



Provisional edition

Wednesday 1 October 2025, afternoon

Official report of debates

Opening of sitting No 33

Debate: Youth movements for democracy

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

Dear colleagues,

The first item of business this afternoon is the debate on the report titled "Youth movements for democracy", Document 16239, presented by Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK on behalf of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media, with a statement by Mr Clifton GRIMA, Minister for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation of Malta.

In order to finish by 5.10 p.m., we shall interrupt the list of speakers at about 5 p.m. to allow time for the reply and the vote.

I call now Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK, rapporteur.

Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK, as you know, you have seven minutes now and three minutes at the end to reply to the debate.

You have the floor.

Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK (Ukraine, ALDE, Rapporteur): Thank you, Mister President.

Dear colleagues, distinguished Minister,

We have some young people on the balcony looking at us that came for this debate. We do have the representatives of the Youth Council. And actually it's the first topic, the first debate that was chosen in line of the resolution that was passed before for the better youth engagement with this Parliamentary Assembly. So this topic, Youth Movements for Democracy, wasn't my choice or the choice of the Committee. It was the choice of the young people that work in different bodies together with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

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.

We do feel that this is the House of democracy and it is. But to be honest, the real – you know, the pulse of democracy, the genuine power and energy, is among the young people on the streets, in different spaces where young people are getting together. They organise themselves, they create something new when they demand change. We see a lot of engagement and a lot of active young people everywhere around the globe.

I admire the Maltese leadership in this case, with the vote at 16, but also the possibility to be, for example, a mayor of a city if you are less than 18 years old. That's quite unusual. I was surprised – surprised in a positive way – when yesterday, during the intervention, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs mentioned that he became a mayor of his hometown when he was 19! So thank you for this example.

But also we do see some worrying signs. A recent survey by YouGov in seven European countries – the UK, Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Greece and Poland – shows that 21% of Generation Z would accept authoritarian rule under some circumstances.

Nearly 10% said they did not care whether their government was democratic or not. And these numbers are not abstract. They are pretty much a call to action.

The message at the heart of my report is clear. Young people are not just future voters. They are active defenders and builders of democracy right now. Across our member states, they are standing up to authoritarianism, corruption and the democratic decline, while also inviting new ways to participate and to govern.

In Serbia, students sustained a powerful anti-corruption movement, even cycling from Novi Sad to Strasbourg to bring their messages to European institutions.

In Georgia, thousands mobilised against the foreign agent law, affirming their pro-European identity.

In Slovakia, youth rallied to safeguard democratic choice.

In France, Italy, Malta and the United Kingdom, young activists have connected climate justice with social justice, using creativity and courage to make their voices heard.

In Türkiye, young activists defend academic freedom, environment and equality rights despite intimidation and arrest.

I welcome the recent release of Enes HOCAOĞULLARI, a Congress youth delegate – you will tell us the right last name after you speak, sorry – a Congress youth delegate who was detained earlier this year. His release, of course, is a positive step. But we do feel that when the charges are still there, the path is not over. This case is a reminder that across Europe, peaceful youth activism still too often comes at the cost of repression.

Colleagues,

We must ensure that the courage of these young people is met with protection, not punishment. The barriers they face, vague public order of laws, politically motivated unrest, disinformation, economic precarity are not inevitable. They are political choices and different choices are possible. Another example, even during wartime, I can bring the example of Ukrainian youth.

64% of Ukrainian young people are engaged in volunteering.

25% of them started volunteering during the full scale invasion.

Actually Lviv is one of the biggest cities in Ukraine right now, it holds the title European Youth Capital. It's a vibrant city. Young people show that even under the bombs you can create. Of course, some young people are fighting, so we have very young veterans in their twenties, and of course a lot of things to overcome.

Of course, next week ministers responsible for youth will meet in Valletta, in beautiful Valletta in Malta, for the 10th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth. I will not take too much time to explain - probably the honourable Minister will tell you more about the outcome and the practical steps they see.

But what we call for in the resolution is for member states to protect the right of youth to peaceful assembly and that freedom of association be guaranteed.

Laws that criminalise protests must be repealed and the politically motivated arrest of young activists must be stopped.

Institution wise, we must ensure meaningful youth representation in our government. This resolution proposes considering lowering the voting age to 16, introducing youth quotas and ensuring the integration of young people into decision-making processes at all levels.

And invest: we call for the public funding to be given to youth infrastructure, community centres, independent online platforms and educational programmes. It's extremely important, all of these steps.

The recommendation further asks the Committee of Ministers to make youth participation a standing priority across the Council of Europe, to integrate youth civic space into human rights monitoring and to strengthen our youth sector resources.

What I would like to say at the end - this resolution is the guideline. The resolution doesn't mention any of the countries; we want the guidelines for all of the countries to be followed, and for young people to feel that they're not just heard, but that they can be active participants, and creators of the decisions in their respective home countries.

Thank you.

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

Dear colleagues,

I will call now the Minister for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation of Malta, Hon. Clifton GRIMA. Hon. Clifton GRIMA, you may speak from the rostrum, if you want, or from your seat. Wherever is more convenient for you. Okay. You will have the floor for 10 minutes. Thank you.

Hon. Clifton GRIMA (Minister for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation of Malta): Mister President,

Secretary General,

Distinguished parliamentarians,

Excellencies,

Esteemed visitors,

At the outset, allow me to thank Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK for her comprehensive presentation. Her reflections remind us of the urgency and responsibility we all share in ensuring that Europe's democratic future remains in the hands of our young people.

Today's debate on youth movements for democracy is both timely and, in my humble opinion, also essential. Across Europe, young people are at the forefront of defending rights and ensuring democracy.

Malta stands with them, not merely recognising their activism, but actively embedding youth leadership in our institutions. We were among the first in Europe to lower the voting age to 16 for all elections. But we went further. 16-year-olds in Malta are not only trusted with the right to vote, they may also serve as mayors of their respective localities.

By extending voting and leadership rights to 16-year-olds, Malta embraces a forward-looking vision towards democracy. This approach reflects a deep trust in their ability to engage thoughtfully, act responsibly and help build a more inclusive and representative society. It's a clear commitment to empowering youth as full partners in shaping our shared future. Our experience clearly demonstrates that empowering young people is essential to building stronger, more resilient democracies. When youth are given meaningful opportunities to participate through voting, leadership and civic engagement, they bring fresh perspectives, renewed energy and a deep commitment to the future of their respective communities. Malta's example shows that trusting young people not only enriches democratic processes, but also fosters a more inclusive society where all voices are heard. I urge other member states still debating this kind of reform to consider the profound benefits of youth empowerment.

Expanding civic space for young people is not just a progressive choice. It is indeed a necessary step to ensure the health and sustainability of democracy itself. Civic space for youth must be recognised as a fundamental right, not a privilege to be granted selectively. Only by fully including young people today can we build democratic societies that are vibrant representatives and prepared for the challenges of tomorrow. Of course, participation is not enough.

Even with voting rights, young people across Europe face barriers, discrimination, housing insecurities, precarious work or limited access to education. These obstacles directly weaken political engagement. Malta therefore advocates policies that tackle these barriers, recognising the clear link between economic precarity and democratic disengagement. Our educational strategies collectively address all these challenges. They promote inclusive education, continuous learning and digital transformation, equipping young people with the tools they need not only to participate, but what is most important, the tools needed to lead.

We also believe democracy must be experienced daily, not just at the ballot box. At school level, Malta embeds youth leadership through student councils in every secondary school. These councils are giving young people real decision-making roles in shaping their daily school lives. Throughout the Student Council Democracy Awards, led by our youth agency, Aġenzija Żgħażaġh, we incentivise schools to empower students, engage them in their communities and build a culture of participation. Within our curriculum transformation, civic competence and democratic participation are integrated into assessment and through participation in the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study, we do benchmark our progress against international standards.

But democracy also thrives outside our classrooms. In Malta, young people have been central to movements, defending the environment against overdevelopment and unsustainable planning. They represent the same democratic courage and imagination as other activists across Europe.

Our young citizens are also digitally active. Like their peers worldwide, they face the risk of surveillance, disinformation and algorithmic exclusion. Malta therefore calls for stronger protection of digital civic rights, while also championing the creativity and innovation young people bring to the digital sphere.

Distinguished members of the Assembly, we must not forget those young people in conflict-affected societies, who are not only resisting, but also leading recovery and democratic renewal. Their courage demonstrates the extraordinary power of youth to rebuild nations. We must express our solidarity with them.

Malta's geography makes us a bridge between Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. Strengthening youth-to-youth exchanges across the Mediterranean is indeed vital for peace, inclusion and also democratic culture.

In our Presidency of the Committee of Ministers and in Malta's capacity as President of the organisation's North-South Centre, we are working to create those exchanges, building understanding and resilience across borders.

Youth always remained at the very heart of our agenda. Last May, Valletta hosted the 4th European Youth Work Convention, a flagship presidency event. This gathering brought together more than 500 participants from 42 countries, including EU institutions and youth organisations. It charted a European strategy for youth work and showcased Malta's commitment to youth work as a regulated profession.

The same month, I had the privilege of addressing a roundtable discussion on the vital task of empowering young people in democracy, organised in close co-operation with your Assembly on the margins of the Standing Committee meeting in Malta. I commend your Assembly for its role in placing youth at the centre of its work, most notably through the introduction of youth rapporteurs. And we are especially proud that our Head of Delegation, Honourable Ms Naomi CACHIA, was chosen to take up one of these important positions.

Next week, I will have the honour to host the 10th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth. This will be a landmark moment. For the first time, ministers and young people will deliberate as equals, sitting side by side in shaping Europe's democracy and youth agenda. The conference will adopt the Youth Perspective Reference Framework, embedding youth participation across policymaking. This is not just symbolic, it is structural change.

Our experience proves one thing beyond doubt. When young people are trusted, democracy grows stronger. We will continue to protect young people's freedom and their participation in public life. Let us continue to invest in their leadership, recognising them not as threats to established orders, but as indispensable partners in Europe's democratic resilience.

Colleagues, if democracy is to endure, it must be reimagined by its younger generations, our young citizens. Malta is committed to working with you all to ensure that their voices are not only heard, but are instrumental in shaping the Europe we want to see.

Thank you very much.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Dear Minister, thank you so much for your speech.

I know that you have to catch a plane, so whenever you need to leave, you are of course excused. Thank you for your presence.

Dear colleagues, I will call now the speakers on behalf of political groups.

Ms Aurora FLORIDIA, on behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group, first.

Ms Aurora FLORIDIA (Italy, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you.

Mister President,

Dear colleagues,

Distinguished Minister,

Thank you for being here during this debate on this important issue: youth.

As the youth rapporteur of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development, I'm fully aware that we must stop referring to young people as an abstract entity that passively endures the decisions of others, unable to decide for itself.

Across Europe, they are leading the defence of democracy: protesting corruption in Serbia, resisting repression in Georgia, rebuilding Ukraine, standing up in Belarus and demanding justice in Gaza.

They are not just the future, they are the present.

Personally, we can only thank them for taking on this responsibility.

Yet, their rights often exist only on paper, as we also read in this report.

Peaceful protests are criminalised, activists face harassment and civic spaces are shrinking.

Young people don't just want their rights recognised, they demand action. So it is our duty to protect them: safeguard the right to protest, promote youth representation and invest in safe, inclusive spaces.

But this is far from sufficient. We must also address insecure jobs, unaffordable housing and unequal access to education.

Young people are asking to be involved. At the Council of Europe, we are engaging them actively — now it is up to us to turn this engagement into real, concrete action that empowers them and proves that we are capable of delivering.

Thank you very much.

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

On behalf of the Group of the European People's Party, Mr Benjamin DALLE.

Mr Benjamin DALLE (Belgium, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Mister President, dear Minister, dear colleagues,

On behalf of the European People's Party Group, I express our strong support for this report.

It addresses one of the central challenges of our time: how to involve young people more strongly in democracy.

Democracy today is under pressure. It needs renewal. It needs the energy and the creativity of the young generation. The text makes a valuable and hopeful contribution.

Let me highlight three points we particularly welcome.

First, the role of youth councils. Independent and representative youth councils ensure that the voices of children and young people are included in decision-making. They provide expertise and advice based on lived experience. They reflect the diversity of youth perspectives. Policy should be made *with* young people, not *about* them. With the amendment unanimously adopted in the Committee, we underline the need for youth councils that are truly representative and that have a real mandate.

Second, the importance of creating space for young people. Adapted infrastructure and shared public and private spaces are essential. If we want participation, we must also provide a physical and social environment where it can flourish.

Last, but not least, the need to strengthen quality leisure opportunities. With the amendment adopted in the Committee, we stress that youth work, sports and culture are not luxuries, but vital means to foster personal development and social inclusion. Quality leisure time is almost as important as formal education for the well-being of children and young people.

Colleagues,

Democracy needs young people and young people need a democracy that listens and delivers. This report helps us build that bridge

Thanks to the rapporteur Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK, and also thanks to the Maltese Presidency for putting young people at the centre of their presidency.

Thank you.

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

On behalf of the European Conservatives, Patriots & Affiliates, Ms Bianca-Eugenia GAVRILĂ.

Ms Bianca-Eugenia GAVRILĂ (Romania, ECPA, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister President.

Dear Minister,

Dear colleagues,

I represent the Party of Young People in Romania. I appreciate that here we talk about democracy and human rights — and rightly so. But let me share how Romania is treating democracy and respecting the choice of young people.

According to the data, in the second round of the presidential elections that were supposed to take place in December 2024, the majority of young people were ready to vote for candidate Călin GEORGESCU. He was the opposition candidate — and the candidate the system feared the most. What followed was a brutal cancellation of those elections. In their place, controlled and manipulated elections were staged — with the "approved" candidate, the one the system "allowed" to win.

This is not democracy. This is not the will of the people. This is the silencing of a whole generation who want change, fairness and freedom.

Not to mention the fact that Călin GEORGESCU is now being persecuted by the state — just like politicians and civic activists in countries we often criticise in this very Parliamentary Assembly.

I urge you to open your eyes and recognise that Romania only pretends to be a democracy. Because the cornerstone of democracy is free and fair elections — and that is not what happened in Romania.

Thank you.

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

Ms Yuliia OVCHYNNYKOVA, you have the floor.

Ms Yuliia OVCHYNNYKOVA (Ukraine, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Dear Madam President, dear Minister, dear colleagues,

First of all, my congratulations to the rapporteur, Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK, you really put a lot of effort into preparing this report and thank you for this really urgently needed document.

Today, I am deeply honoured to speak on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe group on the youth role in democracy. This topic is a part of my personal story. My professional journey began in the brave, determined and inclusive spaces of youth activism.

Today, as a Parliamentarian, I carry with me the lessons of youth engagement: the power of collective action, the importance of inclusive dialogue, and the unwavering belief that democracy must be co-created with the next generation. And I do believe that by opening the doors to young people, by engaging them into "adult" issues, really and seriously, by supporting their activism, we do build the bridges for the future.

For generations, young people have stood at the forefront of social and political change. Their energy, idealism, and courage are not just assets, they are essential prerequisites for a healthy, functioning democracy. Today, they continue to challenge injustice, demand accountability, and reimagine democratic engagement. From climate strikes to anti-corruption protests, youth-led movements are reshaping our societies with creativity, resilience, and civic innovation.

The PACE Resolution 2553 talks about the pioneering role of the Council of Europe as involved in the youth with the European Youth Foundation, the European Youth Centres. Our organisation and its youth engagement is at the core of our association.

And after all that, I want to say that we do our best in order to institutionalise youth participation, lower the voting age to 16, invest in civic education and protect youth rights.

We must recognise that young people are not just the leaders of tomorrow. They are the change-makers of today.

Thank you.

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

Ms Laura CASTEL, you have the floor.

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

Let me start by congratulating Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK on her excellent report, because it is not only about our present democracies, but also our future life.

Youth movements, as is stressed in the resolution, are vital forces in the defence of democratic values, the present and future army against authoritarianism and distrust in democratic institutions.

Indeed, we should support both the resolution and the recommendations, since they value how direct action can help us as society to defend against the collapse of democracies, including protests, boycotts, occupations or any kind of activism.

It is paramount that our Parliamentary Assembly, but also the Committee of Ministers engage in supporting youth participation, repealing legislation that criminalises peaceful protests, ending politically motivated arrests based on vague provisions such as public order, national security or extremism, as it is stressed in the report – used to silence dissent. Very important indeed.

But also, recommending lowering the voting age to 16: my political party has committed to this objective for many years, so all our support! It's a key element to foster civic responsibility, together with youth quotas and multi-age electoral lists.

In conclusion: excellent work, dear Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK. We support all the recommendations enshrined in your report.

With the engagement of youth, with the critical thinking of youth, with the wisdom of youth and with a clear view of youth, humanity wins as a whole.

Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Mister Minister, for being here and supporting and backing the report.

Thank you.

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

I now give the floor to Ms Nina GRMUŠA, Chairperson of the Advisory Council on Youth. You have the floor.

Ms Nina GRMUŠA (Chairperson of the Advisory Council on Youth): Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK, for this very comprehensive report that has been created with the contribution of young people and of the Advisory Council on Youth.

We are facing defining challenges.

Democracy and its defenders are under unprecedented attack in Europe. But notwithstanding this, across member states, we see young people that are getting involved.

We are fighting climate change, we are fighting corruption, disinformation, democratic backsliding. We are defending social justice and we are standing up for human rights. We are protesting. We're participating to fight for the causes we believe in. We are providing examples for new forms of organisation. We are creating movements, all while promoting democratic participation in different forms.

Yet all too often, and sometimes even because of that, we are confronted by attacks, exclusion from policy- and decision-making, resulting in ever growing distrust towards the institutions that are supposed to protect our rights.

At last year's Confidence in Tomorrow youth event, it became clear how deeply we care about democracy. How many of us fight, risk our lives, face imprisonment for simply peacefully protesting and risk our freedoms for democracy. Because our civic space is not only shrinking by the minute, by coincidence, it is being attacked.

We are very happy that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has this commitment for youth participation with its new mechanisms. We welcome more of this continued co-operation in the future.

So, but what do we need now, beyond this report?

We need to protect the youth civic space. We need to include it as a standing item in human rights monitoring.

We need to protect our freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, our right to protest and all of our human rights.

We need to invest in youth infrastructure: spaces where young people need to meet and invest in independent youth-led civil society organisations and tackle barriers for youth participation, protecting free media and continuing engagement across all levels of this House and back home.

I thank the Maltese Presidency for bringing this event and for the youth perspective framework that we will adopt next week.

So I really welcome this work that is being done here. I would like to once again say that it is now time for political commitment, because there's nothing else at stake other than democracy.

So let's continue to work together and provide chances for young people to participate and make our societies better.

Thank you.

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

We shall now continue with the list of speakers.

Ms Victoria TIBLOM, you have the floor.

Excuse me, you need to insert your badge and press the button.

Thank you.

Ms Victoria TIBLOM (Sweden, ECPA): Thank you Madam President [in French],

And thank you rapporteur, Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK.

I am confident that I speak for all political parties when I say that we all want and need more young people to get involved in politics. And politics have surely become a bigger part of everybody's life, including young people.

The recently murdered Charlie KIRK had made it his life mission to educate young people about politics and gave everybody the opportunity to make themselves heard, no matter what their political views were.

And I am very sad that we were not able to honor him with a minute of silence, here in the Assembly of the Council of Europe as requested by the European Conservatives, Patriots & Affiliates.

The access to internet and social media has made it easier to for young people all over the world to educate themselves more, even though, unfortunately, TikTok seems to be the main source of information.

But to lower the age of voting to 16, as Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK suggests in her report is not the way to proceed. 18 years is the age to defend your country and also should remain the age for voting.

But all of us political parties have an important part to play regarding our youths, and also to remind them how we make our voices heard in a democratic way. And it is not in the ways of the aggressive left, with violence and hate, but in the spirit of Charlie KIRK by debates and discussions.

And it is a very negative trend with the violent pro-Palestine protests going on all over Europe, completely taking over our streets and the public space. In Sweden it is every single week and every single day outside our parliament.

We will and rightly should listen to the younger generation of Europeans, because it is their future that we are shaping right now. And to give them a better future we need to make the right choices, but also teach them how to make their voices heard in a democratic way.

Merci, madame.

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

Ms Naomi CACHIA, you have the floor.

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

I have been a member of this Assembly for three years now, and I am very happy to note the increased attention on youth participation, especially now that it is one of the priorities of the Maltese Presidency. Because no matter what is going on across our continent, no matter the issues which are rightfully at the very top of our agenda, we must also keep an eye on our young people, on their hopes, their dreams, their aspirations and their fears.

I really enjoyed the use of the term "imaginative builders" in the resolution. The politics of imagination is such a powerful term and really captures the essence of youth movements across the globe. And it is incredibly important that as an Assembly, we are recognising the vital role of youth-led movements which all too often work to remind us of what is at stake when we take our eye off the ball on social justice, on environmental justice, on so many important issues. We need young people to continue setting the agenda, because more often than not, they are the ones getting it right.

