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Official report of debates

Opening of the sitting No 13

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Dear colleagues, the sitting is open.

I remind members that in order to be registered for this sitting, you should insert your badge when you take your seat and keep it inserted for at least 30 seconds. You should also insert your badge in order to speak or to vote. To request the floor, please press the "request" button.

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

And I remind you that the Assembly agreed yesterday that speaking time today in the debates would be 3 minutes for spokespersons for the political parties and 2 minutes for everybody else.

Address: Communication from the Committee of Ministers

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Now we come to the first item of business this afternoon and it is the Communication from the Committee of Ministers to the Assembly, represented by Mr Mihail POPSOI, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova and President of the Committee of Ministers. This will be followed by questions to Mr Mihail POPSOI.

Many of you know him already. I'm really grateful that you continue to join us in our Assembly meetings. And please, Mr Mihail POPSOI, the floor is yours to address the Assembly.

Mr Mihail POPSOI (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova, President of the Committee of Ministers): President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe,

Secretary General,

Distinguished Members of the Parliamentary Assembly,

Excellencies,

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.

It is a privilege to stand here before you today for our second exchange, in my capacity as President of the Committee of Ministers.

Time moves swiftly, perhaps never more so than in moments of profound transformation such as those we are having to go through through today. In such times, institutions are tested not only in their ability to respond, but also in their capacity to anticipate, lead, and inspire confidence.

For the Council of Europe to remain a guardian of its core values, it must evolve. It must not only react to crises, but act ahead of them, anchoring stability in an increasingly uncertain world and safeguarding the democratic trajectory we have built together.

During our Presidency, the Republic of Moldova has been fully committed to strengthening the Organisation's ability to adapt to these new realities. Our priorities have been guided by a clear dual objective: to reinforce the Council's foundational values, and to enhance its effectiveness in responding to today's complex challenges that are interconnected, pervasive, and demand comprehensive solutions.

For the Republic of Moldova, membership in the Council of Europe has never been an end. From the very beginning, it has represented a defining step towards our European future. A path anchored in values, standards, and a shared vision for tomorrow.

Today, as a candidate country to join the European Union, this perspective is stronger than ever. It reinforces our determination not only to align with European standards, but also to actively contribute to shaping them. This evolution is reflected in our trajectory. In the past, the Republic of Moldova has contributed to the development of key Council of Europe conventions, including in areas such as the prevention of human trafficking and, more recently, emerging domains such as artificial intelligence.

Today, in our capacity as President of the Committee of Ministers, we have sought to build on this legacy by promoting forward-looking initiatives, fostering dialogue, and advancing concrete responses to new and complex challenges of our societies.

We are witnessing, with concern, a growing tendency to relativise human rights protections. This trend calls for renewed investment, not only in enforcement mechanisms, but also in public awareness and education, empowering citizens and human rights defenders alike.

In this spirit, our Presidency has placed particular emphasis on social rights and women's rights, including the effective implementation of the Istanbul Convention.

Two significant milestones illustrate this commitment: the first is the adoption of the Recommendation on Accountability for Technology-Facilitated Violence against Women and Girls – the first international standard addressing this issue, clearly defining states' responsibilities in ensuring accountability in the digital age.

The second is the side-event organised in New York during the 70th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, which focused on gender-responsive policing, co-operation between law enforcement and technology companies, and strengthening the full chain from reporting to prosecution of online abuse.

Social rights have also been central to our agenda, culminating in the High-Level Conference on 19 March in Chișinău, which resulted with the adoption of a forward-looking Political Declaration. This Declaration reaffirms our shared commitment: that social rights are not secondary, they are foundational. They underpin social justice, enable economic strength, and open the door to the full enjoyment of all other rights.

Importantly, eight member states used this occasion to commit to additional provisions of the European Social Charter, a strong signal of renewed dedication to advancing social protections across Europe.

In parallel, we must address challenges to the rule of law. A transactional approach to justice risks weakening institutions. What is needed indeed is renewed determination, to protect their independence, integrity, and effectiveness.

The credibility of the European Convention on Human Rights rests fundamentally on the execution of the Court's judgements. Progress is visible: more cases are being closed, and more states have advanced in implementation.

