (France, ALDE, Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): This amendment was rejected.

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

I shall put Amendment 3 to the vote.

The vote is open.

I close the vote.

The result is:

67 in favour, 65 against, 3 abstentions.

So this Amendment 3 is accepted.

Then we go to Amendment 4. Mr Max LUCKS, please, 30 seconds.

Mr Max LUCKS (Germany, SOC): Thank you, colleagues.

While the 2004 Co-operation Agreement commits to parliamentary democracy, the rule of law and fundamental freedoms, this amendment expresses the grave concern at the repeated refusal to register the peaceful opposition party and the criminalisation of fundraising by the opposition. It calls for the immediate release and full rehabilitation of imprisoned opposition leaders.

A true democracy needs that you register an opposition party.

And that is why I ask you to support this amendment.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Does anyone wish to speak against?

Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN.

Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD): I agree with Mr Max LUCKS that all political parties should be registered.

But simultaneously it is impossible to push a country to do something from Strasbourg. It's necessary to actually respect the constitutional settings we have.

We should more engage in the further understanding of what's going on in this process.

But actually the paragraph we have and the amendment is not only concerning the registration of the political parties, also concerning the events which occurred in 2022.

And it's quite important that the text of the resolution is addressing not only past challenges, but that it's also addressing the current challenges.

And having the text as it is more favourable than if we change the text as proposed by Mr Max LUCKS' amendment.

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

And what is the opinion of the Committee?

Mr Bertrand BOUYX (France, ALDE, Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): The Committee rejected this amendment.

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

I will put this to the vote, and if this is accepted, then Amendment 6 falls.

The vote is open.

I close the vote.

So 69 against, 66 and two abstentions. *So Amendment 4 is adopted.*

And we go to Amendment 6. That falls because of accepting Amendment 4.

So we move then to Amendment 5. That is from Mr Max LUCKS. Please present it in 30 seconds.

Mr Max LUCKS (Germany, SOC): So, colleagues, this really is now a very serious amendment because I am so happy that we, as the Parliamentary Assembly, we are committed to expanding our relations with Kazakhstan. And I really want to see more relations with Kazakhstan.

But we have to face the fact that there is transnational persecution by the authorities from Kazakhstan, in particular a case from Belgium.

I think that we need to create a safe space for human rights activists, for journalists, for oppositional politicians in the Council of Europe member states.

So please, follow this amendment to make here a safe place for oppositional politicians, but also to strengthen our relations with Kazakhstan.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Does anyone wish to speak against Amendment 5?

Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN. Your microphone isn't working yet.

Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD): We're speaking about an amendment which actually mentions one individual case where the circumstances are unclear, and as I know, have been not substantiated by any independent body. And such information will be placed in an explanatory memorandum.

In addition, the Open Dialogue Foundation reportedly has close ties with the already mentioned person. So I would like to say that we cannot actually...

We would like to have a Kazakhstan closer to the Council of Europe. These kind of amendments may actually hinder the process.

Thank you.

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

What is the opinion of the Committee?

Mr Bertrand BOUYX (France, ALDE, Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): This amendment was rejected.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you. So we put this to the vote.

The vote is open. Amendment number five.

So I close the vote. *And the figure, as you can see, has been rejected.*

We go then for the whole draft resolution as amended. A simple majority is required. I open the vote on the whole resolution as amended.

The vote is open.

I close the vote and call for the results to be displayed.

We see 130 in favour, two against and two abstentions.

The resolution is accepted.

Debate: The honouring of membership obligations to the Council of Europe by Hungary

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): The next item on the business of this afternoon is the debate on the report titled "Honouring the membership obligation of the Council of Europe by Hungary", presented by Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS and Mr George PAPANDREOU on behalf of the Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee).

So, please take the seats. We can start with the presentations. We will be beginning with the rapporteurs Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS and Mr George PAPANDREOU, the co-rapporteurs. They have each five minutes now and five minutes in total to reply after the debate.

So I call now Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS, you are ready to present your part? Please.

May I speak?

Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS (Estonia, ALDE, Co-Rapporteur): Dear colleagues,

Today, we present the key findings of the Monitoring Committee's report on Hungary, which reflects our ongoing responsibility to ensure that every member state upholds the fundamental values of the Council of Europe: democracy, the rule of law and human rights.

Hungary has been under a full monitoring procedure since 2022 due to what this Assembly called "systemic concerns". While in this report we acknowledge some progress – most notably, recent judicial reforms aligned with the Venice Commission recommendations – the overall picture remains deeply troubling.

First, on democratic institutions:

Hungary's electoral system has been systematically engineered to favour the ruling coalition. The Venice Commission and the ODIHR have consistently highlighted gerrymandering, unequal suffrage and opaque redistricting processes that lack public consultation. Successive reforms have turned electoral victories into two-thirds majorities, and these two-thirds majorities have been used to single-handedly modify the institutional framework in the ruling majority's interest.

The excessive use of cardinal laws and constitutional amendments – 15 of those to date – has undermined the normal legislative process and cemented the ruling party's preferences into near-irreversible legal structures. Appointments to key oversight bodies, including the Constitutional Court and the State Audit Office, are dominated by political allies, weakening checks and balances.

Second, the rule of law is under sustained pressure.

Despite the 2023 reform package that aimed to strengthen judicial independence in response to European Union concerns, significant challenges remain. Judges face political intimidation, and their remuneration remains the lowest in the EU. The *Baka v. Hungary* judgment remains unexecuted, perpetuating a chilling effect on judicial independence and freedom of expression.

Moreover, and maybe also more importantly, Hungary's continued use of a "state of danger" – originally justified by the Covid-19 pandemic and now extended under vague pretexts – has allowed the government – particularly the prime minister – to bypass parliament, ruling extensively by decree.

Third, corruption and public integrity. They go together.

Hungary's corruption levels are among the highest in the EU. GRECO and the OECD have reported severe deficiencies in preventing high-level corruption, with critical reports often unpublished by Hungarian authorities. The anti-corruption bodies created to appease EU conditionality mechanisms are themselves in crisis – one under criminal investigation against its president, the other unable to release its last annual report due to the lack of agreement between civil society members and the government representatives.

Fourth, on human rights and civil society:

Media pluralism is gravely compromised. The state controls a large portion of the advertising market, and media regulatory authorities are politically appointed. Civil society is under growing pressure, with state bodies such as the Sovereignty Protection Office aiming to intimidate independent organisations. The Assembly has before called for the abolition of such institutions and for the amendment of laws that curtail civic space.

In conclusion, we welcome Hungary's legislative steps towards restoring some judicial independence, but these remain isolated improvements within a broader landscape of democratic erosion. The Assembly reiterates its commitment to a constructive dialogue with Hungary – but such dialogue must be based on genuine adherence to our shared values.