When it comes to young people, I believe there is an important currency that is transacted when they are at the very heart of our democracy: hope. Organisations like the Council of Europe must continue to protect young people and pioneer youth policy, to allow them to hope and work for a better future. And in return, their determination gives us - the policymakers - the energy to keep going, working to give hope where hope has been lost. And so I look forward to continuing this discussion next week in Valletta during the Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth. And I truly hope that we continue this discussion way beyond the Maltese Presidency. We've set the tone, but now we're just about to pass on the torch. And as a youth rapporteur, as a young parliamentarian, and also as the youngest head of delegation in this Assembly, I do hope that we continue to engage with young people because we are not only duty bound to do so, but it also makes us stronger.

Thank you.

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

Ms Marija PETRUSHEVSKA, you have the floor.

Ms Marija PETRUSHEVSKA (North Macedonia, EPP/CD): Thank you, Madam President, [in French]

Dear colleagues,

Let me begin by expressing my appreciation for the work of the rapporteur and by underlining my strong support for the initiative “Strengthening the youth perspective in the work of the Parliamentary Assembly”.

I myself began as a young activist, part of the largest political youth organisation in my country.

As we often say: “Once a member of the union of youth forces, always a member of the youth forces.”

I fully agree with the rapporteur that young people across Europe are among the most active defenders when it comes to democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

Yet, in my country's youth movement, we have the example of a brave high school student movement in 1997, six years after our independence from Yugoslavia. To this day, it stands as a testament to the courage of youth, as well as a reminder of the abuse and manipulation of young people during the so-called ‘Colourful Revolution’ in 2016 which will remain among the darker chapters of modern political developments in my country.

We often hear that young people are the future. But I would like to recall the words of Dubravka ŠUICA, the Vice-President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography: “They say ‘young people are the future’... but they’re wrong. Young people are also the present.”

Distinguished colleagues,

As a positive example, let me share that in my country's parliament we have established the Club of Young Parliamentarians, also known as the Club for Youth Policies and Participation.

This is an informal body within the parliament that unites young MPs from across the political spectrum.

As a member of this club, in my first mandate as a parliamentarian, I am especially proud that we adopted an Action Plan through which we reached out to young people at both the local and national levels.

Together with youth, youth organisations and international partners, we launched initiatives that have made the Club of Young MPs recognised, not only as a partner at home, but also across the Western Balkans region.

The message is clear: youth must therefore have a seat at the table, not only when policies directly concern them, but in every domain of public policy.

Thank you.

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

Ms Larysa BILOZIR, you have the floor.

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

Dear colleagues,

I want to thank Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK for this important report on “Youth movements for democracy”. It speaks about how young people across Europe are engaging in politics, participating in drafting resolutions, pioneering new forms of civic participation. This is wonderful. This is how democracy should work.

But I must tell you about a different reality, the reality of Ukrainian youth. Our young people during war face challenges such as protecting their country from Russian aggressors and simply trying to survive. We have thousands of young veterans, boys and girls, who are 19 to 22 years old. They come back from the front line with amputations, without arms and legs, with severe trauma, physical and psychological. Can you imagine young people trying to rebuild their entire life without limbs, learning to live with what they have seen and what they have experienced at war?

In temporary occupied territories, Russia has imprisoned 161 minors, with 48 children placed in forced psychiatric treatment for so-called extremism. Like Maksim LYPKAN, who said the war against Ukraine is disgusting. Denis KHAMIDULLIN, who ended up in psychiatric hospital after shouting “no war!” in central Moscow. Their crime: speaking the truth, being Ukrainian, refusing to accept Russian propaganda. This is the reality of Ukrainian youth, not civic innovation, not participatory budgeting, survival. When we talk about youth

movements for democracy, we must remember that in some parts in Europe, young people cannot even dream about it. They dream about living until tomorrow, about not being tortured for their beliefs, about seeing their families again.

So yes, let us support youth participation, but let us also recognise that for millions of young Ukrainians, the most basic democratic right, the right to life, is under attack every single day. Thank you.

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

Mr Namık TAN, you have the floor.

Mr Namık TAN (Türkiye, SOC): Madam Chair,

Esteemed colleagues,

Youth movements for democracy are not just political acts, they are moral calls to conscience. They remind us that democracy is not a gift from rulers, it is a right that must be claimed, defended and renewed by every generation.

We have seen this in countless corners of the world. In my country, we witnessed it during the Gezi Park protests of 2013. What began as a small gathering to protect trees became a symbol of resistance, a cry for freedom, justice and dignity. The young people in Gezi stood not only against the destruction of a park, but against the silencing of their voices. They showed courage in the face of tear gas and water cannons, proving that hope can never be extinguished by fear.

Today, even in the face of severe democratic backsliding, young people in Türkiye refuse to abandon their demands for democracy. Despite the pressure, they continue to raise their voices for freedom and justice.

These movements around the world carry the same universal message: democracy belongs to the people, not the powerful. And participation, accountability and freedom of expression are not luxuries, but necessities for a just society. But let us also be clear, democracy is fragile. It demands vigilance. It demands that we listen to our youth, not criminalise them. It demands that leaders see criticism not as a threat, but as an opportunity to improve.

Therefore, we must all stand with young people everywhere, demanding a future where human rights are respected and freedom is a reality. Because when the youth rise, democracy rises with them.

Thank you.

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

Mr Theo BOVENS, you have the floor.

Mr Theo BOVENS (Netherlands, EPP/CD): *Merci*, Madam Chair.

Dear colleagues,

I have long hesitated to speak on the topic of youth participation. After all, one could argue that it is primarily the young people themselves who should have the floor when it comes to this subject. And since, as you all can see, I belong more to the senior ranks of Europe - and today I am yet another year older than I was yesterday - that hesitation is quite justified.

And yet, when I joined a political youth organization 48 years ago, at the age of 17, I felt the same ideals that I still hold dear today. It is those ideals that qualify me to take part in this debate, not my age.

I offer my remarks in a spirit of constructive reflection. Because I will soon vote in full conviction in favour of the resolution.

The report devotes considerable attention to non-conformist forms of youth participation: action-oriented engagement, civil disobedience, and extra-parliamentary activism. Young people often approach things differently than established organisations do.

And yet, I want to speak up for the millions of young people who strive to realise their ideals within the framework of existing structures and organisations - from sports clubs to scouting groups. And I continue to encourage young people to join youth organisations affiliated with political parties.

I would also advocate that future actions place even greater emphasis on the digital world: the internet, artificial intelligence, visual culture, and social media. And I wish to highlight that these new forms of communication are creating tension between multilateralism and globalism on the one hand, and rising nationalism on the other. For instance, climate action is often quickly seen as international and global in nature, in conflict with national policies.

Finally, I want to draw attention to the importance of education and preparing young people to become fully-fledged citizens and active participants in civil society. Of course, one could start by lowering the voting age, but in my view, that should be the final step in a broader effort to strengthen civic education across all forms of schooling.

I thank the rapporteur for her important work.

Thank you.

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

Mr Ricardo CARVALHO, you have the floor.

Mr Ricardo CARVALHO (Portugal, EPP/CD): Thank you very much.

Dear President,

Dear colleagues,

Democracy must be defended and renewed by every generation. At a time when Europe faces authoritarian threats, social divides and digital changes, young people stand at the forefront of democratic change.

Across Europe, youth are proving their courage, from Ukraine, to Serbia and Georgia. These movements embody the values we hold dear in the Group of the European People's Party: freedom, responsibility, solidarity and respect for human rights.

But values alone are not enough; they must be turned into action. That means protecting young people's right to speak, protest and organise. It means giving them real seats at the table and ensuring their voices influence local, national and European decisions. It means investing in youth-led initiatives, civic education, and safe spaces where young people can engage, innovate and build trust in democracy.

I believe that democracy thrives when we nurture participation, fight corruption, strengthen the rule of law, and create opportunities for every generation.

Our responsibility is to dismantle the barriers young people face: economic insecurity, digital repression and institutional indifference and replace them with bridges of trust, opportunity and solidarity.

Dear colleagues,

Young people are not just the future of democracy. They are its guardians today. If we empower them, if we stand with them, Europe will not only resist the challenges of our time, it will renew its promise: a continent united in freedom, dignity, justice and hope.

Congrats on your report.

Thank you very much.

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

Mr Sevan SIVACIOĞLU, you have the floor.

Mr Sevan SIVACIOĞLU (Türkiye, NR): Thank you, Madam Chair.

The report we are discussing today is very important. It focuses on strengthening youth participation in democracy and supporting youth movements. Young people play a key role in protecting democratic values, rebuilding trust and keeping peace in society.

Today our world faces many challenges: digital change, social and economic inequalities and environmental crises. In all these areas, the energy and creativity of youth are essential. Young people are not only leaders of tomorrow, they are active contributors today. They help us build more open and innovative democracies.

As the report underlines, youth should not be seen only as listeners. They must also take part in decision-making. To achieve this, we need stronger international co-operation, more space for youth organisations and better opportunities for democratic participation.

At the same time, participation must remain peaceful and constructive.

In Türkiye, young people are very active in politics, culture and civil society. Student unions, youth branches and NGOs all bring fresh ideas and solutions.

The government supports participation while respecting the rule of law and public order.

I believe youth energy and vision is a great value to democracy. They are not just participants, they are drivers of change.

Thank you.

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

Baroness Ruth HUNT, you have the floor.

Baroness Ruth HUNT (United Kingdom, SOC): Madam Chair, honourable colleagues,

I thank the rapporteur for this important report. It reminds us that democracy is not a finished product, but a living, adaptive system. It bends without breaking, but only if each generation is allowed to renew it.

We often hear that young people are apathetic. In truth, I believe this is the most hyper-political generation in decades. They organise, they protest, they build civic labs, climate assemblies and anti-corruption watchdogs.

They are already imagining new forms of democracy.

So why then are some young people tempted by authoritarian movements, when we know they care deeply about climate, justice and freedom?

The uncomfortable answer is this: in my view, they are not rejecting democracy, they are abandoning our narrowed mechanisms of politics, because we have failed to adapt to them.

The evidence is clear. Too often, youth voices are met not with respect but with tokenism, contempt or outright repression: arrests, surveillance, laws that criminalise protests.

Leaders praise free speech in principle, yet restrict it in practice, branding inconvenient dissent as hate speech. This shifting narrative is itself a tool of suppression. Add to this the structural barriers of precarious work, unaffordable housing and crushing tuition fees, and participation becomes harder still.

Stereotyping young activists as naïve or radical only deepens the alienation.

If we want to resist authoritarianism, we must change our way of thinking about young people, not as problems to be managed, but as democratic actors to be trusted. That means protecting their right to dissent, funding their civic spaces and letting their innovations and seemingly 'radical' demands reshape our institutions.

Democracy will not survive by asking young people to conform to old habits, but only if we allow them to be part of democracy's renewal.

If we fail, we fail democracy itself.

Thank you.

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

Ms Meritxell ALCOBÉ, you have the floor.

Ms Meritxell ALCOBÉ (Andorra, ALDE): Thank you, Madam President,

Ladies and gentlemen,

One of the great challenges facing our democracies today is ensuring the active, constant and meaningful participation of young people in political and civic life.

Defending democratic values, particularly in the face of rising authoritarianism, socio-economic exclusion, digital transformation and the climate crisis, must be at the heart of our political agendas. This is why I wish to express my support for the report presented by Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK for her intense and comprehensive commitment to strengthening the perspective of young people in the work of parliamentary institutions.

Last week, Andorra took part in the commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the United Nations World Youth Programme. On this occasion, our head of government reiterated the country's firm commitment to education, sustainable development and multilateralism.

This year, young Andorrans have taken part in international forums organised by ECOSOC, UNESCO and the Model OSCE, becoming true ambassadors for our country while strengthening the bonds of international cooperation.

Ladies and gentlemen, investing in young people is the most powerful tool we have for building fairer, more equal and more sustainable societies.

Young people must be recognised as active citizens in their own right. To achieve this objective, it is essential to strengthen their critical thinking and their autonomy, so that they can make good decisions and participate actively in the life of the community.

Young people across Europe are among the most active defenders of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, bringing an inclusive vision of justice, rights and participation.

The Europe we want for young people depends on the choices we make today.

Andorra aspires to act as a bridge between large and small states, so that we can move forward together towards a fairer, more inclusive and truly democratic future.

Thank you.

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

Ms Saskia KLUIT, you have the floor.

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

I have to say, after Baroness Ruth HUNT spoke so well, what can I say? But yet, I will use some words.

Across Europe, young people are standing up against the injustices of our time. It is indeed a very political generation that is stepping up.

They fight against the genocide in Gaza, they fight against climate change, they fight against the ongoing violence towards women, and most of all, they fight against the lack of political responses of my generation to the requests of their generation.

At the same time, we debate shrinking their civic space. Even today, we try to restrict freedom of speech and we try to make rules for their right to protest.

We have to realise, though, that young people risk the most when they take to the streets, because they have their whole lives for them. They face threats of police violence, they face threats of intimidation, academic repercussions and even criminal or administrative sanctions.

So, youth movements should therefore not only be protected, but they must actively be supported even, and maybe especially, when they are uncomfortable in content to us.

States have a responsibility to provide financial and moral support to all sorts of youth organisations, to facilitate their demonstrations in any awkward or great form that they have. And we have to listen to their voices.

Young people must not only be included in our political and policy decisions and discussions, we must not only talk to them, but they also need to decide because they have the most time in our future. This is especially important as some of those young people are drifting away from democracy.

In online spaces, they are being hunted to leave democracy behind. They are vulnerable to online radicalisation.

I hope, therefore, that our Parliamentary Assembly will give strong support to the report of Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK, and we can all have a flourishing democracy with young people ahead of us.

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

Ms Arusyak JULHAKYAN, you have the floor.

Ms Arusyak JULHAKYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD): Thank you Madam Chair,

Dear colleagues,

Young people are not only the hope of tomorrow, but also the leaders of change today. Across Europe, our region and around the world, young people continue to face significant obstacles, courageously challenging authoritarianism, defending human rights and demanding inclusive participation in decision-making processes. Their energy, creativity and struggle remind us that democracy is a living, breathing process that requires constant nurturing and protection.

In Armenia, we have witnessed first-hand the transformative power of youth activism. The peaceful Velvet Revolution of 2018 was fuelled by young citizens determined to end corruption and build a democratic future based on transparency and justice. As a result, now we have the second youngest parliament in the world.

Colleagues,

We must not only listen to young people's voices, but also empower them through concrete mechanisms. In this context, I would like to note that earlier this year, the Armenian Parliament adopted the Youth Policy Law, which gave new impetus to the empowerment of young people and the promotion of their participation in processes in Armenia.

The Council of Europe and its member states play an important role in supporting youth movements. For this, I am grateful to my colleagues at the Council of Europe for their role and work on youth issues.

We must continue creating a safe environment where young people can participate freely and without fear.

As an Armenian MP, I reaffirm our commitment to these principles. Armenia is committed to promoting youth engagement as a cornerstone of our democratic development. We will work with our partners at the Council of Europe to implement the report's recommendations, and create a society where every young person has the opportunity to contribute to our shared democratic future.

Thank you.

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

Ms Shelby KRAMP-NEUMAN, you have the floor.

Ms Shelby KRAMP-NEUMAN (Canada): *Merci*, Madam Chair.

Esteemed colleagues,

It is an honour for me to speak to you today at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and to participate in this important debate on youth movements for democracy. I would like to thank the rapporteur, Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK, for the invaluable amount of time and effort she committed to drafting this very informative report.

It provides multiple interesting instances of how young people are currently politically active across the Council of Europe region. The rapporteur cites examples from her own country, Ukraine, where, through their volunteerism, young people have been key pillars of resilience in their war-torn communities. They are also helping to rebuild Ukraine and advance its path towards European Union membership.

It is clear from the report that young people can, and do, make a tremendous difference through their participation in the wider political and social sphere. As a mother of two teenage daughters, it disappoints me when I recently read that a majority of respondents to an international public opinion poll said that they lack optimism for the next generation.

In this respect, I would like to point you to another very illuminating paragraph in rapporteur Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK's report. She writes that young people are not merely participants in democracy, "they are among its most active defenders and imaginative builders. (...) Their actions show that democracy must be lived, contested and renewed by every generation."

We experienced this earlier this year in Canada; across our vast nation youth of all ages took roles in our campaigns of all political stripes, providing unique perspectives and sources of information that we would not traditionally get.

We should always remember that democracy is not a finished, done deal. It is an ongoing, evolving process, in which we must continually draw new life and energy.

Getting involved in politics at a young age is one of the most powerful ways to shape the future. Politics isn't just for seasoned leaders, it thrives when young people step up to advocate for change, hold power accountable and create a society that reflects their values.

Youth need to volunteer. Youth need to ask questions.

Your age is not your limitation, it's your advantage. The earlier you engage, the greater your impact can be.

Merci. Thank you.

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

Ms Olena MOSHENETS, you have the floor.

Ms Olena MOSHENETS (Ukraine, ALDE): I'd like to thank rapporteur Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK for preparing this resolution and highlighting the issue of youth involvement in political processes.

I am aware of the importance of this issue from my own experience. On a regular basis, I hold lectures for students from Ukraine. For me, this is not just a gesture of support. It is an example of how politicians can open doors to a new generation. I offer internships and job opportunities for the most active ones. And today one of them, Daria, is here at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe with me. We have collaborated for more than four years already. It is evidence of how our youth broadens our horizons and brings new insights to politics and democracy.

I would like to emphasise that each of us has the tools and the duty to encourage young people to actively participate in politics, both at the level of the national parliaments and within the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. This is not only an investment in the future, but also a guarantee that democracy will live and develop.

Another important proposal of the resolution is to establish quotas for young people in political parties and institutions. Ukraine has the youngest parliament in the history of its independence. One of the members of parliament was only 23 years old at the time of election. Overall, the average age of members of the Ukrainian parliament of this convocation has decreased by seven years.

And finally the war: the lives and plans of Ukrainian youth have been turned upside down by the full-scale invasion. About 2 million young people have left the country because of the war. I am sincerely grateful to the countries that have welcomed Ukrainians and provided them with opportunities to study, work and develop.

Thank you very much. We must support this resolution and guarantee the rights and freedoms of young people.

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

Ms Marianne BINDER-KELLER, you have the floor.

Ms Marianne BINDER-KELLER...

You need to insert your badge and press the button. Thank you.

Ms Marianne BINDER-KELLER (Switzerland, EPP/CD): Thank you President, colleagues,

Thank you very much for this well-founded and well-researched report, which is urgently needed and hits the nerve of both the vulnerability of our democracies and their strengths.

Why vulnerability? Demographic change is evident. The population is getting older and the proportion of older people in society as a whole is increasing.

What does that mean for elections? The fact that the voices of older people are overriding those of young people, and the voices of young people are in danger of being marginalised is fatal for democracy, because the future is being shaped today. It is therefore fundamental that older people must take the concerns of their children and grandchildren into account in their voting behaviour. This is the responsibility of all of us, in the spirit of intergenerational justice. We will not live forever, even if we want to.

At the same time, however, we are also seeing that young people are not getting involved enough themselves and that disenchantment with politics is spreading.

On the other hand, where do the strengths of democracy lie? In this very youth, in political movements led by young people. They become a driving force for the defence and renewal of democratic values, human rights and the rule of law.

Young people ask uncomfortable questions and demand change where stagnation would be dangerous. Without this impetus, our democracy loses its political strength.

One key to this is political education. We need schools that enable children and young people to take a stand. We need parents who support political education. It should not be a side issue, but a core component of every democracy.

In my opinion, the Council of Europe has the task of strengthening such processes, supporting programmes that support youth movements and making the concerns of young people heard.

So thank you for this initiative and this report, which I can fully support.

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

Ms Patricia STEPHENSON, you have the floor.

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

And thank you, Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK, for this report.

Often, when we speak about the role of youth in democracy, we're always framing it in terms of the future.

But across Europe today we see young people, very much in the present, protesting and organising in defence of their political and their civil rights, and demanding transparency and accountability from their leaders, from their representatives, from us.

And we see them protesting, whether that's climate change, whether it's the genocide in Gaza, whether it's the housing crises that are affecting, I'm sure, all of our countries, including my own, quite deeply.

Young people are the ones that are leading the way. They're mobilising segments of society to support their movements. And their resilience is not only an inspiration to themselves in their own countries, but it has this incredibly important transnational impact as well.

As the report highlights, online platforms allow youth movements to take inspiration and learn from others, sharing ideas and approaches and creating new modes of mobilising to advance democracy. And this is incredibly positive.

However, of course, the downside of that is in addition to being met with tear gas, sound cannons, and violence in the streets, the repression follows them into the digital space.

It is important that we protect young people and call out instances when their rights to freedom of expression, the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and the right to privacy are being systematically violated.

But we also must not let the streets or social media be the only places young people feel they can have their voices heard.

As the report rightfully points out, institutional attempts to include young people can often be seen as tick-box exercises, and they don't offer an opportunity to shape policy or its implementation.

The "institutional gate-keeping" is a result of a reluctance to potentially disrupt the status quo.

And if we get past that reluctance, or perhaps also that fear that we might have, we might end up with the same result that many generations in the past have had: a more just, youthful and inclusive society, and to me that sounds like an incredibly positive thing.

I would like to add that I very much welcome the recommendation to lower the voting age to 16. In Ireland, you can pay taxes at the age of 16, so I do believe you should be able to decide and define how those taxes are spent.