At the first quarterly meeting of the Committee of Ministers in its Human Rights formation held in March, 42 decisions concerning 21 states were adopted. The Committee also adopted 18 final resolutions in respect of 40 judgments of the Court, concerning 10 different states.

At the end of March, the Committee of Ministers released its annual report for 2025 on the execution of judgments. The report indicates positive trends, including an increase in the number of cases closed and significant progress made by many countries. Yet challenges persist and must be addressed with urgency and consistency.

All member states must fully honour their obligations. This includes, notably, cases concerning the former member. the Russian Federation, which remains legally bound to execute the Court's judgments, including the payment of just satisfaction.

In this context, as regards the institutional dialogue with the Court, in February 2026 the Committee of Ministers decided to extend the format of the exchange of views held twice a year with the President of the European Court to include one supplementary exchange each autumn on developments in the Convention case law and principles. It reflects our commitment to a more dynamic and responsive Convention system.

Distinguished members,

Democratic backsliding cannot be addressed with isolated measures. It requires strategic, co-ordinated responses, engaging both institutions and society.

In times of uncertainty, citizens look for stability. That stability is often found closest to them, in strong, transparent, and accountable local institutions. Local democracy is where trust is built, day by day.

In this regard, we are pleased to host, later this month in Chișinău, a conference on multilevel governance, in co-operation with the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. It will foster dialogue across all levels of governance and with civil society.

We have also advanced youth participation. We are glad that during our Presidency, the Committee of Ministers adopted a Recommendation to member states on the new text of the European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life calling upon member states to create and support youth participation structures and policies that enable young people to take part in decision making. This is not only an investment in the future, it is a necessity for the present.

Democracy must be lived and experienced by younger generations for it to endure.

Democracy is fundamental.

We are equally aware of the increasing challenges faced by journalists and the need to preserve and promote journalists' ability to inform the public and the integrity of the information space, the Moldovan Presidency of the Committee of Ministers will host this week in Chișinău a high-level conference titled "Defending Truth: Comprehensive Approaches to Journalistic Safety and Quality Journalism", organised in the framework of the Council of Europe's Journalists Matter Campaign.

The event aims to promote a holistic and preventive approach to protecting journalists, strengthening the quality and integrity of journalism, and reinforcing democratic resilience across Europe.

Distinguished members of the Assembly,

In recent years, issues relating to migration, including the relationship between the Convention and national measures to control migration, have become the subject of intense political debate within and between many Council of Europe member states. At the Conference on 10 December, ministers from 46 member states called for the preparation of a political declaration on issues related to migration and the European Convention on Human Rights. The Ministers' Deputies are currently preparing the text of the political declaration, which is expected to be adopted at the next formal session of the Committee of Ministers held in Chișinău on 15 May.

All these efforts, together with other priority actions, are aligned with our three overarching priorities – accountability for Ukraine, the New Democratic Pact for Europe and addressing disinformation and foreign information manipulation and interference.

First and foremost: accountability for Ukraine. There can be no democracy without justice. No justice without rule of law. And no lasting peace without accountability. Support for Ukraine remains central to our Presidency. The International Claims Commission, already signed by 35 countries, including the Republic of Moldova and the European Union, must now enter into force swiftly. Two member states have already ratified it: Estonia and Latvia. We call upon others to follow suit. It represents a concrete path toward justice for the immense suffering caused by Russia's aggression.

It remains of utmost importance that the Convention enters into force as soon as possible, 25 ratifications are necessary. I would like to seize this opportunity to encourage the distinguished members of the Assembly of the signatory states to fully support the ratification process in their respective countries.

The Claims Commission will build on the forerunner work done by the Register of Damage, which has 140 000 claims submitted and over 40 000 recorded, and regularly opens new categories of claims.

We also continue advancing the establishment of the Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression. The Republic of Moldova is among the states committed to being a founding member. We encourage others to join, as legitimacy, strength, and sustainability depend on collective engagement.

At a time of geopolitical shifts, rising authoritarianism, and growing hybrid threats, the New Democratic Pact for Europe is not just timely, it is essential. It is our collective answer: to reinforce the foundations of democracy, to make it more resilient, and to ensure it remains meaningful for our citizens.