We call on the Hungarian authorities to implement the full range of recommendations: first, to overhaul the electoral system after the 2026 elections, second, to guarantee the independence of the judiciary and supervisory bodies, third, to combat corruption robustly, and finally, to restore a safe and pluralistic space for civil society and the media.

Thank you.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much, Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS.

And now I leave the floor to Mr George PAPANDREOU.

Mr George PAPANDREOU (Greece, SOC, Co-Rapporteur): Thank you, Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS and dear colleagues.

No one disputes that Fidesz has repeatedly won elections. But democracy is far more than winning at the ballot box. The true measure lies in how power is exercised responsibly. Checks and balances, opposition voices that have a platform to speak and speak freely, leaders that are subject to the rule of law rather than shielded by impunity, and whether justice serves citizens rather than being wielded against critics. Individual rights protected, public resources managed transparently and not captured for private gain, dialogue and consensus fostered instead of silenced. Whether electoral laws ensure fair representation.

So what we're monitoring is not who governs, but how power is used and secured. Is it respecting human rights, democracy and the rule of law? If it does so, then anger turns into a voice, power into responsibility and conflict into justice, building trust which keeps societies peaceful and prosperous. Such important principles for Europe, especially today. And we know if they are eroded in one place, they are eroded for us all. As Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS just said, we are unfortunately seeing erosion of these norms. The opaque redrawing of boundaries in electoral constituencies have allowed for majorities to become supermajorities.

This has given the constitutional protection of a consensus which, the whole sense of, the whole spirit of the two-thirds majority is for consensus. But with a one-party, two-thirds majority, what has happened, of course, is that this has been used, weaponised, for unilateral control, entrenched laws, personnel and partisan control of institutions, even from courts to media regulators.

As was said, we have had since 2020 a state of danger with decrees. A concrete example was only recently when Donald TRUMP, after just recently deciding for a law to open up and decide on who is a terrorist. And Viktor ORBÁN followed him with a decree opening up a list where he will decide what is a terrorist organisation without consultation in Hungary.

The judiciary is still under pressure, although some reforms have been made, it is true. But appointments, promotions, caseload transfers and salary leverage keep courts vulnerable. Even smear campaigns chill critics. As was said, we have corruption. Billions of EU funds were frozen or subject to strict conditions pending rule of law compliance. And some funds have been lost because of what the EU has seen. Media capture advertising from the State is skewed towards allies and friends. And the KESMA conglomerate has brought together oligarchs of the media that are friendly to the government, which has basically muted critics.

The sovereignty laws - we have the Sovereignty Protection Office, supposedly to look for foreign agents. The first organisation to be examined and investigated was Transparency International. Universities and cultural institutions have been shifted, moved, from the public sector to foundations. It sounds very autonomous. However, these foundations are basically controlled through the boards, through partisan positions on the boards. So they are political appointees.

Assembly and surveillance. We have, of course, restrictions on assembly. We had restrictions on the Pride parade, however, that became a protest movement, a very strong one against this restriction.

And finally, Strasbourg judgments. I think Hungary is the worst as far as implementing the decisions of the court.

So all this as a bottom line shows that this amounts to an entrenched system designed to prevent real alternation in power or checks on abuse of power. And the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has called it out as a mounting case of state capture. As Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS, my colleague has said, these are recommendations in favour of Hungary. We want to see good co-operation with the Hungarian government and, of course, Hungarian society in order to have implementation. And we can move forward implementing the principles that are so dear to our Council of Europe.

Thank you.

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

And now we go to the debate.

And I remind you that the time limit is two minutes. Now we first have the representatives from the political groups. And I first call on Mr Damien COTTIER from Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe to take the floor.

Mr Damien COTTIER (Switzerland, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mr President,

The Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe expresses its deep concern about the state of democracy and human rights in Hungary. Admittedly, some reforms are moving in the right direction, notably to reform the independence of the judiciary. However, the main thrust of the report shows a persistent erosion of checks and balances and pluralism in this country. Basically, the co-rapporteurs see problems and backsliding across the board, and we are deeply concerned about this.

We are particularly concerned about the conditions for the forthcoming parliamentary elections: gerrymandering, imbalance in campaign funding, inadequate representation of minorities, and so on. We call for a complete overhaul of the electoral system in line with the recommendations of the Venice Commission and Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

The report, and thanks to the co-rapporteurs for their work, calls for protection for national minorities. We therefore invite Hungary to reform its system of minority representation in Parliament, in line with the Court's decision, and to ensure the effective participation of people belonging to all minorities in the political process.

We are also concerned about the issue of freedom of expression. We are deeply concerned by the succession of measures aimed at silencing civil society organisations. The political climate towards LGBT+ communities and organisations, in particular, is very worrying, especially the law passed under emergency procedure again this year.

In the media, it is the concentration of media ownership, the lack of pluralism and the political influence on content, that is worrying.

And in the fight against corruption, it's the lack of a strong political will to tackle it.

Our group wants a demanding and constructive dialogue with Hungary. Hungary must fully honour its commitments to the Council of Europe and stop distancing itself from it. There is still a lot of work to be done.

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

Then I leave the floor for the representative from the Group of the Unified European Left. It's Mr Emmanuel FERNANDES.

You have the floor.

Mr Emmanuel FERNANDES (France, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister President, ladies and gentlemen,

The report before us illustrates a truth of which history never ceases to remind us: once the far right takes power, it becomes difficult to unseat it. In Hungary in 2010, it was the coalition led by Viktor ORBÁN that came to power. And in 15 years, the far right has shown how, once elected, it uses and abuses its constitutional prerogatives to hold on, whatever the cost.

Electoral redistribution carried out in the shadows, inequality of suffrage for the diaspora, changes to the voting system, enabling 50% of the vote to win nearly 80% of the seats, over-representation of the winners, opaque campaign financing where the far right spends eight times more than the opposition... Added to this is the disregard for the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights and the opinions of the Venice Commission, the weakening of the rule of law, the control of corruption, the resources allocated to the judiciary, the undermining of the separation of powers and the representation of the 13 recognised minorities.

At the same time, we are witnessing the concentration of the media, all in favour of the government, the repression of human rights defenders, and the banning of all LGBTQIA+ gatherings, including the banning of Pride Marches, in contravention of the case law of the ECHR and Article 11 of the Convention. This is the record of the government in Hungary: backsliding freedoms, weakening democracy and changing the law to ensure its own political survival.

At this point, my Group of the Unified European Left would like to thank the rapporteurs, who enable our institution to fulfil its mission of vigilantly monitoring compliance with member states' commitments. At this very moment, Hungarians, exhausted and desperate in the face of the oppression inflicted by their government, are listening to us. We are telling them: "You are not alone. We see what is happening, and we support you." We are calling for strong measures to be adopted to ensure that Hungary respects its obligations, starting with voting in favour of this draft resolution.