Democratic decisions and outcomes will affect the lives of 16 year olds just as much as they'll affect you and me, if not indeed more so.

Go raibh maith agat.

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

Ms Luz MARTINEZ SEIJO, you have the floor.

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

Dear Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK, thank you very much for your report because it is necessary to speak on behalf of a generation that feels more and more disconnected every day. Not because they're not interested, but because they feel excluded. Our youth is not leaving democracy behind, they're worried that democracy might be leaving *them* behind.

The economic situation is also making this democratic disconnect even worse. Many young people are faced with insecure work, unaffordable housing and limited access to decision-making spheres. When democracy doesn't offer opportunities, there is a risk that it will lose its legitimacy. Throughout the whole of Europe we can see the same panorama.

Look at the European elections of 2024: only 36% of voters aged under 25 turned out to vote. And that's six points down from the previous record in 2019.

According to a Eurobarometer survey, 28% of the young people who did not turn out to vote cited 'lack of interest'. Others mentioned that they did not have confidence in the system: they felt disillusioned; they felt that their voices didn't matter. And yet young people are not quiet: they lead climate strikes, they organise digital campaigns, they build civic platforms which challenge traditional narratives.

They are redefining democracy. They're certainly not abandoning democracy.

Throughout the whole of Europe, youth movements are calling for transparency, justice, inclusion. They're using art, storytelling, technology in order to break with the status quo and in order to build new civic infrastructures.

Your report highlights precisely these trends. It documents how movements led by young people are breathing new life into democracy. They're doing that through transnational solidarity, horizontal leadership and civic innovation.

Your report also talks about the shrinking civic space. It talks about digital surveillance and the institutional barriers that act as an impediment to youth participation.

If we want to be up to the task, we need to do more than just applaud the courage of young people.

We need to embed their participation in our institutions, and that means allowing young people to get involved earlier and more meaningfully in the construction of their own future, starting with schools.

It means also incorporating youth representation in our own political bodies, not just as tokenism, but in the form of quotas.

I very much hope that this will be what we choose to do for the way forward.

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

Ms Nerea AHEDO, you have the floor.

Ms Nerea AHEDO? Thank you.

You must insert your badge.

Ms Nerea AHEDO (Spain, ALDE)*: Yes, young people are not the future, young people are the present. They are citizens and we have seen a radical cultural change. We have seen a change in the way in which they express their concerns, the way in which they organise themselves. For example, when it comes to climate change, local is becoming global. And that is why it is important that we pay heed to these movements, the way in which they organise themselves and choose to participate. And I agree with pretty much everything that's been said by the speakers in the debate so far.

Now Paragraph 1 of the report tells us that the last year's youth-led movements have emerged as vital forces in defence renewal and democratic values. They are absolutely essential. But I'm worried about how many young people are actually involved, what percentage of young people are actually in these youth-led movements, because the figures don't actually bear out the optimism or positivity of the report. There's actually been a fall-off in interest in politics, disaffection with institutions, young people who do not feel they are represented.

That is why I think there is perhaps a missing link here in what we do. And even though they're convinced that they have achieved certain rights, they are not interested in defending them and fall prey to populist, radical and anti-system movements. For example, in Spain, 40% of men aged between 18 and 34 support the extreme right, so authoritarianism, against the democratic values we hold so dear.

This is not peculiar to young people. Rather, we have to face up to the problem of these movements in Europe and the sections of young people who are seduced by them.

So we need to look at organised, democratic movements because that is what we're missing here.

I think that we are forgetting something important and, of course, democracy depends on them, so what are we to do?

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

Mr Georgios STAMATIS, you have the floor.

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

I'm very pleased to have some young people amongst us today.

This report, and I'd like to congratulate the rapporteur, shows something which is simple, but in many countries is not a given.

We have the repression of the protest marchers, of the young people. Young people who take to the streets for better jobs, to create families, to find where to live and to have more democracy than the one we've already created.

This report is not for us, it's for them. We invite them, as we invite the member states, mainly to see what the youth is seeking.

Democracy has to be part of schools. It has to be in absolutely everything that some countries are trying to repress. It has to enter the universities too. We have to listen carefully to young people.

What we're trying to do today is to create a better future in terms of human rights for these people.

I believe this, that Europe and the people that we represent here, the political parties and the national parliaments have to listen to them. They have to listen to the young people, not when they're out in the streets only, they have to listen to them when they legislate, when they vote for the lives of these young people. Because that is how the gap is created, that is how the distance is created.

In the end, young people listening to the voices of populism might turn radical. So I think that we need to support what young people want for a better tomorrow. In the end we're here for that exact purpose, to create a better future for them, with them.

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

Ms Jurgita ŠUKEVIČIENĖ, you have the floor.

Ms Jurgita ŠUKEVIČIENĖ (Lithuania, SOC): Dear Madam President,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today we are talking about an essential subject: the role of young people in defending democracy.

Around the world, youth movements are rising up to protect freedom, the rule of law and human dignity. Their energy, creativity and courage remind us that democracy can never be taken for granted and must be lived and defended every day.

This resolution underlines the importance of the role of young people in protecting democratic values and calls on member states to strengthen the rights of young people and involve them fully in decision-making, including by reducing the voting age to 16. It also calls for sufficient funding to be guaranteed for civic infrastructure and citizenship education.

Lithuania attaches particular importance to this issue.

Our own history teaches us that it is often young people who have been at the forefront of democratic change. In the 1980s and 1990s, the youth movement played an important role in the fight for democratic independence, where thousands of young Lithuanians mobilised peacefully for freedom. This collective memory continues to inspire us today.

In practical terms, Lithuania has adopted several initiatives to strengthen youth participation. We are developing local and national youth councils, encouraging voluntary work and supporting civic organisations run by young people. Our education system is placing increasing emphasis on civic education so that young people know their rights and responsibilities from an early age.

Giving young people a real voice is not a symbolic gesture. It's an investment in the democratic future of our societies. It means recognising that democracy needs everyone, regardless of age.

I fully support this resolution.

Thank you very much.

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

Mr Ionuț-Marian STROE, you have the floor.

Mr Ionuț-Marian STROE (Romania, EPP/CD): Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear colleagues,

Across Europe and beyond, young people are stepping forward as determined defenders of democracy. They refuse to accept a shrinking civic space, or that politics should remain the privilege of the few. Instead, they bring new forms of engagement, from creative protests and digital campaigns to participatory budgeting and civic labs where ideas turn into action. These young people are driven by the belief that democracy must be lived, not just inherited. They remind us that democracy is renewed each time a new generation dares to raise its voice.

And yet, in too many countries, these defenders are met with suspicion, harassment and even sanctions. And yet, peaceful protest is treated as a threat, and digital activism as a crime. Such reactions weaken democracy itself. Youth voices are not a passing wave of protest. They are the living heartbeat of democracy.

If we want democracy to endure, we must not fear these voices; we must amplify them. We must open our parliaments and councils to young representatives and provide them with civic education, with resources, and with real decision-making power.

Thank you very much.

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

Ms Aysu BANKOĞLU, you have the floor.

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

And I also would like to thank the rapporteur for his vital report.

Indeed, freedom of speech for young people and youth movements is not only a right; it is the lifeblood of democracy and the safeguard of rights and the engine of civic participation.

While welcoming the attention given to youth activism, I must draw special attention to the situation in Türkiye. Young people in Türkiye are both the brightest hope and the heaviest burden of our democracy, of course. But after the arrest of opposition presidential candidate Ekrem İMAMOĞLU on 19 March, peaceful youth protests were brutally suppressed. More than 2 000 young people were arrested – many unlawfully – amid severe police violence and systematic violations of human rights.

Among those targeted was Enes HOCAOĞULLARI, a youth delegate who spoke in this very Parliamentary Assembly, arrested merely for exercising free expression. Young people are prosecuted for their social media posts under vague charges.

But repression is not confined to courtrooms or police stations. Also, students struggle to meet their basic needs, such as unbearable rents, overcrowded dormitories and scholarships. Many are forced to work long hours in precarious jobs just to afford basic education costs.

Women students, LGBTI+ youth and those from minority backgrounds face additional layers of discrimination and insecurity, both on campuses and in public life.

But anyway, the youth – they resist. Their courage remains our strongest democratic force, of course.

As a youth rapporteur, I'm fully aware of the struggle the youth face in Türkiye, in Serbia, in Georgia, of course, in Europe.

We still, we will, and we should stand by them.

We should support their rightful actions and their courageous fight for democracy, my friends.

Thank you.

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

I must now interrupt the list of speakers.

Registered speakers who are present in the Chamber but have not yet spoken may do so within four hours by sending their typed speech in electronic format to the Table Office for publication in the official report. It should not exceed 400 words.

I now call on the rapporteur to reply.

Mrs Yevheniia KRAVCHUK, you have the floor. You have three minutes.

Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK (Ukraine, ALDE, Rapporteur): *Madame la Présidente,*

Thank you, dear colleagues, for this debate.

I still see a lot of people in the list who wanted to speak, so maybe, indeed, you could publish your speech.

Actually, I have a short video for the young people of your country, just explaining about the debates and what you wanted to say and what you feel and what we have voted, because that's what communication is about. And I mean I carefully listened and I haven't heard any of the speakers saying that we should not involve young people, that we should be closed to what they think.

And I truly agree with Mr Georgios STAMATIS's statement. For the first time, I've heard him speak in Greek in this Assembly – it's a great opportunity. He said that it's too late when the young people are on the streets. We should listen to them before taking such decisions that would lead to the streets. And I think this is very important.

So I will not take too long. About the vote at 16, it was already in the documents of this Assembly before, and it has a very mild version saying "consider", and of course, it's at the discretion of the national parliaments and countries to make these changes or not make these changes. But I guess the discussion about it is also important, and to hear from the countries that already introduced these decisions is also important for the overall exchange.

So thank you. It's my pleasure to present this report, and I would like to announce that we will have another report on youth participation that will probably cover some questions that you said or issues that you said could be written more in this report, and we will wait for Ms Sona GHAZARYAN and my colleague to present it during the January session.

So, thank you. Please support it.

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

Does the Vice-Chairman of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and the Media, Mr Mehmet AKALIN, wish to take the floor?

Please go ahead.

Mr Mehmet AKALIN (Türkiye, ALDE, Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Dear colleagues,

On behalf of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media, it is my honour to present our views on this timely report on Youth Movements for Democracy, prepared with dedication by our rapporteur, Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK.

Across our member states, it is often young women and men who stand at the forefront of democratic life. They mobilise in their communities, create innovative forms of participation and defend rights and freedoms, even in the face of repression. Their courage and creativity remind us that democracy is not static. It must be renewed and lived by every generation.

The Committee fully supports the findings of this report. We agree that governments must not respond to youth civic engagement with repression or indifference, but with recognition, protection and support.

Safeguarding their right to peaceful assembly and association, repealing laws that criminalise protest and ending politically motivated arrests are essential measures to defend democracy itself.

The report also urges member states to institutionalise youth participation, lowering the voting age to 16, ensuring youth representation in parliaments and councils and promoting intergenerational solidarity.

Those are not symbolic gestures. They are investments in the legitimacy and resilience of our democratic system.

Supporting youth-led initiatives and civic infrastructure is equally vital. Independent media, community spaces, legal clinics and participatory education equip young people to propose solutions as well as to protest. They are indispensable building blocks of democratic resilience.

Colleagues,

Youth movements are not a threat to order, but the force for renewal. They bring energy, vision and a sense of justice that Europe cannot afford to ignore.

The Council of Europe has long championed youth participation, but today we must deepen that commitment. We must treat youth civic space with the same urgency other human rights concerns and mainstream the youth perspective in all our work.

I urge you to give strong support to this resolution and recommendation, and to call on all our member states to implement them without delay.

By standing with Europe's youth, we stand for the future of democracy itself.

Thank you.

Mr Angelo IACONO (Canada): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Valued colleagues,

In Canada, like in most countries in Europe, youth tend to vote at lower rates than older citizens. Despite this, analysis indicates that young people are among the most active participants in other forms of civic engagement in Canada.

The report we are debating today identifies emerging trends for youth democratic engagement. To better promote youth participation, I believe that we must first understand those trends.

Recent research in Canada shows that youth are more active in nontraditional activities such as:

taking part in protests and demonstrations;

participating in community activities, such as volunteering; and

engaging in digital advocacy, particularly through social media.

On this last point, young people are more likely than any other group to use online spaces for civic engagement.

Of note, in Canada, almost half of people under 30 years old follow politicians and candidates online, interact with them on social media, and use social networks to discuss political issues.

However, while social media have created powerful new avenues for youth engagement, they have also become accelerators of polarization and conduits for disinformation.

In short, we are witnessing a clear generational shift in the way citizens engage with politics. This shift is unfolding within an increasingly polarized environment.

Therefore, I believe that engaging youth requires an approach that recognizes the diverse ways young people participate in democratic life.

To foster a healthy and resilient democracy, we must meet younger citizens where they are.

Youth should be empowered to shape the future of our democratic systems.

Thank you for your kind attention.

Mr Dimitrios MANTZOS (Greece, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Thank you, Chair.

Youth movements are inextricably linked with the history of Europe.

I come from a country where young people have always been at the forefront of movements for democracy. Since students stood up against a dictatorial regime in 1973, the history of my country -as many other countries in Europe- has much to say about young people who refuse to remain silent in the face of injustice.

All over Europe, young people organize, discuss, and take action.

In the face of authoritarianism, aggression, poverty, inequalities.

They are restless.

They discuss how to make their cities, their universities, their schools, and their countries better.

Young people, from one end of Europe to the other, gather and organize around the issues that concern them: they fight for good jobs and wages, affordable housing, technological convergence, social justice. They fight against wars, against climate change.

Young people demand that their voices be heard. They are politically active. They are so tired of political elites, detached from reality, trying to pose as youth-friendly by mimicking social media trends.

Young generations have their political views and aspirations, that need to be met with care and approval -not indifference or even hostility.

We have to commit ourselves in safeguarding youth rights and dismantling any barriers of access to political life.

After all, in essence, “democracy” –a Greek word in itself, δημοκρατία- means power to the people.

Not through shallow populism, but through real participation.

Young people are the driving force of democracy.

Let them have their say, let us hear what they have to say.

Mr Aleksandar MIRKOVIĆ (Serbia, EPP/CD): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

It is a serious mistake, in an effort to cite as many positive examples as possible, to end up using one that is not the best and thus cast a shadow over this resolution.

As I have said today, I urge you not to turn into heroes people who commit violence, who break the law and who stand for everything contrary to what PACE represents.

In paragraph 3.2 you have put forward assertions that are simply not correct.

Young people did not demand elections; on the contrary, they consistently rejected them. President Vučić offered elections for six months, but the protesters refused, saying — and I quote — “we are not interested in elections, nor in politics, neither in government nor in opposition; we have our own struggle.”

When the protests began to subside of their own accord after 15 March, they then called for elections in order to revive those protests.

They have not united people; rather, they have created a deep division, especially among young people.

Anyone who wanted to live a normal life, study, take exams, finish school, was branded a traitor, enemy, and was often even physically assaulted.

There is no repression: the police merely act within their powers, and far more leniently than you act in your countries.

While you beat people who are peacefully marching, you criticise us for the police attempting to withstand attacks involving flares and stones.

Being young does not entitle anyone to break the law without being punished for it.

They did not cycle all the way to Strasbourg. They cycled only a few kilometres before their reception so that the media could film it; for the remainder of the journey they were transported by vans. There is a video.

Speaking about the rights of young people, please how are you to reassure the young people in Serbia who are not part of the protests that you wish them well, if you support those who deny them the right to study and who harass them?

Can you imagine, in your countries, professors being beaten simply for doing their job?

Can you imagine politics entering primary schools, even preschools, where children are treated differently depending on whether their parents support or oppose the authorities?

You cannot. Therefore, I ask you, in future, not to rely on examples that you have not verified, so that a sound resolution is not remembered for inaccuracies.

Mr Mihail MITOV (Bulgaria, EPP/CD): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Thank you Chair, Dear Colleagues,

As a young representative of Bulgaria and part of Generation Z, I strongly support the report presented by Ms. Kravchuk.

History has shown that each new era brings both opportunities and challenges. Today, we are witnessing the digital evolution. Artificial intelligence, mass information, and social media are reshaping our world. But while these tools connect us, they also create “social bubbles” that increase separation, weakens critical thinking, and threatens democracy. As such, the alienation between young people and civil structures contributes to populism and conspiracy. Making it increasingly hard for people to separate truth from propaganda.

Today we are facing the biggest population of people under the age of 30. This is why youth participation is vital for the protection of democracy. Ensuring meaningful youth representation in parliaments and local councils is key to renewing democracy. We should also consider multi-age electoral lists, and national policies addressing unemployment and education costs. Additionally, the provision of accessible sport and leisure will foster personal development and social inclusion. These steps will empower young people to contribute actively to the society.

In this regard, I would like to share the Bulgarian perspective. While in many countries youth spaces are shrinking, in Bulgaria we are investing 50 million euros in building 18 new youth centers. Together with the existing eight, this will form a stable national network of youth spaces, strengthening capacity and creating potential. The country has recently adopted the Youth Work Roadmap, but equally we have to equip young people with critical thinking skills to resist disinformation. This will be one of Bulgaria’s key messages at the Council of Europe meeting of youth ministers in Malta next week.

To sum up, democracy can only survive if the next generation is not just included, but empowered and equally involved.

Thank you.

Mr Ioannis OIKONOMOU (Greece, EPP/CD): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

The participation of young people in political processes touches the core of a major challenge for Europe: the quality and resilience of Democracy.

Unlike what happened for many decades after the Second World War, today’s young people face additional obstacles in their pursuit of happiness: a society where inequalities are widening, a labor market that discriminates against the young, a social protection system forced to support a demographically aging population, and a housing market inaccessible to those without strong financial backing.

As a result, on the one hand, the cohesive glue that kept so many different generations and cultures loyal to the same narrative has dissolved.

And on the other hand, young people have little trust in institutions, in executive power; they become alienated from party mechanisms and from electoral processes.

This does not mean that young people are indifferent to politics. The way they express politics has changed. Young people fill theaters, concert venues, festivals, and public discussions with a strong political tone, without this being connected to membership in political parties.

They are protagonists in debates on social media.

And here caution is needed. Their political participation should not be limited only to these spaces, or even worse, be substituted by them.

The deeper their withdrawal from active, living politics, the more frequently they will tend to prefer either populists or tough and controversial leaders who defy constitutional rules, ethics, and the institutions that safeguard fundamental freedoms.

We therefore need mechanisms for the permanent participation of young people, with real responsibilities, not just advisory ones, that will lead to binding proposals.

We need safe and transparent participation platforms that allow young people to co-shape policies, express ideas, and hold institutions accountable.

Finally, we need investment in education for democracy. Democratic education is not just a subject for school classrooms, but a continuous experience. From local student councils to internships in parliaments and municipalities, young people must experience democracy in practice, not only be taught it theoretically.

Mr Sam RUSHWORTH (United Kingdom, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

I welcome this report, not only because it recognises the need to amplify youth voices in our democracies, but because it calls on us to do so in ways that are meaningful and inclusive.

Youth participation only works when all young people can take part, not just the few with confidence, resources, or connections, and when they are not only listened to but have the power to change outcomes.

We sometimes talk about "the youth" perspective, as though there is one hegemonic view; but young people are not all the same. They have intersecting identities and diverse perspectives.

Too often, what we call "youth engagement" ends up being a box-ticking exercise. It benefits the already privileged, while excluding marginalised voices, ethnic minorities, disabled, neurodivergent, LGBTQ+, in care, and from lower-income backgrounds.

And this goes to the heart of concerns expressed so well by my colleague, Baroness Hunt, about young people being drawn to the far right, young people hold diverse, sometimes conflicting views, and when they feel ignored or disrespected, far right narratives can be seductive.

Democracy is not built by listening to the loudest; it is strengthened by reaching those least heard. But that takes effort. It takes funding. And a commitment to building structures that don't just invite young people in but give them power to shape decisions.

Secondly, I want to express my support for the report's call to lower the voting age to 16 across the Council of Europe. This is something our new Labour government has committed to doing in the UK, joining Austria and Malta, where evidence shows earlier voting leads to a stronger habit of civic engagement as they grow older.

Critics have accused us of "vote rigging". But let's be honest: the real beneficiaries of this change won't be any one party. It will be young people themselves. Because when 16- and 17-year-olds can vote, politicians are forced to take their views seriously, on climate, housing, education, jobs. And that is long overdue.

Right now in the UK, the share of national wealth held by under-40s has halved since 2010. Young people are locked out of home ownership, burdened by debt, and facing a climate crisis not of their making. And yet they are systematically underrepresented in politics.

It's time to change that. Let's give young people not just a voice, but a vote, and a real stake in shaping the future.

Ms Maria-Nefeli CHATZIOANNIDOU (Greece, EPP/CD): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Thank you Mr. President,

Dear Colleagues,

Dear rapporteur,

As a young parliamentarian from Greece, the birthplace of democracy, I warmly welcome the report "Youth movements for democracy" and its clarity in recognising young people not only as participants but as defenders and innovators of democracy. Democracy is not a relic of the past, it is a living concept.