Through this Pact, all 46 member states are called to take ownership of their democratic future.

Our response must be structured around its core objectives: democratic stability, democratic resilience, and democratic security.

In this context, I would highlight the High-Level Conference on Media Literacy and Information Integrity, held in Chișinău in March.

Disinformation and manipulation are no longer peripheral threats, they strike at the heart of democracy. They erode trust, distort public debate, and weaken institutions.

Crucially, we must confront one of the most pressing threats to our democracies: foreign information manipulation and interference – better know as FIMI.

FIMI is a deliberate and co-ordinated effort to distort reality, erode trust in institutions, and weaken democratic institutions. It targets our citizens' ability to make informed choices, undermining free and fair democratic processes.

Defending against FIMI means defending democracy itself, free choice, open debate, and the integrity of public discourse.

FIMI must be addressed and has been a key priority of our Presidency.

The Committee of Experts has completed a feasibility study, which clearly confirms three essential points: that FIMI constitutes a real and evolving threat; that isolated responses are insufficient; and that a co-ordinated, whole-of-society approach is indispensable.

This work has just been finalised and transmitted to the Committee of Ministers to act upon in the process of preparing the Chișinău ministerial meeting in May.

Member states are now called upon to decide on the most appropriate angle and legal instrument to address FIMI and related hybrid threats.

The Council of Europe has a clear added value in shaping such a response, through a legal and policy framework that reflects our shared values and diverse national experiences.

Defending democratic security inside Europe also requires coherent and visible engagement beyond Europe. In the current unstable geopolitical context, the Council of Europe should position itself as a regional actor capable of contributing to the protection and promotion of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law through its external action.

The Committee of Ministers, along with the Secretariat, is preparing a strategy for the Council of Europe's external action, which will be adopted at the ministerial meeting in May. The strategy aims to strengthen the Organisation's role in contributing to democratic security and rules-based international order, including multilateralism.

At the same time, we believe that the effectiveness of our actions depends on stronger co-ordination across the multilateral system.

The Council of Europe's impact is amplified when aligned with other international organisations, particularly within the United Nations system, including the Human Rights Council and UNESCO.

In an increasingly interconnected world, coherence between institutions is not optional – it is essential.

The Council of Europe has stood for over 75 years as a pillar of democratic values. Today, those values are under pressure, from geopolitical shifts, from authoritarian tendencies, and from hybrid threats. Our response must be equally strong: to ensure democratic stability, resilience, security and development. These are not abstract concepts. They are lived realities – for our citizens, for our institutions, and for the future of Europe.

Each of our countries carries a responsibility, not only individually, but collectively, to uphold and advance the values that unite us.

During its Presidency, the Republic of Moldova has consistently advocated for strengthening multilateral diplomacy. We believe in its power to build bridges, to foster trust, and to provide sustainable solutions to complex challenges.

Multilateralism remains our strongest tool in defending democracy, protecting human rights, and ensuring that the rules-based order endures.

The experience of the Republic of Moldova shows that democratic resilience, strong institutions, and courageous people can withstand even the most complex pressures. More than that, it can renew itself.

It has been an honour to bring this perspective to our shared efforts.

Let us continue, together, not only to protect the Council of Europe but to help shape its future.

Thank you.

[Applause]

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much, Mister Deputy Prime Minister.

It was very interesting and very substantial. Thanks a lot.

I now remind colleagues that questions must limited to 30 seconds.

Colleagues should be asking only one single question and not making speeches.

We will start with the questions of the representatives of the political groups.

I first call Mr Julian JOSWIG, on behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group.

Mr Julian JOSWIG (Germany, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you very much, Madam President.

Dear Minister,

Thank you very much for coming here to Strasbourg to speak in front of the Council of Europe at our Parliamentary Assembly.

I would like to ask you to elaborate, please, on what you said, on how your government is strengthening Moldova's resistance and resilience against Russian disinformation and hybrid threats.

What support are you expecting from the Council of Europe, from our Parliamentary Assembly?

What can other European countries maybe learn from your government, from the experience you had in Moldova?

Thank you.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Mr Mihail POPSOI.