Thank you very much.

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

And I now ask Mr Stefan SCHENNACH to speak on behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group.

You have the floor.

Mr Stefan SCHENNACH (Austria, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you very much, Mr President.

A few years ago, when I tabled the motion in this plenary chamber to open a monitoring procedure on Hungary. At the time, I did not realise that we would have such formidable co-rapporteurs. I would therefore like to thank the co-rapporteurs for a great report, the great work that you have done, thank you colleagues. As part of my political group, all I can do is fully subscribe to what you say in your report.

The situation in Hungary - and it is one of Austria's neighbours - is dire. You have to bear in mind that, since 2020, we have had decrees, special legislation. Really they should be curtailed to moments of special danger. But now we are talking about legislation simply being set aside. There is also an office entrusted with setting aside the judiciary and its decisions. And, in addition to that, there is a foundation for the management of public assets. But nobody has any insight into this, there's no transparency. So I'm afraid that the oxygen and air in Hungary has become very thin. The media are practically in the hands of Prime Minister ORBÁN and his

friends. The cultural scene is completely barren and many creative artists have had to leave the country. And if we then look at the electoral laws, which no longer follow the principles of proportionality or majority. Instead we have a system that is favourable for the dominant party. Thus, democracy and life in Hungary are in great danger and civil society is completely marginalised.

I can only recommend that this resolution be adopted today by a large majority. Thank you.

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

And now I give the floor to Ms Agnieszka POMASKA from the Group of the European People's Party.

Ms Agnieszka POMASKA (Poland, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mr President.

Dear colleagues,

This report on Hungary's obligations to the Council of Europe highlights both progress, but also serious challenges.

We should acknowledge that in 2023 Hungary adopted judicial reforms. They improved the independence of the courts. This shows that constructive dialogue with our Parliamentary Assembly can deliver results.

But key concerns remain.

Electoral reforms have tilted the system in favour of repeated two-thirds super majorities, undermining fair competition.

Constitutional amendments and cardinal laws have entrenched one party's preferences, weakening checks and balances.

Meanwhile, restrictions on media and civil society continue to shrink democratic space.

And the fight against corruption is still insufficient.

Allow me also to recall a case that directly concerns this Parliamentary Assembly. We lifted the immunity of former MP Marcin ROMANOWSKI so he could face serious criminal charges in Poland. Instead, he fled to Hungary and was controversially granted political asylum despite the gravity of the accusations. This raises troubling questions about mutual respect for the rule of law between member states.

Our task is not to stigmatise, but to uphold the principles every member has freely accepted: democracy, rule of law and human rights.

Hungary has shown it can reform - when it chooses. But a genuine and sustained political commitment will be necessary to restore pluralism, the rule of law and the protection of fundamental rights.

Implementing the recommendations of the Venice Commission and the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) on elections, judicial appointments, anti-corruption measures and media freedom should be the priority.

Continued monitoring remains essential, with the overreaching goal of strengthening the democratic foundations of Hungarian society.

Thank you very much.

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

And the last speaker from the political groups will be Mr Axel KASSEGGER.

You have the floor.

Mr Axel KASSEGGER (Austria, ECPA, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you very much.

Today we are once again seeing how left-wing forces who believe they are in possession of the truth and justice are trying to lecture Hungary, punish Hungary and insult Hungary. The same left-wing ideologies that oppressed entire peoples in the past, and which are now losing one election after another in many European countries, are pointing the moral finger at Hungary.

I would like to say that Hungary is a functioning democracy in the heart of Europe. There are free elections and there is a strong government that is supported by the people. What bothers you is not the lack of democracy or the rule of law in Hungary. What bothers you is that the Hungarian people are making decisions that you do not like. As an Austrian, from a country with a long shared history with Hungary, I find this deeply unfair and disrespectful. We are neighbours, friends, partners, and I will not remain silent when our Hungarian friends are attacked and defamed.

Ladies and gentlemen, anyone who truly believes in Europe respects its peoples, their sovereignty and their decisions. Anything else is misguided. I therefore say clearly and with full conviction: this report is simply bad. My group will also reject this report. And finally, (note the irony), it has nothing whatsoever to do with and is in no way an interference in the free elections that Hungary will hold next year.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): And I now call the next speaker, Mr Christophe LACROIX.

You have the floor.

Mr Christophe LACROIX (Belgium, SOC): Thank you, Mr President and dear colleagues,

By joining this Parliamentary Assembly, Hungary has voluntarily agreed to respect and defending tooth and nail the values and principles that bring us together here. Since 2011, however, Hungary has deliberately strayed from this path: government-controlled media, restrictions on the actions of NGOs, pressure on civil society, frontal attacks on the freedoms of LGBTIQ+ people, promotion of a retrograde vision basing education on religious prejudice.

And no, dear colleagues, these are not judgements, but facts! Facts that in the report, and this is what undoubtedly bothers you in your retrograde vision of rights and human rights, because I want to say it here. These attacks are not isolated accidents, they form part of a system, a political strategy.

These developments call into question the principles that underpin the Council of Europe, its very *raison d'être*. And so for fourteen years now, Hungary has been weakening the architecture of rights protection that we have spent decades building. Fourteen years of Hungary intentionally and provocatively trying to tear apart our common mechanism. Fourteen years of exploiting the flaws in our system to impose a vision that is far removed from the values of democracy, the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights.

To remain silent in the face of such a situation would be to lend credence to such a situation. That is not something we can do. We, I think, stand by civil society.

When the Hungarian authorities tried to ban the Pride March in Budapest, thousands of citizens marched peacefully in defiance of the government. This example demonstrates just one thing: even when rights are under attack, we need civic courage. And civic courage is the way forward, whether you like it or not on the extreme right, that is the way forward.

Thank you.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): And the next speaker is Ms Elvira KOVÁCS. You have the floor.

Ms Elvira KOVÁCS (Serbia, EPP/CD): Distinguished Chair,

Dear colleagues,

As a representative of the Hungarian minority political party from Serbia, I would like to underline the very good co-operation between the two countries in different fields, including infrastructure, justice and the European integration process.

As we all know, our Assembly has been closely following the situation in Hungary on specific issues, the measures taken, and the progress achieved.

Unfortunately, the draft resolution in front of us only selectively cherry-picks elements from the opinions of the Venice Commission, systematically omitting statements that acknowledge Hungary's efforts.

The timing of this debate is also not clear. Namely, it comes at the very last moment before the six-month moratorium prior to the elections. It is clear from the Constitution of Hungary that the parliamentary elections will take place there in April next year.

I would also like to underline that claims that Hungary restricts LGBT events are false; the law protects children and bans gatherings only if they promote content restricted under child protection laws. The right to protest is still protected in Hungary. Accusations of mass surveillance are misleading; technology can only be used in specific cases and under human supervision.