Across Europe, young people are proving that democracy is not just inherited, it is built and rebuilt every day and we see movements led by students, activists, and volunteers shaping politics in real time.

Polarization, disinformation, and declining trust in institutions are shaping a landscape where the voices of young people can either be the catalyst for renewal or, if neglected, another victim of democratic fatigue.

What this draft resolution underlines, is that the participation of young people is not a matter of symbolic inclusion. It is a structural necessity for resilient democracies.

Yet the obstacles remain formidable. I know first-hand the skepticism and condescension that young politicians often face. I know how quickly experience can be questioned simply because of age. Young people are too often stereotyped as naïve, too radical, or easily manipulated. These labels are not harmless, they delegitimize youth movements and discourage participation.

And let me say this very clearly: when we dismiss the engagement of young people, we are not protecting democracy, we are weakening it.

This is precisely why the Council of Europe and every institution has such a unique role to play.

What does this mean practically? First, it means protecting the civic space of young people. Second, it means mainstreaming a youth perspective in policymaking. Third, it means supporting youth-led initiatives with real resources. Safe spaces, independent online platforms, youth-led media, and civic education are essential. If we fail to invest here, we risk leaving young people vulnerable to disinformation and disengagement.

Youth participation is essential because young people represent renewal, resilience, and the capacity to reimagine democratic practice. Youth brings fresh perspectives, technological fluency, and a strong sense of justice shaped by today's global challengesstrengthening this way the quality, legitimacy, and future orientation of our democratic institutions.

This Assembly has a duty not JUST to listen, but to walk beside them and to amplify their voice. Democracy is at its strongest when every generation claims it, shapes it, and renews it. If we empower youth, open doors and reform our frameworks, then Europe's democratic future will not only be secure, it will be vibrant and resilient.

Thank you.

Ms Leigh INGHAM (United Kingdom, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

I thank the Rapporteur for setting out this important debate.

When we speak about youth and democracy, too often the responsibility is placed on young people themselves: to show interest, to get involved, to step up for a system that they don't feel steps up for them. As lawmakers, it is our most crucial responsibility to take democracy to young people and make it real in their lives.

Upon my election as MP for Stafford last summer, I was determined to ensure I was able to share as many opportunities as I could with young people across my constituency. I organised a Summer School for young people from a wide range of backgrounds, focussing on those who would be unlikely to have opportunities like this in their lives, those who are care experienced, those entitled to free school meals etc. I and my team devised a week of interactive sessions, helping them learn about campaigning, what happens in Westminster, political activism, and how to make their voices heard.

For one of those days, they were in Westminster, where they met our Speaker of the House, Lindsay Hoyle, they spent time with our Chancellor of the Exchequer (the first woman to ever hold that office) Rachel Reeves, and the Secretary of State responsible for Youth Services - Lisa Nandy. They had genuine conversations with leaders and were heard by the most senior voices in government. And I know those conversations mattered because Ministers have mentioned them to me since then.

The report makes it clear that governments must recognise, support and protect the engagement of young people in democracy.

I want to speak in particular support of the recommendation in 4.2.2, which discusses lowering the voting age to 16. At the last UK general election, I stood on the platform of my party manifesto which promised to give 16-year-olds the vote, and they have followed through. 16-year-olds will be able to vote at our next general election.

We have to go to our young people, meet them in the middle, and make sure they know that this is their future they're fighting for.

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

Ladies and gentlemen,

A terrible tragedy occurred almost a year ago in Serbia, which triggered violent protests and blockades. Instead of mourning the victims of the tragedy, we have faced terrible violence. Instead of engaging in dialogue, protestants blockaded roads and bridges, attacking police and attacking political party offices.

The President of the Republic of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, repeatedly called for dialogue with students. These invitations were ignored, and protests radicalized.

On 15 March, President Vučić publicly stated that he was ready to organize early parliamentary elections. Student movements also rejected this offer.

The President again, in August, invited to dialogue. They declined this invitation.

In Serbia, there was an attempt at a color revolution, similar to what already happened in North Macedonia. It hid behind student movements without names or faces, and created anarchy.

If it is acceptable to you that students who resort to violence and refuse dialogue should run the country, be my guest, but that is not the solution.

Ms Lianne ROOD (Canada): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Honourable colleagues,

I would like to thank Rapporteur Kravchuk for the report we are debating today.

Today we debate the question of how best to strengthen youth participation in our democratic life. Some suggest, like the report before us mentions, that we lower the voting age to 16. Personally, I do not believe that is the right approach. Lowering the voting age is like handing a young driver the keys to a Ferrari before they've learned how to drive. For the young driver it may feel like a thrill, but for everyone else it is dangerous, and any rational observer would call it irresponsible.

Several years ago, I voted against a bill in our House of Commons that would have lowered the voting age for precisely that reason. Instead of lowering the bar, we should be raising up the next generation of citizens through education.

As Rapporteur Kravchuk's report rightly recommends, we must embed civics education into school curricula and equip young people with the values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge they need to participate meaningfully in democratic life.

The most recent Canadian election showed something remarkable to prove this. Younger Canadians, especially first-time voters, broke away from the old Liberal consensus and overwhelmingly voted Conservative.

That tells us something important. Young people are rejecting tired Liberal policies of debt, division, and decline. They want common sense. They want freedom. They want opportunity. That is the generational shift we are witnessing.

We see this trend around the world. In Europe, young voters have been turning toward parties that stand for sovereignty, responsibility, and prosperity. They know that big government and endless bureaucracy have failed their parents' generation, and they do not want to inherit more of the same.

I have seen this change with my own eyes. Whenever I visit schools to speak with students, I see a growing excitement to engage in political discussion. Youth ask tough, smart questions. They want to understand how Parliament works, and how their voices matter. That interest does not come from lowering the voting age, it comes from empowering them with knowledge and inviting them into the conversation.

Conservatism is the future of democracy, because we stand with young Canadians who are ready to shape their countries with morals and courage.

Thank you.

Vote: Youth movements for democracy

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

The general debate is closed.

The Committee on Culture, Science, Education and the Media has presented a draft resolution (Document 16239), to which two amendments have been tabled, and a draft recommendation (Document 16239), to which no amendments have been tabled.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would remind you that the speaking time for each amendment is limited to 30 seconds.

We shall begin by examining the draft resolution.

I have been informed that the Vice-Chairman of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and the Media wishes to propose to the Parliamentary Assembly that Amendments 1 and 2 to the draft resolution, which were adopted unanimously by the Committee, be deemed adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly.

Is this the case, Mr Mehmet AKALIN?

If no one objects, I consider the amendments to have been adopted definitively. If there is an objection, we will have to check that it has the required support of 10 people. Is there any objection?

I see no objection.

Amendments 1 and 2 to the draft resolution are therefore adopted definitively.

We shall now proceed to vote on the draft resolution contained in Document 16239 (as amended). A simple majority is required.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The draft resolution contained in Document 16239 (as amended) is therefore adopted.

We shall now proceed to consider the draft recommendation contained in Document 16239, to which no amendments have been tabled.

We shall now proceed to vote on the draft recommendation contained in Document 16239. A two-thirds majority is required.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be posted.

The draft recommendation contained in Document 16239 is adopted.

Debate under urgent procedure: Draft convention establishing an international claims commission for Ukraine

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Good afternoon, everyone.

The next item of business this afternoon is a debate under urgent procedure on the "Draft convention establishing an international claims commission for Ukraine", which is Document 16270, presented by Lord Richard KEEN on behalf of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights.

To be finished on time by 5:55 p.m., I will interrupt the list of speakers at about 5:45 p.m. to allow for time for the reply and the vote.

I will give Lord Richard KEEN, as the rapporteur, you have 7 minutes now, but you don't have to use everything, of course, and then 3 minutes at the end to reply to the debate.

Please.

Lord Richard KEEN (United Kingdom, ECPA, Rapporteur): President,

Colleagues,

I'm pleased to be able to introduce my report on the draft Convention Establishing an International Claims Commission for Ukraine.

The Council of Ministers will seek to adopt this draft Convention during October, and the text will then be opened for signature at a diplomatic conference in The Hague on 16 December 2025. The matter is therefore one of urgency and a priority for the Council of Europe. But not only for the Council of Europe, but also for Ukraine. The text of the draft Convention has been largely negotiated outside the Council of Europe during late 2024 and 2025. It involved more than 50 states as well as the European Union and the Council of Europe. The Draft was formally considered by the Council of Europe after the establishment of the Ad hoc Committee on the Establishment of an International Claims Commission for Ukraine in September 2025.

But I would note that this Assembly has persistently addressed the need for such a compensation mechanism for Ukraine, having earlier proposed a comprehensive international compensation mechanism with three components: a Register of Damage, which was created in 2023 and became operational in 2024, a Claims Commission and a compensation fund. The assembly has also consistently maintained that this should be created under the auspices of the Council of Europe.

In the Explanatory Memorandum, you will find a summary of all the previous work by this Assembly, including a reference to the excellent reports by Mr Damien COTTIER, Mr Davor Ivo STIER and Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights. And there's then a description of the main features and provisions of the draft Convention. And finally, our assessment both of the positive aspects and our expression of some concerns with regard to the proposals.

Let me begin with the positive aspects. The Claims Commission constitutes a further step in the Council of Europe's accountability response to Russian aggression. It creates an additional and innovative legal tool to ensure that Russia bears the legal consequence of its violations of international law and makes reparation for all the damage stemming from its aggression. It is a complement to other existing tools, such as the recently created Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression, which was constituted under the Agreement between the Council of Europe and Ukraine in June of this year. It assists Ukraine in its efforts to ensure justice, accountability and redress. It contributes to the upholding of the international legal order and the principle of state responsibility under international law. And it is essentially victim-based and human rights-centred, ensuring that individuals have standing to submit claims before the Commission.

The organisational structure of the Commission, as defined in the draft Convention, ensures the independence and impartiality of the mechanism, while providing for the possibility of Russia and Ukraine to participate, albeit with certain limitations. Now I have to add that I have some concerns and view the prospect of possible improvements. There is a lack of clear regulation of how compensation awards will be funded and consequently the effectiveness of this process may be called into question. States should work without delay towards the establishment of a compensation fund. This is mentioned in the Preamble and in Article 22 of the draft Convention. It must be a priority following the adoption and opening for signature of the Convention in December of this year. Furthermore, the temporal scope of the proposal is limited to post-February 2022. That's as a result of there being non-Council of Europe participants in the Convention Proposal.

This Assembly, of course, has always held that the aggression by Russia commenced in February 2014 with the invasion of Crimea. We would wish the parties to the Convention re-examine this issue and I would note that there is a mechanism within the Convention for its amendment. There is also a question over the relationship with other international judgments and awards which needs to be clearly regulated. The future Commission should, I suggest, clarify this and its rules in consultation with the European Court of Human Rights. For example, there is a potential overlap of jurisdiction between the Commission and the Court between February 2022 and 16 September 2022, when the Russian Federation was expelled from the Council of Europe. One recommendation for possible amendment to the Committee of Ministers is that, while recognising the need to secure participation from non-European States, there should be a reference to the Statute of the Council of Europe and to the Assembly's resolutions in the proposed Preamble to the Convention.

Finally, colleagues, while fully supporting the draft Convention in the Opinion, the Assembly should continue to monitor developments on accountability with particular reference to the issue of a compensation fund. President, colleagues, in conclusion, I would like to thank the Secretariat and colleagues on the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights for their attention, indeed their urgent attention to this matter.

Thank you.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Lord KEEN.

Now we go to the debate, and everyone has 2 minutes.

I first call Ms Rian VOGELS.

Ms Rian VOGELS (Netherlands, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister President.

Esteemed colleagues,

The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe expresses its appreciation to the rapporteur for his commendable work carried out in a limited time frame.

Justice and accountability are not complete without compensation. The Russian Federation must be held responsible for its violations of international law in and against Ukraine. That includes facing the legal consequences of its wrongful acts, among them, making full reparations for the harm and damage caused. The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe strongly support the creation, in co-operation with Ukraine, of a comprehensive international mechanism to ensure reparations for the losses and injuries resulting from Russian aggression. This Assembly endorsed that goal at the Reykjavík Summit in 2023.

The first step has been taken: the Register of Damage caused by the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine is now up and running as an enlarged partial agreement. Since 2024, it has already received over 60 000 claims, and the number keeps growing.

Now it's time for the next step: establishing an international claims commission through an open Council of Europe convention. This Commission must be empowered to award compensation to successful claimants. It will complement the work of other international bodies, such as the European Court of Human Rights and the future Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine.

Dear colleagues, I urge you to act. Encourage your governments to sign the Convention at the diplomatic conference on 16 December in The Hague. And just as importantly, ensure your parliaments ratify it. We need 25 countries to bring this commission to life, and give victims a real prospect of justice.

Thank you.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Ms Rian VOGELS.

Then I go to Ms Laura CASTEL. I don't think she's here, but the Unified European Left Group has a right to present someone else on behalf of her.

No. Okay, then we go to Mr Piero FASSINO from the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group. Also no one who can speak on behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group? No.

Okay, then we go to Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN from the European People's Party.

Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): I broke the logic, but I'm here.

Honourable Chair,

Dear colleagues,

First of all, let me congratulate Lord Richard KEEN for the very balanced and topical report.

No right can be derived from violation of law. This is one of the main principles of any national legal system and one of the core pillars of modern international law.

The Draft Convention Establishing an International Claims Commission for Ukraine marks an important step within the Council of Europe framework. It translates the political commitments into a concrete legal mechanism. This instrument would allow claims from those individuals and entities, as well as the state itself, to be examined in a transparent and impartial manner by an international commission.

It is quite important that the drafter of the Convention keep it open not only for the member states of the Council of Europe, but also for all willing states, international integration unions, including the European Union, which enhances its potential reach.

It is worth mentioning the Draft Convention establishes procedure designed to ensure independence, fairness and the rights of the parties.

Of course, there are questions that remain. The sustainability of financing, particularly in the absence of contributions from the responsible state, is still to be resolved. And while the Commission's decisions would be final, their effectiveness will depend on the co-operation of states in implementing them. Yet the importance of this initiative goes beyond financial matters. It is about recognition of responsibility, about preserving a credible legal record and amount, reaffirming the principles which underpin this Assembly: justice, accountability and the rule of law.

I hope that this debate is not an end in itself. I hope the drafters of the Convention will take the findings of this debate into account for further elaboration of the Draft Convention.

Thank you.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr Vladimir VARDANYAN.

Can I go back to Ms Laura CASTEL, on behalf of the political group Group of the Unified European Left.

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

Let me start by thanking Lord Richard KEEN for his opinion.

Indeed, this draft convention establishing an International Claims Commission is an innovative tool to ensure the victims' approach. It marks a further step in the Council of Europe's response to hold Russia accountable for its aggression. All these systems are innovative: the Register of Damages, the Special Tribunal and the convention establishing the Claims Commission.

What is discussed here is how to better make full reparation for all the damage in accordance with the principles of state responsibility. Our Parliamentary Assembly called for setting up international compensation mechanisms for Ukraine, including a compensation fund, and committed the Committee of Ministers to draft this convention.

So now it's our turn. It is true that the draft convention doesn't provide clear regulation of the funding, enforcement and payment. It is also true that without Russia participating in the commission, the effectiveness of the compensation mechanism could be weak.

Nevertheless, what could be problematic is the plan proposed by the European Union to use frozen assets from individuals.

Dear colleagues,

We understand the honourable aim, but taking assets from individuals is against international law, and could be a bad precedent which could be used in the future by hostile governments to harass activists and NGOs. It could question the security of foreign investments in Europe.

It's Russia that has to pay in line with the principles used in the Second World War. Maybe a global fund can be set to pay victims in advance.

We, the international society, have to find a way. Otherwise, it's too vague and could pave the way to future transnational repression.

Having said that, our group fully supports this important opinion.

Thank you, Chair.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Ms Laura CASTEL.

Then I go now to Lord David BLENCATHRA on behalf of the European Conservatives, Patriots & Affiliates Group.

Lord David BLENCATHRA (United Kingdom, ECPA, Spokesperson for the group): Mister President,

I congratulate the rapporteur on this excellent report. This is a rare win for our Council.

The magic words are in Article 2, and I quote, "The international claims commission for Ukraine is hereby established as an independent body within the institutional framework of the Council of Europe."

This Assembly invented the concept of an international claims commission; we set up the Register of Damage, which can be transferred to the commission when fully operational. And we should now proceed as quickly as possible to appoint the members of the commission, the Council, the Executive Director and the panels required under this convention. Now, the convention comes into effect when ratified by 25 member states, and I call on all our member governments to ratify as soon as possible. Of course, many governments sign conventions, but then they fail to ratify. Also, to make the appropriate contributions so that the funding hits the starting threshold of 50% of the initial budget.

Now, I understand that the claims so far have reached €1.5 billion and that 60 000 people have applied, but with the continuing evil war of aggression being waged by Russia on the civilian population, tens of thousands more will be eligible and deserve compensation.

The evil being perpetrated by President Vladimir PUTIN on civilians in Ukraine knows no bounds. The BBC reported yesterday that a Russian drone attack on a residential housing block killed an entire family – the husband, wife and two small children. Colleagues, there is no one left alive to claim compensation there or be compensated.

I also understand that Holland is being looked at as the home of the commission. This imposes another big financial burden on that country, and we should all be grateful to our Dutch colleagues, who will have to find the money and the resources to house the commission.

And finally, I make this plea to our Director General. When this claims commission is fully operational, then there will be a large number of committees, commissioners, panels and officials who will have a say in running this organisation and disbursing compensation. I see ample scope for this to become a complex bureaucratic web, with everyone having a say and nothing being decided or decided too slowly, and victims waiting years for compensation if it ever arrives. We are all aware of the internal bureaucracy in this organisation. I pray that the new commission will have none of it. Let's get the money out, not the paperwork.

Thank you.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

So we have finished the list of the speakers on behalf of the political groups. Then I go to the speakers list. First is Mr Tony VAUGHAN.

Mr Tony VAUGHAN (United Kingdom, SOC): I begin by expressing huge thanks to Lord Richard KEEN for his characteristically thorough and authoritative analysis conducted at great speed on this vital opinion.

I also wish to thank those members of this Parliamentary Assembly and the Council of Europe officials who have worked tirelessly on this issue.

Colleagues, there are many reasons to be pessimistic about the future of international law and the international rules-based order, but the promise of an International Claims Commission on Russia's crime of aggression does, I believe, give us profound cause for hope.

The draft convention is more than a legal mechanism, it embodies our collective refusal to allow aggression to go unpunished. It is designed to demonstrate that when autocrats trample on sovereignty and human dignity, the international community will respond with the legal tools to ensure accountability.

As Lord Keen makes clear, it's absolutely vital that any legal rulings on Russia's liability to make reparation is coupled with the creation of an international compensation fund, because justice without remedy is justice denied. The victims of Russia's aggression, whether Ukrainian families who have lost loved ones, businesses destroyed by missile strikes, or communities torn apart by occupation, deserve more than symbolic victories.

One obvious and compelling source for this compensation fund lies in the vast quantities of frozen Russian assets held in banks of member states and beyond, that we should repurpose and transfer into the compensation mechanism. These assets, which have been immobilised as a consequence of Russia's own actions, are a direct pathway to meaningful reparation for those who have suffered at Russia's hands.

I acknowledge the concerns that some have raised about this idea, but we cannot accept the defeatist view that our legal norms are the barrier to justice. We must find the legal tools to deliver justice for Ukraine and others who have suffered at Russia's hands, which lies amply within the skills and experience of the Council of Europe. For example, as this Assembly has recognised, the principle of lawful countermeasures for internationally wrongful acts is something that must be looked at.

The arc of history bends towards justice, but we have to have the courage to bend it there ourselves.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Now we go to Ms Denitsa SACHEVA. You have the floor.

Ms Denitsa SACHEVA (Bulgaria, EPP/CD): Thank you, Chair.

Dear colleagues,

I would also like to congratulate Lord Richard KEEN on the report.

Today, we are taking another decisive step towards justice. The establishment of an International Claims Commission for Ukraine builds on the Reykjavík Declaration and on the work already carried out throughout the Register of Damage, which has collected more than 60 000 claims so far.

Bulgaria joined the Register early and has been an active participant in the negotiations leading to this convention. We strongly support its universal character, open to all states committed to accountability. The Commission will have to mandate to examine claims and determine compensation for the damage, loss and injury caused by the Russian Federation's aggression.

This is not only a legal obligation under international law, but it is also a moral duty towards the victims, including the most vulnerable, such as children forcibly displaced.

We welcome the leadership of the Council of Europe in providing a comprehensive compensation mechanism and reaffirm Bulgaria's readiness to continue contributing.

Justice delayed is justice denied. With this convention, we make an irreversible step towards restoring justice for Ukraine, by upholding international law and safeguarding peace in Europe.

Thank you.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Then I go to Mr Dmytro NATALUKHA.

Mr Dmytro NATALUKHA (Ukraine, ECPA): Thank you dear Chair,

I would like to thank Lord Richard KEEN for his brilliant work and a brilliant report, together with his team.