Mr Mihail POPSOI (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova, President of the Committee of Ministers): But I still need to press the button.

The story of the Republic of Moldova is a story of resilience against the odds. It's a story of resistance against immense pressure on our democratic institutions. And it's a source of pride that our society was able to resist this pressure. And when I say our society, I really mean it, because if it wasn't for the unity and solidarity of all our citizens, NGOs, independent media, the effort of the state institutions alone would not have been enough.

And we have witnessed how individual citizens were playing a role in making sure that illegal Russian money is not able to corrupt the Moldovan political system by bribing voters. Independent journalists uncovered efforts by the Kremlin to hijack our democratic process by infusing illegal cash into our political process. And combined with a significant effort from state institutions to prosecute those illegalities, but also, given the incredible solidarity of society as a whole, we could stand united against these pressures coming from the Kremlin, which resulted in a positive outcome.

But we should not rest assured that the battle is over. It is safe to say that this sort of pressure and interference will continue. That's why it is so important for the entire community of member states of the Council of Europe to contribute to this effort that is being carried out now within the Committee of Ministers and which will be put forward for discussion and for approval at the Session of the Committee of Ministers in Chişinău for a framework convention on combatting foreign information manipulation and interference.

To have such a framework, and given how well suited the Council of Europe is to presenting this document not just to member states, but to the international community, we very much hope that we'll be successful in reaching this consensus document, so that other countries and other societies will be better prepared than Moldova was in combatting this effort.

Thank you.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much for that.

Now I call on 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, Madam Chair.

President, as you mentioned, in a period in which multilateralism is under strain and pressure, how can the Council of Europe reinforce its position as a standard setter or geopolitical actor, particularly in relation with other international organisations?

Thank you.

Mr Mihail POPSOI (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova, President of the Committee of Ministers): Thank you.

The Council of Europe is one of the most vivid expressions of multilateralism. It is not only a creation of multilateralism, but it has also become a promoter of the value of multilateralism initially at the European level, then gradually beyond Europe and now on the international stage.

As witnessed by the establishment of mechanisms to ensure accountability for Ukraine – the Claims Commission and the Special Tribunal for Ukraine, the Council of Europe is shaping multilateralism and reaffirming its value for the rules-based international order. It is particularly relevant in these times when one can see more voices speaking in favour of power as the main enabler of actions on the international stage.

It is also for this reason that the Committee of Ministers is working now on the External Action Strategy of the Council of Europe. And as I have mentioned in my intervention, the impact of our Organisation is maximised when there is synergy and complementarity with other like-minded international organisations.

The External Action Strategy aims, among other objectives, to intensify the global outreach of Council of Europe standards in support of the promotion of human rights, democracy, the rule of law and democratic security, particularly emphasising its place in open conventions. This has paved the way for effective entry points for enhancing co-operation with non-member states and other international organisations and expanding the standard-setting activities beyond Europe’s borders.

Let me just briefly provide you with an example. The Budapest Convention on cybercrime is the Council of Europe's most obvious success story, with 81 parties. The most recent Conventions that are open to non-member states are the AI and human rights, democracy and the rule of law Convention which is the first-ever international legally binding treaty in this field and the new Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of

the Environment through Criminal Law is the first international legally binding instrument to address environmental crime, covering a broad range of criminal acts that aggravate the triple planetary crisis of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss.

It is not a coincidence that, for instance, the EU is a signatory to the latter two conventions I mentioned, or that countries such as Australia and Canada are parties to the Register of Damage for Ukraine. This demonstrates the relevance of the Council of Europe beyond the standard-setting authority and as a multilateral actor in Europe and beyond.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

I now give the floor to Sir Christopher CHOPE on behalf of the European Conservatives, Patriots & Affiliates.

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

Thank you for leading by example in promoting the values of democracy.

Can you assure us that the Political Declaration on Migration which is going to be made this May, will assert the rights of individual countries to take back control over their borders and give them the freedom to use expulsion to deter illegal entry?

And if not, why not?

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Mr Mihail POPSOI.

Mr Mihail POPSOI (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova, President of the Committee of Ministers): Thank you.