I know that Hungary is a committed member of the Council of Europe. The rule of law and democracy fully apply in Hungary. There is a firm commitment of the country to respect human rights, and in legal terms, a lot has been done.

As I mentioned at the last meeting of the Monitoring Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in Paris in September, it is very sad that the resolution of this Committee we are discussing today is extremely critical, not objective and picks only the negative parts of the opinions of the Venice Commission asked for in the preparation of this work. Therefore, unfortunately, I cannot do anything else but vote against this resolution.

Thank you.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): And the next speaker is Mr Zsolt NÉMETH. You have the floor Zsolt.

Mr Zsolt NÉMETH (Hungary, ECPA): Chairperson, dear colleagues.

So the Hungary-bashing continues. And this Hungary-bashing will continue until April 2026.

As you know, we have an election, a parliamentary election, in April 2026. We are prepared for this and it seems that you are also enjoying it.

This was the case yesterday when we had the Hungarian judges' list. I would like to thank at this point all those who supported our position. Everybody knows who it concerns.

And this is the case with the timing of this report. Yes, in six months there will be a parliamentary election. I have asked the Parliamentary Assembly to have the debate after this. But no, I was rejected.

Unfortunately, this report is not new, not original at all. We all know the arguments and the counter-arguments in this report. And that's why there is not much interest around it. That's why there is not a single amendment which would have been tabled to this report. Roger SCRUTON said – the philosopher – "the greatest enemy of the left is reality". If the Hungarian government is so anti-democratic, why for victory in the last 16 years?

Today you give us some help, colleagues, to repeat it next April.

No, we are not anti-democratic, not anti-European. But yes, we have an alternative vision of Europe. A Europe of nations, respect for social conservative values. A Europe, a fortress against illegal migration.

Thank you very much for your attention.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): And now I give the floor to Mr Petri HONKONEN.

You have the floor.

Mr Petri HONKONEN (Finland, ALDE): Thank you, Mister Chair.

And thank you to our rapporteurs, too.

The Council of Europe is a system of mutual trust and responsibility, where governments and parliamentarians work together, watch over each other, and stand up for what is right. So, this is not an institution for governments; this is an institution for people.

And so, after hearing this discussion, this debate, I must say this: no country is perfect, but every country in this room made a promise when they joined this organisation and its conventions. A promise to uphold the core treaties and conventions that bind us all. These are not optional. Once a state becomes a member, and so long as they are a member, there is no any so-called "foreign interference" or "attack" in relation to the monitoring procedure or other procedures of this organisation, based on our common rules.

So there is no question that the commitments and agreements of this organisation are binding upon its member states.

And in the end, you either respect these obligations or you don't respect them. So I ask you: respect the promises you have given and above all, respect the rights of your citizens.

Thank you.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): And the next speaker is Ms Saskia KLUIT. You have the floor.

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

This debate is not about right or left. It's about democracy and the rule of law. And since Hungary adopted its new constitution, power has concentrated in one majority and checks and balances have weakened. Critical voices in the judiciary, media and civil society are silenced. Democracy, the rule of law and human rights, including freedom of expression and assembly, are under threat in Hungary.

The Hungarian state dominates the advertising market. Resources are channelled to pro-government media. Public service media are under government control. Journalists are instructed to promote government narratives. Some content comes directly from the Prime Minister's cabinet. Pegasus spyware has been used against journalists, politicians and activists. Political control is being consolidated. Media pluralism is under attack.

Banning demonstrations based on content is a direct assault on fundamental rights. On 18 March 2025, Hungary passed a law banning all LGBTIQ-related public gatherings, including the Pride march. This happened despite warnings from the Commissioner for Human Rights. Hungary's commitment to fundamental freedoms is therefore in serious question.

The Assembly calls on Hungary to act now: please ensure an independent media council, ensure fair and transparent state advertising, and an end to the special legal order before the next elections. Because citizens in Hungary deserve a democracy that respects their rights and voices. The international community must act to restore democracy, rule of law and human rights in Hungary, and that's why we are here in this plenary.

I would like to end by thanking the rapporteurs, Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS and Mr George PAPANDREOU, for their wonderful report. And I will strongly support it.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): And the next speaker is Mr Hayk MAMIJANYAN.

You have the floor.

Mr Hayk MAMIJANYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD): Honourable Chair, dear colleagues,

I want to speak about some more facts that show the pattern of behaviour of the Hungarian authorities.

You all know that Armenian Army lieutenant Gurgen MARGARYAN was murdered with an axe while asleep by an Azerbaijani participant during a NATO event in Hungary back in 2004.

In 2012, he was extradited to Azerbaijan, where he was pardoned, promoted and given an apartment. The reaction of the Secretary General of this Council of Europe was, and I quote: "Honouring a convicted murderer and transforming him into a hero is unacceptable."

Five years later, an investigation into the Azerbaijani laundromat money-laundering scheme uncovered and revealed that several bank transfers in 2012, totalling more than USD \$9 million, were made to the Hungarian MKB Bank account in Budapest right around the time when the Hungarian government extradited Ramil SAFAROV to Azerbaijan. Still to this very day, there has been no official apology from the Hungarian authorities. They owe an apology to the Armenian people.

I began with the expression "pattern of behaviour" on purpose. This year, when EU member states decided to allocate "non-lethal" military aid to Armenia from the European Peace Facility, Hungary vetoed the decision in the European Council. I would like to add that there are publications in the media that a few months before the Azerbaijani offensive, Budapest had already signed contracts to help the Azerbaijani authorities rebuild villages in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Thank you.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): I call on the next speaker. It's Ms Patricia STEPHENSON. You have the floor.

Ms Patricia STEPHENSON (Ireland, NR): Thank you, Chair.

As colleagues know, the Commissioner for Human Rights has sent several letters to the Hungarian National Assembly this year to warn against passing of laws that go against the values that we're supposed to share.

The Commissioner's calls to uphold human rights and take the pressure off civil society have been ignored, as the Hungarian government continues to silence independent voices. Journalists, activists and judges are branded "bugs" or "insects" by the Prime Minister, quite frankly, appalling language when referring to those defending democracy and human rights. Civil society is suppressed with the so-called Defence of National Sovereignty Act, a bill the Transparency International as described as "aiming to annihilate civil society and independent media".

I want to highlight the treatment of the LGBTQI+ community in Hungary. They are singled out, their marches are banned, their identities are censored from classrooms, television screens, their very right to live openly is criminalised. These are not the actions of a government committed to the values that we, in this room, say that we hold. These are the tactics of oppression.