I think that this is one of the boldest attempts to return the practical weight of this Parliamentary Assembly in global politics, not just from the philosophical side, not just from the side of values, not just from the side of theoretical debates, but from a very practical and material side.

If this Commission were to start working, that would mean that this Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has played a vital and a crucial historical role in asserting that justice is being made, that fairness is being attained. And this is, I think, the most important and dominant role of this report.

A report that, of course, will secure that, whatever the consequences, fairness has to be returned to the victim. Justice has to be installed.

So I fully support and urge you, dear colleagues, to support this brilliant piece of work, this brilliant text and document, and then promote and advocate it in your own parliaments, in your own governments, to make this happen and make this work.

Let's together make this our milestone with the hands of Lord Richard KEEN and this wonderful document.

Thank you.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Then I go back. On behalf of the political groups, Mr Piero FASSINO from the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group.

Mr Piero FASSINO (Italy, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister President. I'm going to speak Italian.

I think the document we are examining is very important, because it is the concretisation of our commitment, of one of the most important commitments we have made on Ukraine.

Ukraine has become one of the central themes of the Council of Europe's activity, through the Action Plan for Ukraine, through the establishment of the Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine, and above all the Register of Damages.

I would point out, as we all know, that the Register of Damage has already received 55,000 reports, which gives an idea of the disaster that the war in Ukraine has produced and of how much damage, how much suffering, how much devastation that war has caused.

But, above all, it commits us to putting in place everything necessary to ensure that the Register has a concrete effect in guaranteeing those who have suffered damage forms of redress, that will enable those who have suffered damage, suffering, devastation of their property, of their families, of their lives, to find some form of restoration.

That is why I think it is very important that we approve this document of ours with the broadest consensus, I hope unanimously, because it would be a concrete testimony, along with so many other things that this Parliamentary Assembly has approved over time on Ukraine, of our concrete commitment.

Being on Ukraine's side is all the more important today in the face of Mr Vladimir PUTIN's strategy to continue the aggression, to increase its intensity and to force Ukraine to surrender.

We must stand side by side with Ukraine. The act we are taking today goes in this direction.

Thank you.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): May we go to Ms Lesia ZABURANNA?

Ms Lesia ZABURANNA is not in the room. No? Yes?

Okay, sorry. You have the floor.

Ms Lesia ZABURANNA (Ukraine, ALDE): Thank you Mister President.

First of all, I would like to say that we highly appreciate this work and this report because it's very important not only for Ukraine, but for all of Europe, because it's about justice.

If we talk about the International Claims Commission for Ukraine, I would like to share with you some information. For example, for the entire period of Russian military aggression, which began in 2014, the the total losses inflicted on Ukraine could reach \$1 trillion. Losses caused by Russia from 2022 now are about \$600 billion. As of August to September 2025, around 44 000 applications for compensation have already been submitted to the International Register of Damage for Ukraine.

But if we talk about the total number of victims, we have only about 4 and 5 million people, who were internally displaced people. And actually the state, I mean Ukraine, now has only provided housing for 63 of them. Why do we have this situation? Because of the total deficit of our state budget. Because one day of the war now costs for Ukraine about \$183 billion. So we have Russia to pay for this and this mechanism, this commission, will be a progressive and practical step for this.

Thank you very much.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Then I go to Ms Gala VELDHOEN.

Ms Gala VELDHOEN (Netherlands, SOC): Thank you, Chair.

Dear colleagues,

The draft convention before us is a landmark step in restoring justice. It ensures that the massive damage caused by Russia's act of aggression will not remain uncompensated.

By anchoring the Commission within the Council of Europe through an open convention, it guarantees both independence and legitimacy. Importantly, the Convention provides continuity: the Commission will take over the work of the Register of Damage, transforming documentation into adjudication. This avoids duplication, strengthens victims' access to justice and embeds safeguards against double compensation.

We are grateful to Lord Richard KEEN for his report and congratulate him. His recommendations underline essential next steps amongst others, clarifying the Commission's relationship with other adjudicative bodies, and moving without delay towards a compensation fund.

We strongly support his conclusion to adopt the convention and open it for signing by December of this year. And we strongly encourage all our national parliaments to act as soon as possible.

The Netherlands is fully prepared to host this Commission. There is strong and broad political support in our country to advance accountability and reparations for Ukraine.

With decades of experience as the home of the International Court of Justice, the International Criminal Court, and other tribunals in The Hague, my country offers a trusted environment of legal expertise, security and international co-operation.

By adopting this convention, we send a clear message: accountability is not abstract. It is practical, enforceable and rooted in the rule of law.

This is what the Council of Europe stands for, and how we turn the promise of justice for Ukraine into reality.

Thank you.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Then I go to Mr Theo BOVENS.

Mr Theo BOVENS (Netherlands, EPP/CD): Thank you, Mister President.

Dear colleagues,

It is encouraging that this Assembly is closely monitoring the progress of establishing a Claims Commission for the damages suffered - and still being suffered - by Ukrainians as a result of Russian aggression. I therefore wholeheartedly welcome Lord Richard KEEN's Opinion, which clearly outlines the current state of affairs within the preparatory bodies of the Committee of Ministers, and also guides us on how we, as an Assembly, should approach this matter.

For me, three points are of particular importance:

Firstly, recognition of the Council of Europe's role in the development of the trilogy: Register of Damages, Claims Commission, and later, a compensation fund.

I say this not merely to record history, but to embed this development within the principles upon which the Council of Europe is founded. After all, the rule of law also entails accountability in retrospect.

Secondly, sound and practical regulations. While I urge speed and decisiveness, this trilogy must not fail due to legal missteps, for example. Nor should a Claims Commission run into trouble after a few years due to insufficient funding or threats to the safety of those working within it.

And finally, forgive me for taking a moment, as a Dutch politician and leader of the Christian Democrats in the Dutch Senate, to speak about the commitment expressed by Dutch politics, including the willingness to act as a host country. All major political movements - Social Democrats, Greens, Christian Democrats, Liberals - have supported this. And the upcoming parliamentary elections at the end of October will not diminish this support.

In conclusion, let us continue to organise and sustain support for the progress of the Claims Commission within our national parliaments. For this is not a matter for Ukraine alone, nor just for a host country.

International law is a matter for all of us, within and beyond Europe.

Thank you.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Then we go to Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO.

Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO (Ukraine, EPP/CD): Dear President,

Dear colleagues,

I want to salute us all. This is a historical document and we've been through this in a very critical time, in a very short period of time.

No other international armed conflict across the world has faced such a speedy legal answer to the aggression.

In our case, it is the Russian Federation who was expelled from this Parliamentary Assembly and which has to pay for all the losses, material and non-material, which Ukrainians are facing today.

I would like to thank you colleagues, for everyone who was fighting to enlarge this Commission in time. So we're talking about the fact that the war has lasted for almost 12 years, not only from 2022.

If we go down to a very basic understanding of how it works, today, Ukrainians just using their phones, can apply for at least 12 categories. For instance, if their home is damaged, if their beloved one is in captivity, or they have experienced sexual violence, or maybe they have even lost a family member, if they were temporarily relocated, or those children whom we fight for were deported and now are being traced back. Of course, civilians in captivity, prisoners of war who are still there and who got back.

Colleagues,

It is extremely important to show to the international community that we are able to produce this document.

It's important to use Russian frozen assets, because this is the only country which is guilty in this war of aggression.

I want to salute us all because we will definitely be in some legal books, because this mechanism is working now. We have to fill up the Register, to fill up the Commission and to ensure impartiality.

Thank you very much.

Today we salute our Armed Forces of Ukraine. This is their day and thanks to them we are here.

Glory to Ukraine. Thank you very much.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Then I go to Ms Nadejda IORDANOVA.

Ms Nadejda IORDANOVA (Bulgaria, NR): Thank you, Mr Chair.

Colleagues,

The Draft Convention before us establishing the International Claims Commission for Ukraine is more than a legal text. It is a statement of principle, a commitment to accountability and a promise of remedy to victims of aggression. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has brought immense suffering. Lives lost, millions displaced, homes and schools destroyed, hospitals and cultural heritage in ruins, ecosystem damage.

They are not statistics. They are the lived realities of countless families and communities. International law is clear. The state responsible must make full reparation for the harm caused by its unlawful acts. The Convention makes that obligation real. It builds on the previous work done in this House and the creation of the Register of Damage. That Register gave us the first step, documenting the evidence. Now we take the second step, creating an independent and impartial body to adjudicate claims and determine compensation.

Some will say that without the answer to the question "Where will the money come from?" our efforts are meaningless. Let us be clear. This is a stage-by-stage process. The need for complex solutions ahead must not paralyse us now. Our task today is to complete the second stage of the compensation mechanism. The International Claims Commission will bring justice to victims and reinforce the rule of law. It sends a simple but vital message. Accountability is not optional. It is essential to peace and security. And let me congratulate and thank Lord Richard KEEN for his expeditious and professional work in preparing this excellent and balanced opinion in support of the Draft Convention.

Thank you.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

I'd like to have as much as possible speakers. So, just a question to Lord Richard KEEN and to Mr Pablo HISPÁN, if you will each use your three minutes. If not, then I can go for two more speakers on the list, otherwise it will be only one.

No, no, wait, wait, wait. Do you need more? Will you use your three minutes or will you reduce a little bit?

Lord Richard KEEN (United Kingdom, ECPA, Rapporteur): President, I will be but 2 minutes in response.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): And you also? Okay, thank you.

Then I go to Mr Tekke PANMAN.

Mr Tekke PANMAN (Netherlands, EPP/CD): Thank you, Mister President and dear colleagues,

It's reassuring to see how this Assembly continues to keep a close eye on the steps towards creating a claims commission to address the harm inflicted on Ukraine by Russian aggression.

In this light, I greatly appreciate Lord Richard KEEN's contribution, which both clarifies the current discussion within the Committee of Ministers and offers guidance on how our Assembly can best engage with this process.

Much has already been said. Allow me to highlight some essential points. The Register of Damage, the claims commission and the eventual compensation mechanism reflect the very principles of our organisation. That also includes ensuring accountability once violations have occurred.

We all wish to see rapid progress and a qualitative process. This means a robust framework that is legally sound, properly resourced and designed to withstand challenges. It must be solid and sustainable till the end.

Speaking as a member of the Dutch Senate, I am proud of the broad political consensus in the Netherlands to contribute actively, including a readiness to act as a host state. This support is widely spread in the Dutch political spectrum, and this support will remain regardless of our elections at the end of this month.

In closing, let us each work within our national parliaments to make the claims commission a success for all those in Ukraine who need it and in respect of our international law.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

And then I go to the last speaker, Mr Petri HONKONEN.

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

Dear colleagues,

Thank you to the rapporteur for the excellent work he has done. The claims commission for Ukraine is a major step forward for the Council of Europe, for the international justice system, and above all, a significant step towards justice for those whose lives have been harmed in countless horrific ways.

The Claims Commission is a natural way of holding Russia accountable and compensating Ukraine. As guardians of international law and a just Europe, it is our duty to support this initiative and promote it within our own national parliaments.

The funding of the operation must be resolved. And I support the rapporteur's proposal to establish a compensation fund.

We must also seriously utilise Russia's frozen assets to compensate the damages suffered by the Ukrainian people. It is important to enlarge this convention to third countries in order to have solid legal support for accountability in case of a war of aggression.

I also hope that the work on establishing a tribunal continues in good faith. Establishing the Claims Commission is nothing less than protecting the functioning of the international justice system and the rule of law, and especially justice for the brave people of Ukraine.

Thank you.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

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

The speeches of the members on the speakers list will have been present during the debate, but have not been able to speak, may be given to the Table Office for publication in the official report. But the speech must not exceed 400 words. And I also remind you that the typewritten text can be submitted electronically if possible, no later than four hours after the list of speakers has been interrupted.

Thank you.

So I now call Lord Richard KEEN to reply as a rapporteur. And you have, as promised, 2 minutes.

Lord Richard KEEN (United Kingdom, ECPA, Rapporteur): Thank you, President. And thank you, colleagues.

I appreciate the constructive contribution to this debate from all colleagues. Of course, many alluded to the requirement for a compensation fund, and quite a number referred to the potential complexities of dealing with the frozen assets of the Russian Federation. Ms Laura CASTEL, Mr Tony VAUGHAN, Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO included.

Colleagues, I would remind you that when Alexander the Great arrived in the city of Gordium in what is now Türkiye, he cut the Gordian knot with a sword rather than enduring the complexities of untying it. The time may have come for us to address the principle of international law with respect to lawful countermeasures and to wield the sword of justice in respect of that.

Colleagues, I thank you again for your contributions.

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you. Does the Vice-Chairperson of the Committee wish to speak?

You have two minutes.

Mr Pablo HISPÁN (Spain, EPP/CD, Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights): Thank you, Chair.

Colleagues,

Yesterday the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights unanimously adopted the Draft Opinion on the Draft Convention for Establishing an International Claims Commission for Ukraine. A new brick in the legal building that we are making in which the Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine was a historical path.

I would like to thank the Committee rapporteur and Chair Lord Richard KEEN for his excellent in-depth work and report. Due to the urgency of the matter, he completed the report in a very extraordinary short period of time. The Assembly received a request for an opinion from the Committee of Ministers on 17 September 2025 and we are delivering our opinion just two weeks later. Although we should not usually use this urgent debate procedure for statutory opinion, exceptional circumstances can justify it, as is the case here, but it should be extremely exceptional. The establishment of an international claims commission for Ukraine is the next logical step in the development of an international compensation mechanism following the creation of the Register of Damage in 2023.

As we have been calling for a claims commission since 2023, the Assembly should now play its part in contributing to the swift adoption of an opening for signature of the Convention which should take place before the end of the year.

I would also like to thank Mr René LEFEBER, Chair of the Committee on the Establishment of a Claims Commission for Ukraine, the group that finalised the Draft Convention, and Mr Markiyan KLIUCHKOVSKYI, the Executive Director of the Register of Damage, for the fruitful discussions we had at our Committee meeting on Monday.

Colleagues, I invite you to support this opinion and this Draft Convention. The Council of Europe is developing a parallel legal instrument to hold Russia accountable for its aggression against Ukraine. The Assembly has been at the origin of many of these proposals, so we must now do everything we can to ensure these legal tools become operational.

In conclusion, I urge you all to support the ratification process that will be required in your respective national parliaments and to call on your governments to allocate the necessary resources to this mechanism. The Ukrainian people must not be left in an empty promise of justice and reparation. This must become a reality. Thank you.

Mr Olivier BITZ (France, ALDE): *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in French*

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

So the debate is closed.

We will now proceed to vote on the draft opinion contained in Document 16270, to which no amendments have been tabled. But I remind you all that a two-thirds majority is required.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

Well, that's very clear.

The draft opinion contained in Document 16270 is unanimously adopted.

Thank you very much for this nice debate.

Can I ask the rapporteur for the next debate to come down, so that we don't lose too much time, because this is also very tight in time. I'm sorry that I have to hurry you up a little bit.

So, Mr Yves CRUCHTEN, and I also see the Vice-Chair, sorry, the Chairperson of the Committee is also here. Are you ready?

Vote: Draft convention establishing an international claims commission for Ukraine

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): We will now proceed to vote on the draft opinion contained in document 16270, to which no amendments have been tabled. But I remind you all that a two thirds majority is required.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed. Well, that's very clear.

The draft opinion contained in document 16270 is unanimously adopted.

Thank you very much for this nice debate.

Debate: Post-monitoring dialogue with Bulgaria

Mr Andries GRYFFROY (Belgium, ALDE, President of the Assembly): Can I ask the rapporteur for the next debate to come down, so that we don't lose too much time, because this is also very tight on time. I'm sorry that I have to hurry up a little bit.

So, Mr Yves CRUCHTEN and I also see the Vice-Chair. Sorry, the Chairperson of the Committee is also here.

Okay, are you ready?

So, the next item of business this afternoon is the debate on the report titled "Post-monitoring dialogue with Bulgaria". This is Document 16246 presented by Ms Deborah BERGAMINI and Mr Yves CRUCHTEN on behalf of the Monitoring Committee.

And to finish by 6:35 p.m., I know it's tight, and we have some amendments to vote on, I will interrupt the list of speakers at 6:20 p.m. to allow time for the reply and the vote.

So, because Ms Deborah BERGAMINI is not here, Mr Yves CRUCHTEN will have seven minutes now. You don't have to use the whole seven minutes. The less you use, then we can have more speakers. And then you have three minutes at the end to reply.

Mr Yves CRUCHTEN, you have the floor.

Mr Yves CRUCHTEN (Luxembourg, SOC, Co-Rapporteur): Dear colleagues,

As you heard, I have to excuse my colleague Ms Deborah BERGAMINI, who unfortunately can't be with us today. Allow me to thank her for her good and friendly co-operation, as well as the staff of the Assembly for their dedicated work on this report.

You may recall that in March 2024 the Monitoring Committee adopted a draft resolution and report on the post-monitoring dialogue with Bulgaria, prepared together with our former colleague, Ms Thórhildur Sunna ÆVARSDÓTTIR. The rapporteur, then, recommended, and the Committee agreed, to close the dialogue.

Unfortunately Ms Thórhildur Sunna ÆVARSDÓTTIR could not finish the report and I was appointed to replace her.

The debate in the Assembly, scheduled for April 2024, was postponed following the announcement of snap parliamentary elections on 9th of June. As these elections did not lead to a government, another early election was held on 27 October. All in all, Bulgaria has held no less than seven elections in the past four years. In January 2025, finally a minority government under Prime Minister Rosen Dimitrov ZHELYAZKOV was formed.

Like the earlier version, the report today focuses on six outstanding areas of concern: the judiciary, the fight against high-level corruption, media freedom, minority rights, combatting hate speech, and violence against women.

Between 2015 and 2017, Bulgaria introduced reforms welcomed by the Council of Europe bodies, but key concerns persisted. The December 2023 constitutional reform aimed at resolving many of them by abolishing the plenary of the Supreme Judicial Council and creating two independent councils for judges and prosecutors.

However, in July 2024 the Constitutional Court ruled that most of these amendments required adoption by a Grand National Assembly and nearly 90% of them were repealed. This is regrettable, as the reforms would have aligned Bulgaria with European standards by reducing prosecutors' influence and ensuring that most council members were elected by their peers.

Nonetheless, not all was lost. The removal of the Prosecutor's Office's power of "general supervision of legality" was upheld, as were the May 2023 provisions introducing accountability for the Prosecutor General. The government has also indicated that further reforms could be pursued through ordinary legislation.

In 2023, parliament adopted a new Anti-Corruption Law, strengthening institutions and creating a Commission for Illegal Assets Forfeiture. Additional steps included whistle-blower protection, procurement reforms, and a code of conduct for civil servants.

GRECO acknowledged progress but also highlighted serious shortcomings. In its Fifth Evaluation Round, only 7 out of 28 recommendations were fully implemented, while the response to high-profile corruption remains unsatisfactory. Scandals have led to the resignation of senior politicians, and public trust in institutions is still very low.

Since 2019, Bulgaria has made notable progress in media freedom. Reporters Without Borders ranked the country 70th in 2024, up from 111th five years ago. Criminal Code amendments have improved protection for journalists, and courts increasingly apply European human rights standards in defamation cases.

Yet challenges persist. Media ownership is highly concentrated and politically influenced, leaving independent voices under pressure. We are also concerned about the rising number of SLAPP lawsuits targeting journalists.

The authorities have taken steps to promote equality and inclusion. Nevertheless, the Roma, almost 5% of the population, continue to face poverty, inadequate housing, and forced evictions. More must be done to achieve tangible progress in the integration and inclusion of the Roma population. Housing and employment especially remain major concerns.

Another unresolved issue is linked to the rights of persons asserting a Macedonian ethnic consciousness. Despite repeated judgements of the European Court of Human Rights, associations representing these people continue to be refused registration. A working group was established in March 2024, but real progress is still needed.

Bulgaria has strengthened its response to hate speech. Amendments to the Criminal Code increased penalties for hate crimes, online monitoring has been expanded, and awareness programmes, including civic education in schools, have been introduced. Training for police and judges is ongoing.

Although Bulgaria has not ratified the Istanbul Convention, authorities have introduced measures to combat domestic violence. However, resources remain crucially insufficient. In particular, there are not enough shelters for victims. We strongly recommend increased funding to ensure adequate protection for those victims.

Overall, Bulgaria has made meaningful progress, although many challenges remain, particularly in the field of judicial reform, the fight against high-level corruption, and the inclusion of Roma people.

These reforms must also be viewed against the backdrop of political instability. Remember: the October 2024 election was the seventh in just over 4 years, reflecting a fragmented landscape with eight parties surpassing the electoral threshold. Despite this, the authorities have demonstrated commitment to European democratic standards. Their planned accession to the Eurozone on the first of January next year is further proof of this determination.

For all these reasons, our report proposes to close the post-monitoring dialogue with Bulgaria, while continuing to closely follow unresolved issues through future periodic reviews.

Thank you.

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

Now we will hear the speakers on behalf of political groups.

I start with you, Mr Ionuț-Marian STROE, on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party.

Mr Ionuț-Marian STROE (Romania, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Chair,

Honourable President,

Esteemed colleagues,

When we look at Bulgaria today, we see a country that has taken significant steps to strengthen democracy, rule of law and of course, good governance.