As you may recall, as a result of the open letter of nine member states, which was calling for an open-minded conversation about the interpretation of the European Convention on Human Rights, the Secretary General decided to bring this issue for discussion within the framework of the Council of Europe and invited member states, ministers of justice to an informal ministerial conference on 10 December in Strasbourg.

The Conference adopted conclusions in which they invited the Committee of Ministers to prepare a draft political declaration reaffirming the obligation to ensure the effective enjoyment of the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Convention to everyone within the jurisdiction of member states in the context of the contemporary challenges posed both by irregular migration and the situation of foreigners convicted of serious offences, taking duly into account in particular governments' fundamental responsibility to ensure national security and public safety.

Subsequently, the Committee of Ministers instructed the Steering Committee on Human Rights (CDDH) to prepare elements for political declaration. The CDDH submitted these elements to the Committee of Ministers for its consideration.

Currently, the Ministers' deputies are finalising a political declaration on issues related to migration and the European Convention on Human Rights to be adopted at the session of the Committee of Ministers in Chișinău in May. I would like to assure you that this work is guided by the need to respect the autonomy and the independence of the Court.

Thank you.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

And now Mr Bertrand BOUYX on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.

Mr Bertrand BOUYX (France, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Madam President.

Minister, the world is turning upside down.

Wars, wars of invasion, wars of grabbing, no matter the type, the retreat of international law and the implosion of what, until recently, we called the international community.

In this context, your country is geographically and humanly situated on one of the fault lines. In this context, Minister, President Maia SANDU recently said she was in favour of reunification with Romania, a member of the European Union. This, I presume, is a way of affirming her clear and definitive choice for full reintegration into the European family.

Has this stance had any impact on the debate within your own country?

I would also like to thank you for putting Ukraine at the heart of the Moldovan Presidency.

Thank you very much.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Mr Mihail POPSOI.

Mr Mihail POPSOI (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova, President of the Committee of Ministers): Thank you.

As I've mentioned during my previous intervention here, and as President Maia SANDU mentioned when Her Excellency was here, the movement for unification with Romania is part and parcel of Moldovan political discourse and has been so since Moldova's independence. For over 30 years now, it has been a constant feature in Moldovan political debates and in Moldovan elections. But at the same time, it is not an imminent issue on the political agenda of today.

At the same time, we need to be aware of the historical, linguistic and cultural commonalities between the Republic of Moldova and Romania. About a million Moldovan citizens are also citizens of Romania. And in light of the very severe geopolitical circumstances in which we find ourselves, we need to be reminded of our common past.

But again, as I said and as it was explained repeatedly back home, this is not necessarily an item on the immediate political agenda of political decisions in Chişinău today.

Thank you.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Ms Alessandra MAIORINO, on behalf of the Group of the Unified European Left.

Ms Alessandra MAIORINO (Italy, UEL, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Madam Chair.

In light of unprecedented sanctions imposed on UN Special Rapporteur Ms Francesca ALBANESE solely for her UN-exercised mandate, how does the Committee intend to safeguard the independence and integrity of the international human rights system?

Given the allegations of severe violations of international human rights law by Israel, including accusations of genocide, torture, apartheid and illegal appropriation of Palestinian land, what concrete steps will you take to ensure that the Organisation's ongoing co-operation with Israel remains consistent with the Council of Europe standards and principles?

Thank you.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Mr Mihail POPSOI.

Mr Mihail POPSOI (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova, President of the Committee of Ministers): Thank you.

The Council of Europe and the United Nations (UN) are long-standing partners and share the priority of protecting and consolidating the universal human rights protection system in these challenging times.

The standard setting, role and normative influence of the Council of Europe, as well as its fundamental human rights protection system based on the European Convention of Human Rights and European Court of Human Rights, are widely recognised. As such, the Council of Europe is a regional actor with the opportunity and responsibility to maintain the universality of human rights and the respect of international law, including the UN Charter.

It will spare no effort to intensify and consolidate its work and dialogue with the UN and other international actors in order to contribute to the resilience and integrity of the protection of human rights system. The Council of Europe has played a crucial role to ensure that neighbouring countries become part of the common legal space, sharing values, standards and protection systems of human rights. The Organisation will continue to pursue these goals when they are put at risk by geopolitical developments.