But this repression does not go unanswered. Hundreds of thousands of people have marched in the banned Budapest Pride this year, from every corner of Europe, including a delegation of politicians and activists from Ireland, and people stood together in solidarity with the community in Hungary. Those are the real values of our Union and the values enshrined in the founding treaties of this organisation. And I would like to say that this is not about bashing anyone's country. We can all be at risk. At different times, our governments can be at risk of not upholding the values that we say that we have. We are all responsible for holding ourselves to account, to fight for the ideals of democracy and human rights protect them.

Hungary is currently failing to fulfil those obligations. If we do not take a stand now, we undermine the principles of human rights, we undermine democracy. And further to that, we undermine the existence of these institutions and the credibility of them in the first place.

Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): I call on Mr István HOLLIK. You have the floor.

Mr István HOLLIK (Hungary, ECPA): Thank you, Mr Chair.

Dear colleagues,

As I see, the Hungarian election campaign has now begun in Strasbourg as well, and this report is the contribution of the mainstream parties sitting here to my country's election campaign. Thank you very much. But I have to tell you that the Hungarian people have always been wiser than to listen to your false accusations.

Because the Hungarian people know exactly what is your main concern with us: that we don't do what the liberal mainstream expects. For example, we say no to migration, and yes, we say no to gender ideology.

But let me also address some concrete criticism of the report.

The report deals extensively with the former general elections.

Dear Rapporteurs,

How is it possible that your report has a detailed part about the 2022 general elections, the Hungarian electoral system and campaign rules, but not a single word about the fact that during these elections there was unprecedented foreign interference? After the elections, the opposition's candidate for Prime Minister openly admitted that they had received 10 million euros from abroad. Just so everyone understands: this is 3 million euros more than the total amount of state campaign funding provided to all parliamentary parties. Including the governing parties.

So I have only one question for those who are applauding this report: what would you do if such a thing happened in your country? Would you just sit and do nothing?

I don't think so.

And this is the context of the laws launched after the election in order to protect our sovereignty. The rapporteurs shouldn't have missed this.

This specific example clearly shows this isn't a balanced report, that is why we won't support it.

Thank you.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): And the next speaker is Mr Titus CORLĂȚEAN. Titus, you have the floor.

Mr Titus CORLĂȚEAN (Romania, SOC): Thank you Chairman, President, colleagues,

From the beginning I will tell you that I rely entirely on the hardened, objective work of our rapporteurs.

I'm saying 'objective' because the rapporteurs are reflecting at the same time both some elements of progress, and I quote the 2023 legislative reform that improved the independence of the judiciary, but at the same time the important criticism and points of concern or serious concern.

So, definitely I vote in favour of the resolution.

In this context, I want to draw your attention to one particular important topic that means the protection of national minorities in Hungary.

I want to underline the fact that I entirely support the conditionality emphasised in the draft resolution paragraph 7.4 and paragraph 19 on the explanatory memorandum, that is mentioning the need for reform, and to assure the effective representation of the national minorities in the Hungarian Parliament, and in the political decision-making process. And that means also valid for the Romanian national minority living in Hungary that is not represented by a member of parliament.

This is already mentioned. I want to underline the fact that this conditionality was mentioned in our resolution from 2022 that re-established the procedure of monitoring on Hungary.

And this is somehow paradoxical, because Hungary is one of the champions during the years that fought for the protection of national minorities. And the fact that this is not solved yet in Hungary; this is a paradox.

It's true that several times from Hungary, going beyond the accepted lines and the European standards that are establishing the fact that these rights are the individual rights of persons belonging to a national minority and not collective rights, giving the right of self-determination, separation or authority based on ethnic grounds.

I want to underline the fact that this is very difficult for me to understand why it's not possible. It was possible during the empire, during even the duality of the Austrian and Hungarian empire, both in Vienna and in Budapest, and is not possible in the current democratic Hungary.

So, with optimism – moderate optimism – I will vote in favour for the resolution, looking also at this subject.

Thank you.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): And the next speaker is Mr Aleksandar MIRKOVIĆ. You have the floor.

Mr Aleksandar MIRKOVIĆ (Serbia, EPP/CD): Thank you, Chairman.

Hungary values constructive dialogue, but it must be based on facts, not selective interpretations. The draft resolution unfortunately completely ignores acknowledgment of Hungary's reforms.

Its timing exposes a political attack dressed in legal form. Hungary respects the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights and remains open to legal dialogue.

But together we must prevent attempts to present political opinions as objective legal findings.

Hungarian constituency reform was necessary, due to demographic changes, to ensure fair elections. The proposal came from a parliamentary committee, not the government, whose role was limited to constitutional review.

Hungary's postal voting system follows international models and has been upheld by the Constitutional Court. The "winner compensation" mechanism in vote counting prevents wasted votes and mirrors practices in other countries.

Claims that public offices are filled solely by government supporters ignore constitutional safeguards. Many appointments require multi-party involvement, reflecting proper checks and balances. Criticism of the legislative process overlooks committee oversight, Constitutional Court review, and mandatory public consultations, standards comparable to those of EU member states.

Portraying legislation initiated by MPs or parliamentary committees as problematic is not only wrong, it is a constitutional right and standard practice across Europe.

These examples expose the recurring application of double standards. Coming from Serbia, a country often subjected to them, I understand very well the broader implications of such an approach.

I truly believe that Hungary remains firmly committed to democracy, dialogue with partners, and strengthening the rule of law, based on facts, not political narratives.

Thank you.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): And I call on Mr Oleksandr MEREZHKO. You have the floor.

Mr Oleksandr MEREZHKO (Ukraine, ALDE): Dear colleagues,

There are only two people in the world who openly claim Ukraine is not sovereign: Russian dictator Vladimir PUTIN and Hungarian authoritarian Mr Viktor ORBAN. There are only two countries in the world that violate Ukraine's sovereign air space with drones: Russia and Hungary. And it is no coincidence. These so-called strongmen, as Vladimir PUTIN and Viktor ORBAN like to portray themselves, are allies and coordinate efforts against Ukraine. In fact, they are allies in undermining democratic European and transatlantic solidarity and security.

It is hard to comprehend why Hungary, a country that suffered Russian aggression in 1956 and used to be one of the leaders of democratic changes in the 1980s, has turned into Putin's ally and gives preference to authoritarian rather than democratic values. The most recent example of creeping authoritarianism in Hungary is a ban on Ukrainian media outlets like Ukrainska Pravda. Now we have a paradox. In Hungary, Russian misinformation and propaganda is spread freely, whereas Ukrainian media exposing the truth of day-to-day events is banned.

Hungary continues to buy Russian oil and gas thereby financing the Russian war machine. Russian oil is more important for Mr Viktor ORBAN than democratic values and principles.

Dear colleagues,

Soon the people of Hungary will face a crucial choice: European values such as freedom, democracy, human rights, peace, stability and prosperity or authoritarian values and alliances with totalitarian regimes like Russia and communist China.