The road has not always been easy, but the progress is real and deserves, of course, recognition.

The recent constitutional amendments and judicial reforms show a clear determination to modernise institutions and address long-standing concerns. These changes strengthen accountability and open the way to more transparent decision-making. Equally important is the adoption of the Anti-Corruption Act, granting enhanced investigative powers to independent bodies. No country can eliminate corruption overnight. Yet Bulgaria has demonstrated seriousness in building the tools to confront it.

We should also commend the constructive political will of the authorities and their readiness to work with European partners. This openness reflects a genuine commitment to belonging fully to the democratic family of nations. And when it comes to human rights, Bulgaria of course must implement the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights.

And of course, there are still more things which remain to be done to ensure that reforms are fully effective and irreversible. That is why our approach must combine encouragement, support and constructive dialogue.

In this period, we welcome the proposal to close the post-monitoring dialogue with Bulgaria, while keeping a balanced follow-up on the remaining issues. Acknowledging Bulgaria's progress means reinforcing democracy not only in one state, but of course across our entire continent.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you so much and thank you for the time. On behalf of the European Conservatives, Patriots & Affiliates, Ms Atidzhe ALIEVA-VELI.

Ms Atidzhe ALIEVA-VELI (Bulgaria, ECPA, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister President.

Dear colleagues,

On behalf of the European Conservatives, Patriots & Affiliates Group, I would like to express our full support for the conclusions of the rapporteurs to close the procedure for post-monitoring dialogue with Bulgaria.

It started in January 2000 and has lasted for 26 years until today. It's time to finalise this procedure, appreciating the progress achieved by Bulgaria. It refers to reforming the judiciary, ensuring media freedom and transparency of the ownership of media, free and fair electoral processes, etc.

The draft resolution presented by the Monitoring Committee reflects the significant results which have been achieved over the past several years. It should be underlined that during the period covered by the draft resolution, Bulgaria struggled to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic, like much of Europe, and was very heavily affected by the energy, economic and security fallout of the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Despite these challenging circumstances, Bulgaria resolved a domestic political crisis entirely through the process within the democratic institutions, simultaneously advanced key reforms and greatly contributed to the security in our region.

We support the draft resolution, as well as the amendment proposed by the co-rapporteur. And colleagues, I invite you all to lend your support.

Thank you.

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

Mr Mehmet AKALIN on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.

Mr Mehmet AKALIN (Türkiye, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Mister President,

Dear colleagues,

First of all, I must thank the rapporteurs for their intensive work.

I wish to raise some issues about the current challenges facing democracy, freedom and the rule of law in Bulgaria. Recent developments risk undermining public confidence in institutions and weakening democratic governance. The case of Blagomir KOTSEV, the elected Mayor of Varna, is emblematic. His detention has triggered large demonstrations and raised fears that judicial measures are being used as political instruments.

Beyond this, the Monitoring Report identifies wider issues. Despite reforms in 2023, subsequent court rulings rolled back progress, leaving judicial independence uncertain. Corruption remains a serious problem with very few high-level convictions.

On the other hand, human rights issues, minority organisations struggle for recognition and minority groups' protection remains incomplete. Turks are the largest minority group in Bulgaria, experiencing problems such as difficulties with bureaucracy, lack of resources and support in learning their mother tongue, racist attacks on religious places and hate speech on minorities, which goes unnoticed.

The Istanbul Convention is still unratified, despite strengthened domestic violence legislation.

There have been positive steps, however. Bulgaria has improved in the Press Freedom Index and introduced stronger legal protection for journalists. Yet concerns remain over concentrated media ownership, lack of transparency and disinformation that undermine pluralism.

Finally, dear colleagues, our role is not to condemn, but to support. I therefore suggest that this Parliamentary Assembly remain attentive and consider a fact-finding mission or independent review. Such actions will both provide clarity, and signal that Europe stands ready to help Bulgaria strengthen its institutions and uphold the rule of law.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Sorry to be a bit tough, but I want all colleagues to take the floor on this debate. It is a very crucial debate. I understand that both sides, or all sides, would like to speak. That's why I ask all of you to be within the limit of two minutes, even less if you can.

Mr George LOUCAIDES, the co-Chair of the Group of the Unified European Left.

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

Today we are invited to take stock of Bulgaria's path under the post-monitoring dialogue.

It is right to acknowledge the determination of Bulgarian institutions and society to confront deep-rooted challenges. The measures to reinforce accountability of the prosecutor general, the establishment of a stronger anti-corruption body, new protections for victims of domestic violence and actions to counter hate speech are not symbolic gestures. They demonstrate resilience and a commitment to European standards, even in a period marked by political turbulence.

For these reasons, our group fully supports the proposal to close the post-monitoring dialogue.

Yet support must come with responsibility.

Bulgaria's reform agenda is far from complete. Judicial independence remains vulnerable after constitutional setbacks.

The fight against corruption has advanced on paper, but effective results in high-level cases are still awaited.

Marginalised Roma communities continue to face exclusion.

Long-pending Strasbourg judgments demand urgent execution.

Media pluralism is challenged by concentration of ownership and abusive litigation.

Therefore, closing post-monitoring cannot be seen as closure in substance. It must be understood as a transition to a new phase of co-operation based on trust, but also on vigilance.

We expect Bulgaria to preserve the gains achieved and to press forward where reforms are unfinished. Our Parliamentary Assembly should continue to follow developments closely, ensuring that setbacks do not undo hard won progress.

For us, in the Group of the Unified European Left, the standard is clear: democracy, human rights and social justice are not halfway goals.

Bulgaria has taken important steps forward. Now it must continue without hesitation until those commitments are fully realised.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr George LOUCAIDES. Mr Stefan SCHENNACH on behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group. Stefan.

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

I was sceptical at first, but the rapporteur has convinced me that this move to end a post-monitoring procedure is appropriate in this case. After a series of elections, a political crisis and instability, the new coalition government has now actually taken action since the beginning of 2025 and demonstrated its seriousness, especially in the area of the judiciary.

In the area of periodic monitoring, however, we will still have to look at a few things in the future, in particular the five-year probationary periods for judges, the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) recommendations, where there are no convictions, but also the 90 unfulfilled recommendations of the European Court of Human Rights. Many are waiting, and especially the catastrophic situation of the Roma population, with the evictions, the demolition of houses, lack of education, lack of health and so on.

As a rapporteur here for SLAPPs, it should be noted that there is also work to be done in the media sector for the new government. Better protection for the journalists, to consider SLAPPs complaints and to make media concentration better and more transparent.

But in this sense - and I have every confidence in the two excellent rapporteurs here - we can and should do this post-monitoring and I support it.

The last post-monitoring, which I was able to complete as Chairman, was over ten years ago and that was Monaco, so all good things come to Bulgaria.

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

Ms Bisera KOSTADINOVSKA-STOJCHEVSKA.

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

First of all, allow me to thank the rapporteurs for the immense effort that they have put into producing this very important report.

Colleagues and friends,

My government recently received a letter of complaint from another government labelling my questions and enquiries into why member countries are not executing the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights as 'hate speech'.

If that is hate speech, I would like it to be noted that I will continue to ask and be loud on issues concerning respecting human rights around the world, and not just in this hemicycle.

I know that for some of you, dear colleagues, here inside, the only worry is counting the numbers and the votes. But for most of us, when we say yes, when we vote yes, it means that the country in question respects the human rights of all of its citizens. And no means that no, this country only piles on examples of not respecting the human rights in general of its own citizens, and yet strives to be perceived as the most exemplary student.

To respect human rights is not just on paper, but to do your best in practice and to strive to be better in every single way, in respecting people's choices.

Being a member of a bigger ideological family, though, gives a country an even bigger responsibility to look into the future and pave the way for everyone in that family and those who are striving to join, to give the opportunity, just as they themselves were given a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Are we always ready when given this opportunity? No. But do we seize it? Yes.

Having this process closed, Bulgaria needs to stop labelling and start working.

In the end, as we heard today, 'justice delayed is justice denied'.

Thank you.

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

Ms Denitsa SACHEVA.

Ms Denitsa SACHEVA (Bulgaria, EPP/CD): Thank you, President.

Distinguished members of the Parliamentary Assembly,

Bulgaria joined the Council of Europe in 1992, affirming its unwavering commitment to democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the principles of multilateralism and co-operation.

For the past 26 years, Bulgarian authorities have engaged actively and constructively in the post-monitoring dialogue with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), a process which I believe has fully achieved its purpose.

By the way, ladies and gentlemen, here with me is a colleague of mine who is just 27 years old, and he was born in the year when the post-monitoring procedure started, and he is now joining the Parliamentary Assembly.

Against this backdrop, I welcome the fact that the Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee) acknowledged Bulgaria's progress and recommended the closure of the post-monitoring dialogue with Bulgaria with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

The draft resolution before us today is not only a recognition of our efforts, but is also an expression of trust in Bulgaria's democratic trajectory.

I would like to use the opportunity to sincerely thank our co-rapporteurs, Ms Deborah BERGAMINI and Mr Yves CRUCHTEN, and also to the previous one, Ms Thórhildur Sunna ÆVARSDÓTTIR, for their excellent work.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I sincerely hope that you will be able to lend your support to the proposed draft resolution and recognition of the significant progress of Bulgaria in the past two decades.

I reiterate the firm commitment of Bulgaria to contribute to a strong, stable and social Europe.

Thank you.

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

Mr Didier MARIE, you are next.

Mr Didier MARIE (France, SOC): Thank you Mister Chairman,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I too would like to thank our co-rapporteurs for this very comprehensive report on the situation in Bulgaria.

Since 2021, the country has held seven legislative elections, with no party or coalition managing to win. Despite this political instability, Bulgaria has initiated a number of reforms. In 2023, for example, an anti-corruption law was passed to strengthen the investigative powers of the anti-corruption commission.

Similarly, a law on the protection of whistleblowers has made it possible to establish a comprehensive legal framework to simplify the reporting and protection of whistleblowers.

These advances testify to the solidity of Bulgaria's democratic institutions and the goodwill of the authorities. Significant progress has been made since Bulgaria joined our organisation in 1991 and the end of the full monitoring procedure in 2000. While we can now envisage closing the post-monitoring dialogue with Bulgaria, certain points nevertheless remain a cause for concern, and will need to be closely monitored as part of the periodic reviews.

I am thinking first of all of the implementation of the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights. More than 90 of the Court's judgments concerning Bulgaria are still awaiting execution. The Bulgarian authorities need to co-operate with the Committee of Ministers to introduce the necessary reforms. Priority should be given to the execution of judgments aimed at combating the discrimination suffered in particular by Roma and people of Macedonian origin.

Furthermore, despite high-level corruption scandals, little progress has been made in securing the final conviction of politicians who have committed criminal offences.

I therefore encourage the Bulgarian authorities to implement all the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) recommendations.

Similarly, the issues of media concentration, media diversity and journalists' freedom of investigation are not being properly addressed. The authorities should take the necessary steps to ensure respect for pluralism.

With these reservations, I agree with the conclusions of the rapporteurs to close the post-monitoring dialogue with Bulgaria.

Thank you very much.

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

Ms Marija PETRUSHEVSKA.

Ms Marija PETRUSHEVSKA (North Macedonia, EPP/CD): Distinguished President, *Mesdames et messieurs*.

Let me begin by thanking the rapporteur for this important report.

Bulgaria continues to refuse to implement the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights.

As highlighted in the report, there remain serious concerns regarding human rights, including those of the ethnic Macedonian minorities. Macedonians are not included in minority programmes, they receive no assistance and they have no representatives in consultative bodies.

Their language, literature, and history are not taught. They are prevented from establishing organisations to defend their rights.

Let me remind you that recognition as a "national minority" by Bulgaria is not a prerequisite for protection under the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

The major concern in this respect remains the non-execution of the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, notably in the cases *UMO Ilinden and Others v. Bulgaria*. For 18 years now, Bulgaria has refused to register this association.

The ethnic Macedonian minority and its organisations are a symbol of courage and of the democratic struggle for their most basic human rights.

Dear colleagues,

There is a Macedonian novel called "Pirej" by Petre M. ANDREEVSKI:

"You may pull it, uproot it, and try to destroy it, but it never dies. The moment it touches the earth again, it grows back, it lives, it rises. Nothing can destroy it."

I firmly believe that, regardless of the behaviour of the Bulgarian authorities, the ethnic Macedonian minority will always be reborn, will always rise, and will always endure.

Thank you.

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

And the last speaker is Ms Nadejda IORDANOVA.

Ms Nadejda IORDANOVA (Bulgaria, NR): Thank you, Mister President.

Dear colleagues,

Today we debate the closure of the post-monitoring dialogue with Bulgaria not because this mechanism achieved its goals, but because after 26 years, it has become ineffective.

The report notes progress, yes. A difficult one, a fragile one. I took every step in this process. But it also makes clear how much remains unfinished. I will stress two issues that cut to the heart of democratic resilience: the rule of law and media freedom.

Bulgaria still struggles with judicial independence. The Supreme Judicial Council fails to meet international standards, and both it and the inspectorate have overstayed their mandate. This undermines justice and public trust. Our prosecution system is neither politically neutral nor accountable. For over two years, we have had a so-called temporary prosecutor general, an arrangement meant to bypass the rules and at a later stage secure a full mandate.

Since July, thousands of Bulgarians have protested against politically motivated repression. The arrest of the Varna Mayor is seen as part of the pattern. Opposition figures investigated, others ignored.

Finally, I shall put a word of alarm. The Council of Europe itself is struggling. Too often, we issue resolutions but fail to act. Too often, we compromise and excuse inaction. Each hesitation erodes our strength.

Colleagues,

This report marks the future challenge for Bulgaria. It is a cultural reform for this Council. It is a test of whether it truly defends our principles.

Thank you.

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

Does the co-rapporteur wish to reply? You have three minutes.

Mr Yves CRUCHTEN (Luxembourg, SOC, Co-Rapporteur): Thank you, Mister Chair.

And also thank you all the colleagues that have taken the floor.

May I summarise what was just said?

Bulgaria is on the right track, but not all issues concerning human rights, democracy and the rule of law have been addressed to complete satisfaction.

Is everything perfect in Bulgaria? Absolutely not. This resolution and our report leave Bulgaria with some homework to complete.

Therefore, and I think many of you have pointed out the issues of concern... Therefore, the Parliamentary Assembly should keep a close eye on the developments in Bulgaria and continue to co-operate strongly with the Bulgarian authorities in their efforts to fulfil the necessary requirements.

Allow me, though, to congratulate Bulgaria on the progress achieved so far. I am convinced that working hand in hand with its neighbours and with us here at the Council of Europe, Bulgaria will continue to shape a bright, secure and prosperous future for all its citizens and the wider region.

Finally, after more than 25 years, let's close the post-monitoring dialogue with Bulgaria today.

So please vote in favour of this resolution.

Thank you.

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

Mr Mogens JENSEN, would you like to say a few words? We have three minutes.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee)): Bulgaria joined the Council of Europe in 1992 and was under a full monitoring procedure until 2000.

In 2000, the Parliamentary Assembly decided to close the full monitoring procedure and engaged in a post-monitoring dialogue.

Since then, three reports have been submitted to the Parliamentary Assembly by the Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee) in 2010, in 2013 and 2019.

At its September meeting, the Monitoring Committee proposed now to close the post-monitoring dialogue with Bulgaria 25 years after the launching of the procedure.

We hope, of course, that all of you today will decide to support this decision, which would be a big step in strengthening this country's engagement in implementing our common European values.

Bulgaria has overcome the political crisis and instability illustrated by seven consecutive early parliamentary elections held between 2021 and 2024. It established a coalition government in January 2025. Since the last resolution on Bulgaria in the Assembly of 2019, major progress has been achieved as regards the six areas enumerated in the text.

We should welcome the reform of the criminal procedure code and the constitutional amendments limiting the power of the prosecutor's office and various measures taken to combat high-level corruption.

Bulgaria has also considerably improved its framework as regards freedom of expression and taken a number of measures to combat hate speech, violence against women and it has improved the situation of minorities.

To conclude, we commend the authorities' efforts made to take all necessary measures to finalise the post-monitoring dialogue. We look forward to very good co-operation in the future.

Nevertheless, as said by the rapporteur, the Committee should continue to follow the developments in the country in the framework of one of its forthcoming periodic reviews. As the rapporteur has rightly pointed out, there are a number of unresolved issues.

Thank you very much.

Vote: Post-monitoring dialogue with Bulgaria

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

The debate is closed.

Dear colleagues,

The Monitoring Committee has presented a draft resolution in Document 16246, to which four amendments have been tabled.

They will be taken in the order in which they appear in the compendium. I remind you that speeches on amendments are limited to 30 seconds.

I understand that the Chairperson of the Committee wishes to propose to the Assembly that Amendments 2, 3 and 4 to the draft resolution, which were rejected by the Committee with a two-thirds majority, be declared as definitely rejected. Is that so? Good.

If no one objects, I will consider the amendments to be rejected. Is there an objection? No. The amendments are rejected.

I have received an oral amendment from the Committee, which reads as follows: "In paragraph 7, second sentence, delete the words 'by administrative courts'. The sentence as amended would therefore read as follows: "Following this reform, prosecutors' decisions not to open investigations into certain categories of criminal offences, including corruption-related offences, can be subject to judicial review".

The President may accept an oral amendment on the grounds of promoting clarity, accuracy or conciliation, and if there is no opposition from 10 or more members to it being debated. In my opinion, the oral amendment meets the criteria of Rule 34.7.a. Is there any opposition to the amendment being debated?

So, that is not the case.

I therefore call Mr Yves CRUCHTEN to support the oral amendment. You have 30 seconds. If you want, of course.

Mr Yves CRUCHTEN (Luxembourg, SOC, Co-Rapporteur): Please support the amendment.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Does anyone wish to speak against the Oral Amendment? No?

I shall now put the Oral Amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The Oral Amendment is agreed.

I have received an Oral Amendment from the Committee which reads as follows:

'In paragraph 14, first sentence, replace the words "more than half" with the words "around one-third".'

The sentence as amended would therefore read as follows:

'Over 90 leading judgments of the European Court of Human Rights concerning Bulgaria are pending implementation, with around one-third of them pending for at least 10 years.'

The President, as I've said earlier, may accept an Oral Amendment on the grounds of promoting clarity, accuracy, reconciliation, and if there is not a position from 10 or more members to it being debated.

In my opinion, the Oral Amendment meets the criteria of Rule 34.7, paragraph A.

Is there any opposition to the amendment being debated? That's not the case.

I therefore call Mr Yves CRUCHTEN to support the Oral Amendment.

You have 30 seconds.

Mr Yves CRUCHTEN (Luxembourg, SOC, Co-Rapporteur): Thank you, Mister President.

Facts are facts and they should be correct. So, please support this oral amendment.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Anyone who wishes to speak against? No. So I will put it to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The oral amendment is agreed.

I understand that Ms Denitsa SACHEVA wishes to withdraw Amendment 1 in favour of an oral amendment of conciliation.

Is that so, Ms Denitsa SACHEVA?

Ms Denitsa SACHEVA (Bulgaria, EPP/CD): Yes.

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

So Amendment 1 is therefore withdrawn.

I have received an oral amendment from the Committee which reads as follows: "In the draft resolution, paragraph 14, second sentence, replace the words 'ethnic Macedonians' with the words 'persons asserting a Macedonian ethnic consciousness'." The relevant phrase, as amended, would therefore read "and refusals to register associations of persons asserting a Macedonian ethnic consciousness".

In my opinion, the oral amendment meets the criteria of Rule 34.7, paragraph A. Any opposition to this amendment?

That's not the case. I therefore call Mr Yves CRUCHTEN to support it.

Mr Yves CRUCHTEN (Luxembourg, SOC, Co-Rapporteur): By this amendment, we take over the wording, the exact wording of the court in their judgment, and this paragraph is about the court's judgment. So please support this amendment.

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

Does anyone wish to speak against the oral amendment? No.

I shall now put the oral amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The oral amendment is agreed.

I have received another oral amendment from the Committee, which reads as follows: 'In the draft resolution, paragraph 19, second sentence, replace the words "criminal code" with the words "law and protection from domestic violence".'

The sentence as amended would therefore read as follows:

'It commends Bulgaria in particular for the adoption in July 2023 of the amendments to the law and protection from domestic violence, which cover the protection of victims of domestic violence from an early stage, irrespective of the illegal status of their relationship.'

In my opinion, the oral amendment meets the criteria of Rule 34.7, paragraph A.

Any opposition to this amendment? That is not the case.

We will therefore proceed to the next amendment. You have to support it.

Mr Yves CRUCHTEN (Luxembourg, SOC): Of course I support this oral amendment. We have a law. The law has a name. And then also let's name that law.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Okay. Does anyone wish to speak against? I will put it to vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed. *The Oral Amendment is agreed.*

We will now proceed to vote on the draft resolution contained in document 16246, as amended. A simple majority is required.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed. *The draft resolution in document 16246, as amended, is adopted.*

Debate: Russian democratic forces

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

Dear colleagues,

The next item of business this afternoon is the debate on the Report titled Russian Democratic Forces (Document 16247), presented by Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS on behalf of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy.