Given the importance of these issues for the Council of Europe, we pay particular attention to relevant developments in the country you mentioned. In the context of the recent adoption of the law and death penalty in Israel and the Occupied territories, the Committee of Ministers express deep concern over the legislative proposals which would expand the death penalty in Israel and calling on the authorities of Israel to abandon it.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): So the questions will now be taken in groups of three.

I recall 30 seconds. One question. No speech.

The first one is Ms Mónika BARTOS from Hungary.

Ms Mónika BARTOS (Hungary, ECPA): Mister President,

On 13 March, the Moldovan Presidency organised a highly productive event on the protection of national minorities with OSCE experts.

What lessons were learned from this?

How could this initiative be continued at the future Committee of Ministers presidencies?

Thank you for your answer.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Now, Ms Gökçe GÖKÇEN from Türkiye.

Ms Gökçe GÖKÇEN (Türkiye, SOC): Thank you,

Mister Minister,

I already asked this question to you last session and you answered. Thank you for that.

But there is no progress regarding the implementation of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights regarding Mr Osman KAVALA.

My question is, does the Committee of Ministers discuss this ongoing problem?

Do you have a plan?

Thank you.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): And finally Mr Piero FASSINO from Italy.

Mr Piero FASSINO (Italy, SOC): Thank you, Minister.

My question is very simple: after the election victory and the positive pro-European outcome of the referendum, what policies are you putting in place to, let's say, foster and accelerate the process of integration into the European Union?

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Mr Mihail POPȘOI, please.

Mr Mihail POPSOI (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova, President of the Committee of Ministers): Thank you.

The event you referred to, Ms Mónika BARTOS, was a side event organised on the margins of the 42nd biannual Co-ordination Group meeting between the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), that took place in Strasbourg on 13 March. It was a joint initiative of the Moldovan Presidency and the Committee of Ministers and the Swiss Chairperson of the OSCE.

It's the second time we are organising a side event on the margins of the biannual Co-ordination Group meeting between the Council of Europe and OSCE. The first being in October 2025 in Vienna on human trafficking. And with the OSCE counterparts, we decided to continue this initiative and we are very happy that we had this opportunity. On the occasion of the Co-ordination Group meeting in the Moldovan Presidency of the Committee of Ministers, in collaboration with the Swiss Chairpersons of the OSCE, it presented key trends and outlined ways for renewed commitment between states of the Council of Europe and the OSCE to protect the rights of persons belonging to national minorities in the context of different challenges in different countries.

Now, on the question of Ms Gökçe GÖKÇEN's follow-up on the European Court of Human Rights' decision on the Kavala case, the Committee of Ministers is faced with an exceptional situation where the application remains detained, despite not only the Court's initial judgment of May 2020 ordering his release, but also a second judgment of its Grand Chamber in infringing procedure under Article 46, Paragraph 4 of the Convention.

The Committee follows this case at every ordinary and human rights meeting. At its recent meeting in March 2026, the Committee again expressed its deepest concern that Mr Osman KAVALA remains detained and that no tangible progress has yet been achieved despite the Court's findings and the Committee's numerous decisions. It therefore once again exhorted all the Turkish authorities to ensure Mr Osman KAVALA's immediate release. As President of the Committee of Ministers, I can but repeat the call for Mr Osman KAVALA's immediate release and absolutely insist that this call is respected. The ongoing dialogue must achieve results. There is no step more important for Mr Osman KAVALA and the Convention system. Thank you.

And when it comes to Moldova's European integration path, Mr Piero FASSINO, I can assure you, and you are very much welcome as a distinguished member of the Monitoring Committee, to see the progress that the Republic of Moldova is doing, evidenced in the enlargement report published by the European Commission at the beginning of the year, spelling out that the Republic of Moldova has made by far the biggest progress among all the candidate countries in the past year. We very much look forward to increase the momentum, the speed, but not at the expense of quality, as our friends in Brussels and in member states keep telling us. And indeed, it is our ethos to make sure that we consolidate democratic institutions and develop the competitiveness of the Moldovan economy so that we can be ready for membership.