I am sure when push comes to shove, the people of Hungary will make the right choice. Hungary must stand on the right side of history and support the free and democratic world.

I strongly believe in the people of Hungary and their will to respect democracy and the rule of law.

Thank you.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): And I now call Mr Christophe CHAILLOU. You have the floor.

Mr Christophe CHAILLOU (France, SOC): Mr President, Ladies and Gentlemen

Ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me first of all to thank our colleagues Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS and Mr George PAPANDREOU for their excellent report which, as many of us have said, makes a particularly alarming assessment of the situation in Hungary, a member of our Organisation since 1990 and a member of the European Union since 2004.

Since 2010, when Viktor ORBÁN came to power, our Assembly has adopted several resolutions calling on the Hungarian authorities to work with the various Council of Europe bodies to comply with the fundamental principles and obligations arising from membership of our Organisation. To no avail, since our Assembly has decided to open a full monitoring procedure concerning Hungary.

various Council of Europe bodies have provided Hungary with their expertise. I am thinking in particular of the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), which has put forward a number of recommendations to combat corruption, which is particularly rife, especially at the highest levels of the country, and the Venice Commission, which has made a number of recommendations, notably to reform the electoral law, which is particularly unfair.

At the same time, the European Union has decided to apply conditionality to European funds, which has led to the withholding of certain funds from which Hungary has benefited greatly.

In 2024, 76% of the judgments handed down by the European Court of Human Rights against Hungary had still not been executed, making it the highest percentage of any EU member state.

Against this particularly unacceptable backdrop, ladies and gentlemen, this session should enable us to renew our dialogue with the Hungarian parliamentarians and convince them of the validity of the proposed reforms and the importance of respecting the rule of law.

And I would like to say, in particular to our Hungarian colleague who was extolling the virtues of the current situation: I was among other representatives of youth organisations in the late 80s in Budapest, at large political rallies where there were young leaders, and in particular Mr Viktor ORBÁN, who had just founded Fidesz, and who was calling for demonstrations for respect for the law, for respect for democracy, for free elections, and who was also asking for the support of foreigners, the mobilisation of outsiders.

It would be good for him to remember today what he was fighting for 40 years ago.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): The next speaker is Ms Mónica BARTOS. You have the floor.

Ms Mónica BARTOS (Hungary, ECPA): Mr Chair, thank you for the floor.

Dear fellow representatives,

The picture painted by the rapporteurs regarding Hungary is extremely biased. Why do I think this?

If you read the draft resolution, you will find a total of two sentences that express some positive recognition for Hungary's efforts. Otherwise, it lists increasingly serious criticisms over two pages long.

If the statement made in the last paragraph of the draft resolution were true, that there is a willingness on the part of the General Assembly for constructive dialogue, then this should also be reflected in the report in a way that acknowledges good processes and successes. But it does not do so.

The report is full of half-truths and inaccuracies. I will mention just a few... The text is calling for an amendment to the law on the transparency of public life, although it has not been adopted.

Regarding the salaries of judges, the draft refers to outdated sources and ignores the already ongoing 48% salary increase planned over three years.

The draft resolution downplays the importance of the Hungarian public consultation process, despite existing laws requiring transparency, deadlines and even penalties for ministries that fail to consult properly.

Criticism of the legislative process ignores existing solid safeguards, including minority rights, committee oversight and constitutional court review.

The list is long; I could continue.

We say that the goal is to strengthen the European community through mutual support and assistance to the member states. I do not see this supportive intention in this report. But I hope, I trust, that this will change in the future.

Thank you.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): And the next speaker is Ms Dunja SIMONOVIĆ BRATIĆ. You have the floor.

Ms Dunja SIMONOVIĆ BRATIĆ (Serbia, SOC): This draft resolution selectively chooses elements from the opinion of the Venice Commission, considerably changing the meaning of the statements that praise Hungary's efforts.

Unfortunately, MPs from Serbia felt a lot of misunderstanding within reports and resolutions from this place. Let me remind you that you always criticised Serbia, but in the report for Kosovo, you gave excellent remarks about human rights, although they did nothing to improve, and their obligations. And even worse, the clear exodus of Serbian people and children is ongoing.

So this resolution about Hungary comes at the last minute before the six-month moratorium prior to the elections.

It is also interesting that there is a criticism of the compliance with the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, even though there is a readiness for legal dialogue.

Yesterday, we saw that rules can be easily rejected. You had three Hungarian judges who were in the procedure. Nothing was wrong with them and with the procedure until the Committee on the Election of Judges to the European Court of Human Rights, which was held in Paris two weeks ago, suddenly withdrew the list. During the selection of judges, the list has never been rejected, and the candidates and the country have been humiliated at the very end, with the explanation being that the problem is not the candidates but the procedure. What is interesting is that they were all the time by the book and procedure, because they couldn't have been at the hearing without prior approval.

This is a clear example of when political opponents disguise their political opinions as objective legal findings.

Dear colleagues,

We must all stand against this unwritten rule within these walls. Thank you.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): I now call on Ms Hajnalka JUHÁSZ.

You have the floor.

Ms Hajnalka JUHÁSZ (Hungary, ECPA): Thank you, Mr Chair.

Dear colleagues,

Let me begin by stating that, in my view, this report appears to be highly biased, ideologically obsessed and unbalanced in its approach. This is not a new phenomenon in Europe, we have seen it for years now. It tends to emerge whenever democratically elected majorities support patriotic political forces beyond the mainstream left-wing spectrum.

Let's touch upon some topics that have been raised in your report such like the independence of the judiciary. We have adopted, and will be adopting in the future, amendments to the relevant legislation that will result in a significant increase in judges' salaries. The average salary of judges will increase 48% compared to the 2024 base salary. This significant progress has been recognised by the European Commission in its 2025 Rule of Law Report as well.

Corruption, another hot topic for our political rivals. I would invite you, please dear rapporteurs, to consult the most recent figures of the European Commission's Single Market Scoreboard. In the category of public procurement Hungary has scored, in 8 out of 12 performance indicators, satisfactory. In the performance indicator "single bidder" our rating has been 32%, continuously improving, putting our country well before other EU member states.

Additional measures have also been taken to tackle corruption. In line with the OECD recommendations the possible criminal liability of legal entities for corruption offences will be broadening, the new regulations will enter into force in 2026.

And finally, as a committed member of the Council of Europe since 1990, I do believe Hungary deserves a correct, balanced report, admitting our achievements. Unfortunately, this is not the case here.

Impossible to support.

Thank you very much.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): The next speaker is Mr Didier MARIE.

You have the floor.