In order to finish by 8 p.m. I will interrupt the list of speakers at about 7:10 p.m. to allow time for the reply and the vote.

Of course, as you have seen, we are flexible.

Dear Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS, when you are ready, you may take the floor. You know the procedure. You have seven minutes now and three minutes at the end to reply to the debate. So I'll be waiting for you. When you're ready, take the floor.

Dear colleagues, let us listen to our colleague.

Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS, you have the floor.

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

Dear colleagues,

Two and a half years ago, in March 2022, this Assembly took one of the most important decisions in its modern history. In the face of brutal, full-scale aggression - Russia's aggression against Ukraine - we acted quickly, with unity and with determination. We expelled the Russian Federation from our organisation, thus making it clear that the Council of Europe cannot harbour an aggressor state. A state basically hijacked by a gang of criminals. The state that tramples not only on the rights of its citizens and on the borders of its neighbours, but on international law, on our statute and on all our common values.

At the same time, however, we also made a commitment. We pledged not to close the door to Russia's future, but rather to open a window of dialogue with those Russians who refuse to accept the war, who refuse to live under the authoritarian rule, and who aspire instead to a democratic Russia fully anchored in Europe. And that commitment brings us here today.

I am well aware, as are most of you, that there has been and still is scepticism in this Assembly about such an endeavour. And let me be clear, the scepticism is, of course, justified. We all know the extent of the Kremlin's hybrid operations, its sophisticated disinformation campaigns, and its covert channels of influence. We have seen how Russian state structures exploit openings and manipulate trust. To ignore these risks would be naive and dangerous. But at the same time, it would be equally false to ignore that there are Russian citizens, politicians, political activists, journalists, academics, ordinary people who have risked their freedom - sometimes their lives - to oppose this war and to stand with Ukraine. There are Russians fighting on the side of the brave Ukrainian army today, ready to give the ultimate sacrifice and to wash away the blame of their homeland, and to bring about a regime change in Russia. Many of those Russians are in exile. Many of them are silenced inside their country. And I do believe it is in Europe's strategic interest to help preserve and strengthen the voice of these Russians who refuse to obey the regime.

Ultimately, these are the people who, in a perfect world, will have to bring about the regime change that we all support in our resolutions. It's not the Poles, it's not the Balts, the French or the Brits. Ultimately, it will be the Russians who need to do that.

Therefore, this report proposes that we engage in a dialogue with the democratic forces of Russia. More precisely, those democratic actors who have committed themselves publicly to supporting Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. Those who understand that a democratic Russia can only emerge by breaking with imperial nostalgia and aggression. Those are the partners we need, and those are the partners this dialogue platform is designed to include.

It has been a long and not too easy process to get here today. Many of our colleagues have invested political capital and a lot of energy into this process. Yet it is precisely because of this seriousness that we now have before us a framework, which I believe is both cautious but also ambitious.

In this process, Ukrainians have reminded us time and again that the primary struggle right now is being fought on the ground in Ukraine at enormous human cost. The dialogue that we are hopefully to begin today with the Russian resistance, with the Russian democratic forces, should make this fight easier, not harder.

It will help to explain the war goals to our sometimes far-too-cautious friends in further away countries. The resolution in front of you, of course, is not an end in itself; it's a beginning. We do not know where it will take us, but it's a starting point for a dialogue platform which now needs to grow, to develop and hopefully prove its value through concrete actions.

Therefore, I invite all members who share this vision to become part of this process. But above all, I of course invite all those Russians who adhere to the values of the Council of Europe, of Europe as a whole, who support Ukraine and who are prepared to work for a democratic Russia that will cease to be a threat to its neighbours and to Europe, to contribute actively to the functioning of this platform.

Our Assembly has often shown courage at moments of historic consequence. I believe this is such a moment. By adopting this resolution, we will reaffirm our solidarity with Ukraine, and we are sending a message to democratic Russians that they are not forgotten, that Europe is not indifferent to their struggle and that we believe in a different future for Russia and for our continent. And that is both necessary and possible.

Thank you.

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

Now we'll give the floor to the speakers on behalf of the political groups. And I call first on behalf of the European Conservatives, Patriots & Affiliates, Lord Richard KEEN.

Is Lord Richard KEEN in the room?

I'm going to Mr Stephen GETHINS on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.

Stephen, you have the floor.

Mr Stephen GETHINS (United Kingdom, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Chair.

Chair, can I firstly thank my colleague and my Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE) colleague, Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS, for his hard work on this? This has been a difficult, but I think everybody will agree, an incredibly important task. So thanks to him for his work.

But I'm sure he won't mind if I thank, in particular, the Ukrainian delegation and the Russian democrats who have engaged with this so positively. This is a challenging issue and one for which those who want to be involved in the political process and the democratic process pay a heavy price daily.

Russia's aggression is the biggest challenge that Europe faces. It requires cohesion from us all, for it is one that goes to the heart of this institution and what it stands for. The values of human rights, democracy, the rule of law espoused by the Convention, improve our lives every day and the citizens that we represent and have done so for decades. That's fragile and it's often under threat.

The Russian administration knows about the value of our European cohesion, and the Russian administration knows that they are penalising the citizens for claiming the rights that the rest of us take for granted. And it also seeks to remove by force, by deadly force, those from Ukrainians. No one is immune. Ukraine is on the front line today, defending us all, but it could be any of us, the rest of us tomorrow. This provides a valuable platform to engage for those inside and outside the Russian Federation who have rejected the Russian regime and its criminal acts. For what happens in Russia we know and the Ukrainians know only too well, has consequences for all of us.

So I thank my colleagues for their work and I look forward to our discussion and debate on this important topic as we go forward. Thank you.

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

On behalf of the Group of the Unified European Left, Mr George LOUCAIDES. I will give your turn to Ms Petra BAYR. We have the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group, and then to the Group of the Unified European Left.

Ms Petra BAYR, you have the floor.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Colleagues,

With this report we contribute to one of the key goals set at the Reykjavík summit to find ways to co-operate with Russian and Belarusian human rights defenders, democratic forces, free media and independent civil society. Let me add, without putting them at additional risk.

The decision we take today to establish a platform for exchange with Russian democratic forces is a very, very important step. It gives the representatives the opportunity to participate in our substantive work and to make their voices heard in the Parliamentary Assembly. It is vital that we keep robust and reliable channels of communication with those who share our values, those who stand for the re-establishment of democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights.

We must be prepared not only for rebuilding, but for a new construction of a post-Vladimir PUTIN Russia that is fundamentally different from the state we see today, a state that for too long has fallen far behind European standards.

I'm encouraged that we can rely on people who truly understand what Europe stands for and what we collectively strive for. Dialogue and exchange with them are not just desirable, they are essential.

I also want to thank for this very important report and hope that we can fulfil it with life, that it really inspires not only those who we will be in dialogue with, but also the Russian people.

Thank you very much.

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

Mr George LOUCAIDES, the co-Chair of the Group of the Unified European Left.

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

Dear colleagues,

From the very beginning, our political group has supported the establishment of a platform for dialogue with Russian democratic forces. We firmly believe it is our duty to maintain open channels of communication with those who oppose war and repression and who continue to defend democracy and human rights, whether in their homeland or in exile.

At the same time, we cannot ignore a fundamental concern. The draft resolution introduces a series of restrictive conditions that risk excluding a wide spectrum of progressive and legitimate voices. In practice, this could transform the platform into a narrow forum, thereby undermining its very purpose. We should avoid requirements that resemble tests of political orthodoxy.

On the contrary, we must recall that Russian democratic forces are by definition diverse and fragmented without electoral mandates and without institutional recognition. Their legitimacy derives not from formal structures, but from their courage and their clear opposition to authoritarianism and aggression. Our Assembly should accompany them with openness, not exclusion. For us, the only indispensable criterion should be a clear and consistent adherence to the values and principles of the Council of Europe. Beyond this, it is essential to ensure that the platform reflects the social and political diversity of the position, avoiding domination by narrow elites or privileged groups.

Dear colleagues, democratic change in Russia will only be credible if it embraces the widest possible representation of those struggling for freedom - political, civic, social and cultural actors alike.

Thank you.

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

On behalf of the Group of the European People's Party, Ms Belén HOYO.

Ms Belén HOYO (Spain, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group)*: Thank you very much President.

Colleagues, I'll speak in Spanish.

From the Group of the European People's Party, we think that this is helping to guarantee human rights and the rule of law.

We should open our doors to Russian democratic forces. We must give a voice to that part of society that Vladimir PUTIN is trying to silence. We need to strengthen co-operation with human rights activists, independent media, free civil society and all democratic forces in Russia which are fighting for a democratic alternative, who condemn the atrocities being perpetrated and who acknowledge that the aggression by Russia began in 2014.

Many people today are in prison or in exile simply for having expressed their ideas to defend freedom and democracy.

An example to us is for example Mr Vladimir KARA-MURZA, who is here with us today, to whom we would like to say thank you.

Not all Russians are Vladimir PUTIN. They don't all support his crimes. There is a critical and very committed and brave Russia as well, and *that* Russia needs to be listened to.

We all aspire to a European future in which Russia ceases to be an aggressor country, and becomes a democratic partner.

We all want a safe and secure Europe in which territorial integrity is neither attacked nor questioned.

We know that it will be a long and difficult path. But it's a necessary step if we are to move forward in the right direction.

The Council of Europe was born to defend human dignity from totalitarianism and war. Today, Russia's aggression against Ukraine and other neighbouring countries means we have a historic responsibility of remaining true to our principles.

As Václav HAVEL said, 'Hope is not a conviction that something will go well, but the certainty that something is right, however it turns out'.

So it means we must help democratic Russia, it's the right thing to do.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Mr Sigurður Helgi PÁLMASSON is next.

Mr Sigurður Helgi PÁLMASSON (Iceland, SOC): Mister President,

Vladimir PUTIN has turned Russia into a criminal state. His regime wages a war of extermination against Ukraine, murders his own citizens who dare to speak the truth, and exports terror across Europe. It is a system built on lies, violence, and blood. This Assembly has rightly condemned these crimes, and we must continue to do so without hesitation.

But we also know that Vladimir PUTIN is not Russia, and Russia is not Vladimir PUTIN. Inside Russia and in exile there are men and women - politicians, journalists, lawyers, civil activists - who continue to resist. Some, like Alexei NAVALNY, have paid with their lives. Others, like Vladimir KARA-MURZA, have endured prison for speaking the truth.

These voices are not only courageous; they are the only hope for any democratic future in Russia.

That is why this report matters. It creates a platform for dialogue with Russian democratic forces, just as we did with Belarus. It sets clear conditions: respect for democracy and human rights. We must give them more than words. We must give them protection, legal status, financial and logistical support. We must amplify their voices against Kremlin propaganda and help them reach the Russian people with the truth. Because when the time comes - and it will come - they must be prepared to lead Russia towards democracy and peace.

Colleagues, our message should be clear: Vladimir PUTIN belongs before a tribunal, not at the negotiating table. But Russia without Vladimir PUTIN belongs here, with us.

We should remember that tyrants fall when free nations stand firm together. I would like to end by thanking the rapporteur for his important work.

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

Mr Serhii SOBOLIEV (Ukraine, EPP/CD): Thank you, Mister President.

I think that you can understand us Ukrainians, that it's the most delicate and complicated question on this agenda.

And not only for our delegation, for all the millions of Ukrainians who are now suffering, or in occupied territories, or millions and millions who, thanks to your governments and to the position of your peoples, are now abroad.

Many years ago, we started together – Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic states and Moldova. How is it possible that 10 years later, we're all struggling for democracy?

One of us became a member of the European Union, NATO, or, like Moldova and Ukraine, we tried to become members of the European Union and NATO, and the Russian regime became the regime of HITLER. PUTIN's regime is very similar to HITLER's regime. Why is it possible? Why are all those who are against PUTIN now either abroad with us or in jails?

I think without the answer to this question, we need to answer the main items that we put now in order to characterise the Russian democratic forces. And the main idea that Russia still now is an empire, that colonises tens and tens of people on their territory and wants to colonise Ukraine, Moldova and maybe others. And without answers to these questions, we can't find democracy in Russia.

So I think that in this report, the item that we will have representation of all peoples colonised by the Russian empire, will also be the answer to this main question.

Thank you.

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

Mr Dmytro NATALUKHA. You need to insert your badge and press the button.

Mr Dmytro NATALUKHA (Ukraine, ECPA): Dear Mister Chairman,

Dear Mister rapporteur,

What entertains me for some time already is the fact that the Russian political elite, the current Russian political elite of Vladimir PUTIN's regime, the elite considers itself to be the pinnacle of democracy, that shows off by having staged elections for some reason, keeping their money in Swiss banks, their children in British schools, their yachts in the French Riviera, and so on and so forth.

Why not keep it all in Russia? Why not keep all your capital in Russia? Why not have your children study in Russia? For a simple reason, because the so-called democracy is a joke in Russia.

And in a way, as paradoxical as it sounds, the best thing one could do for Russia is to bring everything back there. To force the Russian political elite to create such conditions in which they would feel safe to station their kids there, their capital there, their yachts there and their wealth there. And the only way to do that is to make Russia really democratic.

If those people in the upstairs are able to do that, we will be rooting for them. However, a group of Russians I lack seeing there, unfortunately is the Russian Volunteer Corps, the RDK. Those are the Russians I would really love to see in the premises of this Parliamentary Assembly.

But nevertheless, I think that the real attempt and the real objective of this work should be setting up a true representation of the people who will be able to represent different parts of the Russian communities. The indigenous people, the people who have fought on the front lines, the people who have sat in the prisons, the people who have fought on the ideological front.

And thus makes this effort to redemocratised Russia, to make it again co-existible with, that is the only probable way to feel safe at its borders.

So I thank you for your job and I look forward to further developments.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Mr Dmytro NATALUKHA. Mr Claude KERN is next.

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

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank our colleague Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS for his report, which reminds us that not all Russian citizens support Vladimir PUTIN's authoritarian regime. Many of them would like to see real democracy in Russia. But they still need to be able to express themselves without fear of reprisals. My thoughts are obviously with Mr Vladimir KARA-MURZA.

I would like to pay tribute to the work of organisations such as the Anti-War Committee and the Free Russia Foundation. There are many of these organisations and they are not unified, which makes it impossible to set up a delegation within our Parliamentary Assembly as we did for the Belarusian delegation.

However, our Parliamentary Assembly must maintain the link with the democratic forces in Russia, as it undertook to do when it decided to exclude Russia. Similarly, the heads of state and government of the Council of Europe agreed to support the Russian democratic forces at the Reykjavík Summit.

The resolution before us today therefore proposes to create, within our Parliamentary Assembly, a platform for dialogue with the Russian democratic forces. This would enable them to take part in committee meetings and, if necessary, speak on subjects of common interest.

Participants from the Russian democratic forces on this platform will have to meet certain criteria. They must be recognised for their high moral standards, share the values of the Council of Europe and oppose the current regime with the aim of establishing a democratic political system in the Russian Federation. They must also undertake to recognise and respect the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Ukraine, as well as the Republics of Moldova and Georgia.

To enable this platform to function, the member states of our organisation must also provide administrative and financial support to the members of the Russian democratic forces, financial support that is necessary to relay the activities of the Russian democratic forces in exile and the work of journalists.

This will allow the Russian people and their opponents to know that we support them in the face of Vladimir PUTIN's authoritarian and criminal regime.

I will therefore support the resolution.

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

Now it is Mr Christophe BRICO. Is Christophe here? I don't see him. No. Thank you.

Ms Marianne BINDER-KELLER.

Ms Marianne BINDER-KELLER (Switzerland, EPP/CD): Dear Mister President, colleagues,

We are talking here about the opposition. Not the opposition, which in most constitutional states and democracies is part of a system of government in which the political forces change from time to time, in other words countries with a system of opposition and government. After elections, it can happen that the government becomes the opposition and vice versa.

We are talking here about an opposition in a dictatorship. An opposition that cannot become the government by virtue of elections and free speech in a constitutional state, but an opposition that is punished by the unjust state with discrimination, imprisonment or even death.

Dear colleagues,

I am a child of the Cold War. I have read Aleksandr SOLSHENIZYN, "The Gulag Archipelago" and other works. The immeasurable cruelties of the Stalinist system got under my skin. Or I read the Russian writer Mikhail SHISHKIN, who also lives in exile. He describes today's system under Vladimir PUTIN as being riddled with violence. Mikhail SHISHKIN warns that critical voices in Russia are increasingly being silenced. Books are being burnt, authors and publishers critical of the regime are being threatened. He says that the regime will "get every author".

Dictators, as we have also heard today, hate critical thinking. We are the Council of Europe, the guardian of human rights. If we want to protect them, then we must protect the opposition in a country that suppresses individual rights.

What do Mikhail SHISHKIN and Aleksandr SOLSHENIZYN have in common? They both say that individuals must take responsibility, even if they cannot change anything. One word of truth weighs more than the whole world. And if there are people who will not remain silent, we have a fundamental responsibility to amplify their voices, in the hope, of course, that the opposition to the dictatorship will speak with one voice, because human rights can only have one voice.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Ms Marianne BINDER-KELLER.

Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO. Mariia.

Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO (Ukraine, EPP/CD): President,

Dear colleagues,

This is a very tough file and I would like to share on behalf of the Ukrainian delegation appreciation to Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS, who took the lead on it.

Today, we're talking about the possible platform of the possible Russian democratic forces. I think this text is very clear, as we were clear back in February 2022 when we were expelling Russia as a state, stating "nothing about Ukraine, without Ukraine".

We definitely want to see the real Russian democratic forces if they get back into the Assembly. We also should not forget about the fact that Russia is not just a huge land, but it's also a huge oppressor of indigenous peoples like Chechens, Ingush, Udege, Karachays, Balkans, Kabardians, and Lezgins. Maybe you have never heard of them, but they still exist. Some of them, like Circassians, experienced 200 years of genocide, and only 2% of them are left living on planet Earth and using their native language. There are also some of them still residing in Russia, but many are outside.

And we suggest, and you supported it, dear colleagues, to have them in the platform, their representation, but if not, having a separate platform later for the indigenous peoples of the Russian Federation.

Let's not forget, today is the day when we salute the brave armed forces of Ukraine, who protect the values we share and of which we so often speak in this House. So, together with them, shoulder to shoulder, for instance, the Russian Volunteer Corps are fighting. They also should be represented in some way on this platform, so that we have a fair representation. Let's see how it works. I want to ask you to support the amendments that will be introduced.

And yet again, *Slava Ukraini!*

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO. Now it's Mr James MACCLEARY.

Mr James MACCLEARY (United Kingdom, ALDE): Thank you, Chair.

This is a decisive moment. The Council of Europe was absolutely right to expel the Russian Federation – but that cannot be where our responsibility ends.

In the last decade, we have witnessed the assassinations of Alexei NAVALNY and Boris NEMTSOV. We've seen opposition politicians locked away, threatened and intimidated. Every day brings fresh reports of journalists silenced, activists disappeared.

This is the brutal cost of standing up to Vladimir PUTIN's regime.

Yet still, brave Russians continue to speak out – both in exile and within Russia itself. Just today, it is reported that the Deputy Chairman of the opposition Yabloko Party was arrested.

They call Vladimir PUTIN's government exactly what it is: illegitimate, criminal and built on fear.

The report we're discussing today is a lifeline. If implemented, it could amplify these democratic voices, provide them with concrete support and crucially help them prepare for the day when Russia can be free again.

As Liberal Democrats, our position is unambiguous. So unambiguous, in fact, that I was recently included on a list of British politicians banned by the Kremlin from travelling to Russia.

We stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Ukraine until victory is won. But we also understand that lasting European peace demands change within Russia itself.

That means hitting back at their lies and propaganda. It means keeping independent Russian media alive. It means protecting those brave enough to flee Vladimir PUTIN's repression.

And yes, it means keeping sanctions as watertight as possible: no loopholes, no escape routes for the oligarchs propping up this murderous regime.

So let's back this motion as an investment in European security, in Ukrainian victory and in the hope that Russians themselves can forge a democratic future.

A free and democratic Russia is the best hope we have for a peaceful and stable Europe.

The alternative is a regime of Vladimir PUTIN that grows ever more dangerous. We cannot – we must not – allow that to happen.

Thank you.

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

Ms Yelyzaveta YASKO.

Ms Yelyzaveta YASKO (Ukraine, EPP/CD): Dear colleagues,

This report for an average Ukrainian is not easy, because how do you explain to a Ukrainian person why we are creating a platform for those who represent the country of aggression? What did these people do to stop this aggression? What do these people do to change the regime? Who are these people?

When we are going to vote for this resolution today, I really want you to ask and to pay attention to what is the criteria of the people who will represent this platform. Who will be there? I wanted to find my answers on what Russia is a long time before the full scale invasion.

And I will tell you a short, personal story that in 2013, I went to do an exchange programme in Moscow as a Ukrainian student. And I wanted to find what Moscow really is and what Russian people are. And my experience is of course subjective, but as a young student I was treated as "Who are you, Ukrainian? You don't have a voice there. Everyone is dreaming to come to the imperialistic Russian capital."

So, for me, since then I've learned the lesson of what Russian imperialism is. And I have also seen a lot of racism of Russian people against representatives of different nations.