Mr Didier MARIE (France, SOC): Dear colleagues,

The report by our colleagues Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS and Mr George PAPANDREOU, unfortunately, confirms Hungary's difficulties in respecting the rule of law, democratic principles and fundamental freedoms. As our Assembly has regularly pointed out, the situation in Hungary has been deteriorating since 2011, to the point where a monitoring procedure was opened in 2022. Yet the authorities continue to ignore the recommendations made to them by the various bodies of the Council of Europe on a wide range of issues.

These include, first and foremost, the successive redrawing of electoral boundaries, the sole aim of which has been to consolidate the ruling coalition's hold on parliament. In addition, the general lack of transparency in the funding of election campaigns and political parties is regularly denounced by GRECO, without any of its recommendations being implemented.

In addition, the climate of mistrust towards judges persists, despite the 2023 reform. Civil society is marginalised, NGOs are prevented from operating and LGBT+ rights are under threat.

All of this bears witness to the development of an "illiberal" regime in Hungary. This shows us the fragility of the principles and values that we defend here and the need to redouble our vigilance in the face of populist excesses that can occur in any of our member states.

Respect for our values cannot be an option, and Hungary must be reminded of its commitments. The European Union and the Council of Europe must work hand in hand to achieve results and convince the Hungarian government to introduce the necessary reforms to combat corruption, particularly high-level corruption, and to guarantee the independence of the judiciary and the freedom of the media.

To achieve this, the Council of Europe has the tools to support Hungary, provided that its government shows goodwill, resumes respect for the rule of law and guarantees, in six months' time, a transparent and fair electoral process.

Thank you very much.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): And I now call on Ms Katalin CSÖBÖR.

You have the floor.

Ms Katalin CSÖBÖR (Hungary, ECPA): Thank you, Mister President, ladies and gentlemen,

You know, we are no longer surprised that there is a new Monitoring Committee attack against Hungary.

The parliamentary elections are approaching, and I am going to work in my constituency so that I can win and we can work for Hungarian interests. Our country is increasingly affected by unscrupulous attacks. Their aim is clear: to install a puppet government controlled from Brussels.

However, the accusations regularly made are slanderous. In particular, the draft mentioned here wrongly suggests that the party in power in Hungary has implemented changes that serve its own interests. In contrast, the recent changes to Hungarian electoral district boundaries were legally binding and based on demographic change.

Contrary to allegations of "electoral tourism", it is still impossible to register anywhere. The permission of the flat owner is required. The rapporteurs wrongly associate the amendment of the law on addresses with electoral manipulation, even though it did not change the electoral system or related laws. The so-called "winner pay" in the vote count is neither new nor unfair. It simply makes better use of votes that would otherwise be lost, and has parallels in other European systems. Not to mention that the compensation system existed before 2011.

To sum up, I would like to say that we are ready for a legal dialogue in all cases, but we reject attempts by our political opponents to disguise their political opinions in objective legal statements.

Thank you.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): The next speaker is Sir Edward LEIGH. You have the floor, please.

Sir Edward LEIGH (United Kingdom, ECPA): Well, we all know what this is about.

There's an election coming up and this is a ridiculous attempt to try and influence the election.

But of course, the Hungarian people are much, far too robust to take note of this kind of nonsense.

We know what's going on here. The left hate Mr Viktor ORBAN with an absolute passion because he's a winner. Even the socialist rapporteur who introduced this report admitted that Fidesz wins, wins fair and square. But they hate him, of course, because he's a proper conservative. And why is he a proper conservative? Because he wants to control immigration. And that's what the people of Europe are dying for. And that's what our government should have done. And if we're in a mess in the United Kingdom, it's because we don't control immigration.

This report is ludicrously biased. All the progress made in judicial reforms, of course, are swept away.

And then we have this nonsense about the fact that he wins the election with a two-thirds majority. Well, do you know what happened in the United Kingdom last July? The Labour party got just 33% of the vote and they have two-thirds of all MPs. So perhaps the United Kingdom should now have a report and we should be put under monitoring because somehow we are fiddling the electoral system, because we have first passed the post. Actually, if Mr Viktor ORBAN is a tyrant, he's a pretty poor sort of tyrant because actually he has a mixed system.

So what is happening here is that the left, and here we have this ridiculous speech from the far left, from Group of the Unified European Left, which said, oh, all right wingers are extremists. They're all anti. They're all anti-democrats. What about the communists? What about the far left who repeatedly destroyed... Well, he's waving at me now. But we all know that his arguments are complete nonsense.

What this is about, is weaponising the Council of Europe against a democratic member of this body.

We should reject this report and tell the people of Europe it's complete and utter rubbish.

Thank you.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): The next speaker is Mr Vladimir ĐORĐEVIĆ. Mr ĐORĐEVIĆ, you have the floor.

Mr Vladimir ĐORĐEVIĆ (Serbia, ECPA): Mister Chair.

Dear colleagues,

Today, we speak not only about Hungary, but about a principle that defines Europe itself: sovereignty. A free nation must have the right to decide its own election laws, its own system, its own values, without being forced, judged or punished by supranational pressure.

Hungary's people, like the people of many European nations, have chosen to preserve their traditions, their faith, their families and their culture. That is not a crime. That is not a weakness. That is democracy in its truest form: citizens deciding the future of their homeland.

But instead of respect, we see interference. Instead of dialogue, we see demands. The Europe that was once a union of diversity now too often seeks to be a machine of uniformity. And let us be clear, there is not a single model of democracy, not a single set of values that can erase centuries of national history.

To ask Hungarians, or any traditional nation, to abandon their identity for the sake of imposed "European standards" is to deny the very essence of freedom.

So I stand here to say, solidarity with Hungary is solidarity with every European nation that wants to remain itself. Respect for sovereignty is respect for democracy. And the question before us is so simple: must we give up our identity, our traditions, our beliefs, only to accept values in which the conservative people of Europe do not believe? The answer must be "no".

Thank you.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): The last speaker is Mr Bob De BRABANDERE. You have the floor.

Mr Bob De BRABANDERE (Belgium, ECPA): Dear colleagues,

What we see again in this report is a very selective understanding of democracy. For some, democracy seems to function only when it benefits left-wing parties and their allies. But when citizens choose differently, when they opt for a more conservative course, suddenly democracy is declared to be under threat.

This is deeply problematic. Democracy is not about producing the right outcome according to the standards of Brussels or Strasbourg elites. Democracy is about respecting the will of the people, even when that will does not align with our own political preferences.

In Hungary, the people, the citizens have repeatedly expressed their support through free elections. To constantly challenge the legitimacy of these results simply because they do not suit one ideological camp is not a defence of democracy, it is a distortion of it.

I also want to point out a recurring theme: the constant emphasis on the role of NGOs and civil society. Let us be clear: NGOs do not have a democratic mandate. They quite often represent narrow activist agendas, not the will of the people. Yet in these reports, they are treated as if they were a substitute for democratic legitimacy. That is not democracy; that is outsourcing politics to unelected pressure groups.