So when we ask what do we Ukrainians want, we want the fall of Russian imperialism. Those who will represent the future of Russia have to be democrats and they really need to fight for freedom of different people who live inside Russia. And that's very important and we must pay attention to that. We need to support the fall of Russian imperialism. Thank you.

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

Mr Oleksandr MERZHYKO.

Mr Oleksandr MERZHYKO (Ukraine, ALDE): Mr President, dear colleagues,

In my opinion, there are several points of disagreement between Ukraine and the Russian opposition. First of all, it's not clear what are the criteria for those who will represent so-called Russian democratic forces at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. The truth is that there are no such objective criteria.

I don't, for example, understand why there is no representation for captive nations in Russia. To me, the best kind of legitimacy when it comes to representation is the struggle with arms against the oppressive Russian imperialist regime.

The second issue is about methods of struggle. It's very comfortable and convenient to talk about the so-called non-violence or non-violent struggle. In reality, non-violence doesn't work because Russian aggression, Russian crimes of genocide against Ukraine can be stopped only by a military hand. Under these circumstances, non-violence plays into the hands of the aggressor.

The third issue is about the thesis promoted by some representatives of the Russian opposition that President Vladimir PUTIN is supposedly different from the Russian people. In reality, however, Vladimir PUTIN is indistinguishable from the Russian state and Russian people in general, because all the crimes against Ukraine have been committed and supported by Russians. Russian people in general support the war of aggression against Ukraine and participate in war crimes, crimes against humanity and acts of genocide against Ukrainians. To absolve Russian people of all those crimes is against reality, against facts. Let's not be naïve.

Fourth, and perhaps the most important issue is the dismantling of the Russian aggressive empire. Russia's neighbours can't live in peace and security and nations within Russia can't be free from oppression while Russia remains an empire. Sometimes it looks as if the Russian opposition wants to retain the empire while taking the place of the Vladimir PUTIN's regime which is now in charge of this empire. History demonstrates that even if a liberal ruler comes to power in Russia, it doesn't remove the danger coming from the Russian empire, and doesn't change the aggressive nature of this empire. The problem is not only Vladimir PUTIN; the problem is Russia itself. That's why we can guarantee regional and global peace and security only by dismantling the Russian empire.

Thank you.

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

Mr Markus WIECHEL.

Mr Markus WIECHEL (Sweden, ECPA): Thank you, Mister President.

Dear colleagues,

I strongly endorse establishing a platform for dialogue with the Russian democratic forces. The Belarusian democratic delegation proves that amplifying exiled voices fuels democratic change.

The Russian opposition, human rights defenders, journalists and activists risking all to oppose Vladimir PUTIN's regime and support Ukraine, merits our engagement.

This platform upholds our core values, from our commitments in Reykjavík onward, and honours figures championing the fight for democracy.

However, we must proceed with caution. The risk of Kremlin infiltrators is real. The resolution's criteria, unconditional recognition of Ukraine's territorial integrity, denunciation of Russian crimes and adherence to the Berlin Declaration are strong but demand rigorous verification to protect trust and security. As much as a certain commitment to fair reparations in order to rebuild what Russia has destroyed in Ukraine.

Ukraine, as the primary victim of Russia's aggression, must play a central role in vetting candidates. Their insights ensure that genuine opponents are included, bolstering the platform's legitimacy and solidarity.

Let us approve this resolution. By empowering authentic Russian democrats with robust safeguards, we ignite a powerful stand not only for a resolute march towards a lasting and just peace, but also for our Parliamentary Assembly.

Thank you.

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

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS. Emanuelis.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD): Thank you so much, dear friends.

So I have been here since the beginning of 1993.

So even in the democratic time – the few years of Russian democracy, when I negotiated with Mr Boris YELTSIN the deal about the independence of Lithuania, Boris NIKOLAYEVICH YELTSIN told me that it would be impossible to delete KGB nomenclature from our network. My answer was that the KGB would come back. So the KGB is just ruling the country. And our war is a war against Russia, not only against Vladimir PUTIN. The Ukrainian war is against Russia. But in this element, remembering our war against Nazi Germany, when Thomas MANN was in New York and other German democrats were outside in London, we were supporting them.

So we've made this step towards Belarusians, and five members are working in our Committee, I think, successfully enough.

So the second step would be a little bit of another platform. Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS promised us during the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy meeting that the platform will be finally defended in the memorandum. Yes, Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS, it will be done.

So in this case, we will be finalising our job in January.

And we have behind us a few clear heroes. If you remember, Mister President, we started our last session asking everyone to support the release of Mr Vladimir KARA-MURZA from jail? And he was a member of our society, probably for the last 10 years. And now we see that they're hunted by the Russian KGB. Their life is endangered. And for that reason, we should find a way to co-operate with them.

Radio Free Europe was cut from its financial sources. And, Mister President, you sent a letter to the European Union to finance Radio Free Europe and to strengthen their voices.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): They already financed it with 5 million euros, dear Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS. This is something very important and we have to appraise the European Parliament and the European Union.

So I have kept my promise. I gave you the floor because you are like 12th in the list. I have gone over the time that I said. Please give me the ability to give the two colleagues the floor.

Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS (Lithuania, EPP/CD): Okay, last words. Your resolutions about Alexei NAVALNY and Boris NEMTSOV were crystal clear. They were killed by Vladimir PUTIN. But now we need to find a way to speak with Russian people inside of Russia, strengthening the few still existing voices. Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): So, respect to the oldest – not the oldest, how do you call it? – you are not the oldest member, but the most experienced member.

My dear friend Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS.

Thank you so much.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, ECPA): Dear President, thank you very much for the possibility to speak.

Dear colleagues, first of all I want to congratulate all of you with a big holiday. Today is the day of the defender of Ukraine, the day of the Ukrainian Army. And today the defender of Ukraine is the defender of the whole Europe, the defender of the civilised world.

And this is the answer. Who are the real democratic forces in Russia? Who are the real Russians which deserve our respect? These are the Russians who, with weapons in their hands, are fighting today against the Russian Imperial army in Ukraine. That is them: the Russian Volunteer Corps, the Freedom of Russia Legion. These are real Russians who want to see the future of Russia as a democratic state.

The real Russian opposition is not people in conference halls, in restaurants, in European capitals. It is the people who are in trenches together with Ukrainian soldiers, fighting shoulder to shoulder against Russian imperialism. The real Russian democratic forces are the Chechens, Ingurs, Circassians and other nations, indigenous peoples who deserve the right to be free as well as any other nation in the world, but who are suppressed today by the Russian empire. These are the real Russian democratic forces.

So if we want to build a dialogue with the Russian democratic forces, I'll tell you who are the people with whom we need to work and co-operate and support them. Indigenous peoples, indigenous nations which are suppressed by Russia today. It's Russians who are fighting with weapons in their hands against Russian imperialism. This is the people, and these are representatives whom we can and should respect. And because today these people are really fighting not just for Ukraine, not just for Europe and the civilised world, but at the end of the day, for a better future for Russia. These people are deserving of our respect. So let's support them and let's work with them.

Slava Ukraini!

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

And the last speaker is Mr Yuriy KAMELCHUK.

Mr Yuriy KAMELCHUK (Ukraine, EPP/CD): Thank you, Mister President.

Distinguished colleagues,

The creation of an institutional platform for dialogue with Russian democratic forces is a right and timely step, since previous ad hoc initiatives have already shown their limitations. If we truly seek democratic change in Russia's future, we must ensure a structured, transparent and effective interaction with those who are fighting against Vladimir PUTIN's regime.

Participants in such a platform can only be those who unconditionally recognise the territorial integrity of Ukraine, including Crimea and the temporarily occupied territories, and who publicly condemn war crimes. This is an essential filter that protects us from attempts to introduce neo-imperial or colonial narratives.

We must also recognise that the future of a democratic Russia is impossible without the voice of the occupied and oppressed peoples within the Russian Federation itself. Their participation in this process is no less critical than that of Russian opposition figures in exile.

That is why I propose the creation of a separate platform for co-operation with representatives of these peoples: Tatars, Bashkirs, Ichkerians, Dagestanis, Ingush, Buryats and others. They suffer from Moscow's colonial policies, and their sons are being sent to die in the war against Ukraine.

We have no right to ignore their voice.

Russia must also bear full financial responsibility for the lives destroyed, for the ruined cities and infrastructure in Ukraine.

A special international reparations fund should be established, into which the frozen Russian assets currently held in the European Union will be transferred. This is not only justice, but also a powerful signal: aggression has a price, and it is the aggressor who will pay it.

Thank you.

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

The debate is closed now and – sorry, the speaker's list is closed.

Everybody has taken the floor and I'm really glad for this because this is a very important issue.

I call now Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS, the Rapporteur, to reply. Eerik, you have three minutes, as you know.

Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS (Estonia, ALDE, Rapporteur): Mister President, thank you very much.

Thank you, everyone, for participating.

I will be very short.

As we heard, a lot of what was said today was, in essence, about trust. Can we trust starting this dialogue with the Russian democratic forces? Some of us don't, some of us do. For the doubters, I sometimes bring this example, talking about this.

Imagine that you are in London in 1943, and there are Brits and French and Poles, maybe Americans, and they're creating an organisation, and they're thinking, can we take in some Germans? And how do we bring them in? Can we trust them? And there will be people who say, "Well, they're all Gestapo agents", and some would say that they are Nazis. But then there is a very good possibility that there is a Willy BRANDT or a Konrad ADENAUER among them. And I think, I believe that there is a good chance, and I think that we need to trust this opportunity, even if this chance is not very big.

This is also a bit of a déjà vu moment for me. I have worked a lot with exiled Estonian political organisations back in the Soviet Union times. The Kremlin was always very, very actively doing its propaganda against those politically active expats. And the narrative is very similar to what I hear today. 'Those people do not matter.' 'They don't represent anyone.' 'Nobody listens to them.' 'They are just drinking coffee in Stockholm or Washington, and who cares? The real people are fighting somewhere else.'

But at the end of the day, the people represented an idea of free Estonia, and their idea won.

And in a similar manner, the democratic forces of Russia represent an idea of alternative, an idea of a free Russia. And that needs to be nurtured. And we need to be optimists, and we need to work with these people and help these people, and let's have some trust.

Thank you.

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

I call now Ms Elisabetta GARDINI on behalf of the Committee. You have three minutes.

Ms Elisabetta GARDINI (Italy, ECPA, Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): Thank you Mister President, ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy, I would first of all like to thank the rapporteur Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS for his work and for guiding this complex but crucial effort to today's debate.

The resolution before us sets out a clear objective: to create a structured platform for dialogue with Russia's democratic forces - those who oppose the war, those who support Ukraine's sovereignty, those who work for a Russia that respects human rights and the rule of law.

The wish of all of us is that this platform can be a signal and a reference point for them, precisely to show that they have partners in Europe and especially here, in this House, on the basis of our shared principles.

The debate has shown both the strong support for this initiative and also the concerns that we have heard have emerged and are understandable.

These are important signals, which must guide our future work.

What unites us, however, is the realisation that the creation of this platform is only the first step. Its success will depend on how inclusive it will be, how carefully we define its standards and how consistently we keep it true to the values of the Council of Europe.

Colleagues,

The Parliamentary Assembly has once again shown that it knows how to deal with very complex issues with firmness and clarity, and this resolution undoubtedly gives us a basis for moving forward in an ambitious yet prudent manner.

So I encourage you to support it and facilitate the functioning of the platform.

Thank you.

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

Yes, dear Mr Iulian BULAI.

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

I did not subscribe for speaking for this important topic because I thought that this discussion would strengthen our Assembly and would create a unanimity that would make us walk harmoniously out of this House. I see this is not happening and I see the division in this House, and this harms us.

I congratulate the Rapporteur for the idea. I congratulate you for strengthening it. I congratulate Mr Tiny KOX, the president who initiated this whole debate several years ago.

But probably it would have been best not to have it formal. I see a split. I see division. I'm not happy with it. I think we should have the Russian democratic forces here, but I think it is wrong not to have the Ukrainian colleagues finding a way to have it in a way that would make everyone happy. I'm not happy with the quality of the discussion in terms of the lack of unanimity around this. And I just want to share with the whole Assembly my scepticism and the fact that this will create harm that we cannot control and foresee now. Thank you.

Vote: Russian democratic forces

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

Dear Mr Iulian BULAI, I just want to tell everybody that this Assembly stands 100% by Ukraine. They're struggling, they're fighting against a regime which we all have characterised as a dictatorship. And I don't think that there is any doubt that the Assembly will stand by our Ukrainian friends all the way through, not because they are friends, but because they are on the right side of history.

Thank you, Mr Iulian BULAI, for your note.

Now, the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy has presented a draft Resolution 16247 to which 28 amendments have been tabled. They will be taken in the order in which they appear in the compendium.

I remind you that speeches on amendments are limited to 30 seconds. I understand that the Chairperson of the Committee wishes to propose to the Assembly that amendments 17, 1, 12, 6, 4, 18, 14, 8, 25, 7, 9, 15, 16, 20, 22, 21, 28, 10, 11 and 23 to the draft resolution which were unanimously approved by the Committee, be declared as definitely approved.

Is that so, Ms Elisabetta GARDINI?

Ms Elisabetta GARDINI (Italy, ECPA, Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): Yes.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): I see that Mr Pablo HISPÁN. Yes, Pablo.

Mr Pablo HISPÁN (Spain, EPP/CD): President, I asked for a vote on Amendment 6.

So I ask for 10 people to stand up.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): You need to verify the objection of Mr Pablo HISPÁN. You need to be supported by 10 people at least, as I know. Please, could those who object raise their hand or stand up?

So it's obvious that there are more than 10 objections.

Therefore, Amendment 6 will be put to the vote individually, and Amendments 17, 1, 12, 4, 18, 14, 8, 25, 7, 9, 15, 16, 20, 22, 21, 28, 10, 11 and 23 to the draft resolution are therefore approved and will not be called.

I understand that the Chairperson of the Committee wishes to propose to the Assembly that Amendments 3 and 27 to the draft resolution, which were rejected by the Committee with a two-thirds majority, be declared as definitely rejected.

Is that so, Ms Elisabetta GARDINI? Yes.

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

Amendments 3 and 27 to the draft resolution are therefore rejected and will not be called.

Amendment 6.

I call Mr Stephen GETHINS to support Amendment 6.

You have 30 seconds.

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

Can I say again that I thought the rapporteur, the Ukrainian delegation and the Russian democratic forces have engaged with this exceptionally positively.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Please, when you speak in the hemicycle, you have to stand up.

Mr Stephen GETHINS (United Kingdom, ALDE): Ah, sorry.

Can I just say, my apologies, Chair, that I think the rapporteur, the Ukrainian delegation and the Russian democratic forces who are here have engaged with this so positively.

But this is difficult, and what this amendment does is to strengthen oversight of what is a very difficult issue. I think we're there if it's rejected or not.

I think it's a good report, but I will continue to push this amendment.

Thank you.

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

Mr Pablo HISPÁN.

Mr Pablo HISPÁN (Spain, EPP/CD): There are a lot of painful situations that affect a lot of countries here, a lot of nations – Cyprus, Türkiye, Greece, Kosovo, Serbia.

And any nation has the right to be consulted on the issues of other countries.

So I know that, of course, this is a very sensitive issue for the Ukrainian delegation, but the Ukrainians should be treated like the rest of the member countries of this institution.

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

The Committee unanimously accepted this amendment. But now I shall put the amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

Yes, the vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The amendment is rejected.

Amendment number 13.

I call Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO to support Amendment 13.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO, you have 30 seconds.

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

Thank you, President.

It's quite a technical amendment. And I thank the Committee for its support of this amendment. It's saying about the procedure, how this list of possible members of the platform should be adopted. So it is the same procedure proposed, plus minus, like what is now happening with the Belarusian democratic forces, which are already with us, that they prepare the common list. And then this list is examined by the President and Bureau. So I ask for your support.

Thank you.

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

Does anyone wish to speak against the amendment? What is the opinion of the Committee?

Ms Elisabetta GARDINI (Italy, ECPA, Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): It was approved, yes.

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

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The amendment is adopted.

Amendment 5, I call Mr Stephen GETHINS to support Amendment 5. Stephen.

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

Again, I think there's a principle, "nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine", that my colleague very ably highlighted earlier on, and this strengthens that particular oversight to this. Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Mr Frank SCHWABE, I have seen that you want to speak against.

Just a moment, Ms Elisabetta GARDINI.

Mr Frank SCHWABE, you have the floor.

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

Dear colleagues,

I met Vladimir KARA-MURZA today. He is really fighting for freedom and for peace and against Mr Vladimir PUTIN.

So, we should support him and we should have him here as soon as possible. And I think we really need trust in this Assembly to choose who should be a member here. I think we show a lot of responsibility and I think we have to have some trust in our work.

So I ask you to vote against this amendment. Please vote no.

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

Ms Elisabetta GARDINI.

Ms Elisabetta GARDINI (Italy, ECPA, Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): It was approved.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): It was approved by the Committee.

I shall now put the amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The amendment is rejected.

Amendment 3.

Sorry, Amendment 2.

Mr Stephen GETHINS, I will call you to support the amendment. (I can't hear you.)

Mr Stephen GETHINS (United Kingdom, ALDE): It should be on. Yeah, it's just a bit of a blip.

Can I say firstly, thank you to all colleagues who are engaging with this so positively. I think we'll come to a good solution and it's so good to see Mr Vladimir KARA-MURZA here on this amendment. This is to have the highest possible standards available and to have some oversight of that too. So this comes to having high standards on this particular issue.

Thank you.

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

Does anyone wish to speak against?

What is the opinion of the committee, Ms Elisabetta GARDINI?

Ms Elisabetta GARDINI (Italy, ECPA, Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): It was approved.

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

I shall now put the amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

Amendment 2 is agreed.

Amendment 19. It's an oral sub-amendment.

I call Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO to support Amendment 19.

Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO.

Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO (Ukraine, EPP/CD): Thank you, dear President.

We are talking about the fact that those people who will be represented in this platform should not in any way have been sponsored by state or state-funded organisations, or received funds from the state. And they should obviously submit annual declarations as we all do once they have access to the Assembly.

Thank you, President.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO.

I have been informed that the Committee wishes to propose an oral sub-amendment as follows.

Please listen, dear colleagues:

Remove the words "since 2014" from the Amendment.

The main amendment as amended would therefore read as follows: *Have not received funding or material support from State or state-controlled entities of the Russian Federation or Belarus or related persons or foundations and shall submit annual declarations of sources of funding.*

In my opinion, the oral sub-amendment is in order under our rules. However, do 10 or more members object to the oral sub-amendment being debated?

That is not the case.

I therefore call Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS to support the oral sub-amendment. Eerik?

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

For practical reasons, we decided to propose removing the date because it would be otherwise very difficult to actually enforce this.

Thank you.

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

Does anyone wish to speak against the oral sub-amendment? No.

The Committee's obviously in favour. I will now put the oral sub-amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

It is adopted.

We will now consider the main amendment as amended.

Does anyone wish to speak against the amendment as amended?

So, I shall now put Amendment 19.

Sorry, what is the opinion of the Committee?

Ms Elisabetta GARDINI?

Ms Elisabetta GARDINI (Italy, ECPA, Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): Agreed.

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

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

So Amendment 19, as amended, is agreed.

Amendment 26.

And now it's the time that we were all waiting for, Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS to support Amendment 26.

Dear Emanuelis ZINGERIS, 30 seconds.

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

So the amendment is based on our rules. If a country is not a member, we cannot use their colours here inside. Instead, looking at our rules, it was proposed that the Russian democrats can use their other colours, which they are using for democratic forces.

That's all. Thank you.

It was a very narrow amendment related to our internal rules. Well, the country is not a member, so we should not use the colours of the state.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Don't dare to speak against Mr Emanuelis ZINGERIS. But I have to ask if anyone wishes to speak against.

Thank you.

What is the opinion of the Committee?

Ms Elisabetta GARDINI (Italy, ECPA, Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): In favour.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): In favour. So we go to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

Amendment 26 is agreed.

Amendment number 24.

I call now Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO to support Amendment 24.

Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO.

Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO (Ukraine, EPP/CD): Thank you, colleagues.

This is a very simple amendment which refers to point 11.3. We think that this platform should never be misused to promote politically or somehow in any way to replace the official parliaments or governments and use the means, even the funds of this institution, for political promotion.

So that should be on the means of the platform itself. They should find their own resources. So we suggest deleting the paragraph, because it's about strengthening political impact.

Thank you, President.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (Greece, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO.

Does anyone wish to speak against the amendment?

What is the opinion of the Committee?

Ms Elisabetta GARDINI (Italy, ECPA, Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): It was rejected.

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

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

Amendment 24 is rejected.

We will now proceed to vote on the draft resolution contained in Document 16247 as amended. A simple majority is required.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The draft resolution in Document 16247 as amended is unanimously adopted.

Our final item of business this afternoon is to consider the changes proposed in the membership of committees. These are set out in document commissions 2025-06 Addendum 3. Are there proposed changes in the membership of committees agreed to? They're agreed to.

Dear colleagues, the Assembly will hold its next public sitting tomorrow at 10:00 a.m. on the basis of the Agenda agreed on Monday.

The sitting is adjourned.

The sitting is closed at 7:50 p.m.