Finally, the double standard is obvious. When left-wing governments manipulate institutions or restrict opposition, this Assembly looks the other way. Look at what happened in France.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

If democracy is reduced to a tool that only counts when it produces the outcomes desired by one side of this hemicycle, then you are not defending democracy, you are undermining it.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): This concludes the list of speakers.

And I will now give the floor to the two co-rapporteurs. And first, I call on Mr George PAPANDREOU. You have the floor, and you, in total, have 5 minutes.

Mr George PAPANDREOU (Greece, SOC, Co-Rapporteur): Thank you very much.

The constitution of the UK, I believe, Sir Edward LEIGH, cannot be changed by a two-thirds majority in parliament, while it can be, and it has been in Hungary, so you are wrong there.

And also migration, which is a real issue, does not justify the undermining of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, either in Europe or in the country across the Atlantic, in the United States.

But I want to diverge from Hungary because I think this is a wider issue. I want to talk to the conservatives who are here in this room, because, you know, I have lived under a dictatorship. I have lived under authoritarian regimes. I know what the concentration of power looks like. And let me not talk about a leftist or even a democrat.

Let me quote PLATO, who met the authoritarian leader of Syracuse and what he saw: Dionysius the Elder. He was near blind, this leader. All around him, his advisors pretended to be more blind. They pretended they could not see, so that they would not offend him, and actually, get more food in the banquets, to his pity.

So I want to ask you, is this the society you would like us to live in, again? Because we have lived, and many of you have lived, under authoritarian regimes where we must pretend to be blind to injustice in order to flatter the powerful; where political survival does not depend on our service to our people, but on how better we serve a ruler; where proud citizens are slowly but surely reduced to sycophants and beggars; where deceit is rewarded and honesty is punished; when reports like this are seen not as an attempt to help a good criticism, but are seen as propaganda; where conspiracy theory and intrigue dominate our lives.

Even the most humiliating loyalty cannot protect you, because there will be the arbitrary use of power, because there is no rule of law. This is not the Europe we want. And if you want this kind of Europe, Europe will end with violence. That is why we are here to fight for a democratic Europe – a Europe that respects human rights and the rule of law.

Thank you.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): And Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS.

Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS (Estonia, ALDE, Co-Rapporteur): Thank you very much.

I enjoyed this debate quite a bit. I think it's the first time ever anyone has accused me of being woke, which is an interesting feeling.

I do not really want to start to defend the report, but I'll give you one example. One of you, Ms Katalin CSÖBÖR, I think, said that we do not acknowledge that the EU Justice Scoreboard recognises the progress in judicial effectiveness. And I'll just read you one paragraph. I am quoting our report.

The judicial system in Hungary is efficient. Digitalisation of the justice system is very high. Hungary performs very well as regards to the estimated time needed to resolve litigious, civil and commercial cases, as well as administrative cases, at all court instances.

So I'm a little bit puzzled by the Conservative claim that this is an attack against Hungary. I know that the Conservatives are rather good at attacking now and then, and I do not want to make it a sort of political, ideological thing, but I think that Hungarians know what an attack actually looks like.

I have very warm feelings towards Hungary from my childhood. But you know Hungarians, and we, in Estonia, remember 1848, when the Russians attacked you and suppressed your uprising, and Sandór PETŐFI wrote poems on freedom. We were inspired, even in my childhood, of your uprising in 1956 against the Russian tanks, when your revolutionary leader Imre NAGY was executed by the Russians. Actually, his grave was the first place I went to visit in Hungary when I went there in 1983. And I was even in the streets of Budapest in, I think, 1990, with a young Viktor ORBÁN as an independence movement leader from Estonia.

So we both know what attacks against a country means. And we are not attacking you. We are trying to, in a balanced way, describe the facts in Hungary. This comes from the hope that the Hungarian people see that they know who is attacking them and when. And we hope that things really improve in Hungary very soon.

Thank you.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you. Does the chair want to speak? Mr Claude KERN, you have the floor.

Mr Claude KERN (France, ALDE, Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee)): Thank you, Mr Chairman.

Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to make it clear that I am speaking in my capacity as Vice-Chairman of the Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee) to present the Committee's point of view.

Naturally, I am delighted with the vitality and intensity of our discussions. This discussion illustrates the quality and intensity of the work within the Monitoring Committee. As the work of our Committee is, as a rule, confidential, the moments of debate in plenary session are all the more precious.

I also note that, despite the sometimes marked differences of opinion, the way in which the discussions were conducted was in keeping with the requirements of our Assembly.

The report before us is the result of three years' work by the co-rapporteurs. The Monitoring Committee held numerous hearings and exchanges of views with various stakeholders, including the experts of the Venice Commission who had been asked to give an opinion on certain texts. Whenever the Monitoring Committee discussed the situation in Hungary, the members of the Hungarian delegation were present and were able to present their point of view at length, in accordance with our rules of procedure.

I would like to emphasise the excellent quality of the work of the co-rapporteurs. The report presented to the Assembly is comprehensive and particularly well documented. It includes numerous references, and all the elements put forward are based on verifiable sources. It is based on several requests for opinion to the Venice Commission, on the reports of the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), on the Court's judgments, on the work of the Commissioner for Human Rights, and on the reports of other international reference organisations, such as the reports on the rule of law published by the European Commission or those of the OSCE/ODIHR. In this way, the work of the various Council of Europe bodies is highlighted.

The transparency of the sources used will enable those who wish to do so to delve deeper into the issues being debated today. This transparency also guarantees the objectivity of the findings.

Since Hungary was subject to the monitoring procedure in 2022, the progress noted has been limited, while in some areas the situation has worsened. The recommendation before you sets out a series of measures in the areas of democratic institutions, elections, the fight against corruption, media freedom and the healthy functioning of civil society.

Our Assembly's recommendations set out a path for Hungarian citizens and their representatives who wish to improve the situation, for the benefit of all. The Monitoring Committee therefore hopes that constructive dialogue and cooperation with all elements of Hungarian society will make it possible to implement these recommendations and thus reinforce the values and standards upheld by the Council of Europe.

Once again, I would naturally like to thank the co-rapporteurs for their work, and I invite you to vote in favour of the resolution before you.

Vote: The honouring of membership obligations to the Council of Europe by Hungary

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

Now the debate is closed.

The Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee) has presented a draft resolution document 16249, to which no amendments have been tabled.

We will now proceed to vote on the draft resolution. A simple majority is required.

I open the vote.

I now close the vote.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The draft resolution is adopted.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe will hold its next meeting tomorrow at 10am with the agenda approved on Monday.

The sitting is adjourned. Have a nice evening everyone.

The sitting is closed at 7:20 p.m.