The reforms that we are doing back home are first and foremost driven by the craving of the Moldovan people to increase and improve the quality of life in Moldova today. The fact that it also helps us to advance towards European Union membership, it's great, but the driver is domestic. Moldovan citizens have waited for 30 years to embark on this path towards returning to the European family of nations. Now that we have this opportunity, we cannot afford to lose any more time. So, we are undertaking the difficult reforms back home and we are counting on the reciprocity of our friends in Brussels and in member states, bearing in mind the principle and the commitment and the promise that we made to each other of a merit-based accession process.

We are certainly working hard to deliver on our commitments and we are optimistic that our friends in member states and in Brussels will deliver on theirs. Because the enlargement of the European Union has always been a success story. There isn't a single country that has joined the European Union and is worse off now than it was before it joined. In fact, all of the countries that joined have been a tremendous success. But in particular, if we look at countries like Ireland, that made a remarkable transformation to one of the most advanced countries with the highest GDP per capita. Poland is perhaps another amazing example, now reaching a status of a real economic and political powerhouse in Europe and in the world. The economic growth that our brothers in Romania have witnessed in the past decade since joining has been truly remarkable.

So, this is an investment in peace and stability in Europe and in Europe's competitiveness as a whole. Because every enlargement wave also improved the competitiveness of German companies, of Italian companies, of companies from Luxembourg, because they received new markets, they received new investment opportunities, and we very much look forward to be able to contribute towards this incredibly successful economic co-operation and peace project that is the European Union.

Thank you.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Now 30 seconds for Ms Albana VOKSHI from Albania.

Ms Albana VOKSHI (Albania, EPP/CD): Thank you.

Since the end of monitoring, Albania has been democratically backsliding.

The V-Dem Institute classifies it as an electoral autocracy with a concentration of power, elections conducted under a party state influenced by drug cartels and the arrest of opposition leaders, no parliamentary oversight, widespread systemic corruption, obstruction of accountability by the socialist majority and the refusal to lift the immunity of high-level officials, including the deputy prime minister, accused by the Special Prosecution Against Corruption and Organised Crime (SPAK) of 11 corruption cases.

How does the Committee of Ministers assess Albania's compliance with its obligation?

Does it consider additional monitoring, including a return to full monitoring?

Thank you.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Mr Titus CORLĂŢEAN from Romania.

Mr Titus CORLĂŢEAN (Romania, SOC): "Welcome to the Minister" [spoken in Romanian].

Congratulations for the good quality of the management of the Moldovan Presidency.

My question is related to the complex process of reintegration of the Transnistrian region that cannot be imagined without the democratisation of this region.

What tools and means can be used by the Council of Europe to support the Republic of Moldova in this process of reintegration, also through the democratisation of the Transnistrian region, and also to ameliorate the deplorable situation of the respect of the human rights in this region?

Thank you so much. "Thank you" [spoken in Romanian].

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

The third in this round is Lord George FOULKES from the UK.

Lord George FOULKES (United Kingdom, SOC): Thank you.

Minister, in your excellent speech, you mentioned the great work we're doing in support of Ukraine.

What similar collective action do you think the Council of Europe and its agencies can do in terms of mitigating the terrible effects that the Middle East war is having on the citizens of our countries?

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Mr Mihail POPSOI.

Mr Mihail POPSOI (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova, President of the Committee of Ministers): Thank you.

The Parliamentary Assembly has developed its own procedures to review member states' progress in fulfilling their obligations. It is not for the Committee of Ministers, and even less so for its President, to interfere in these proceedings.

From its part, the Committee of Ministers has received several several written requests from the Honourable Parliamentarian from Albania. It will respond to them in accordance with the rules of procedure.

The Committee of Ministers expects all its 46 member states to support the undertaken commitment as member states of the Council of Europe. The expertise of the Council of Europe is at their disposal to support them in their reform process, with a view to aligning legislation to meet European standards.

"Nice to meet you, Mr Titus CORLĂŢEAN" [spoken in Romanian]

It's good to be here. When the time for re-integration comes, all Council of Europe instruments that were so useful and brought such important developments for the democratic consolidation of the Republic of Moldova could be applied as well to help identify the best solutions adapted to the specific situation of the reintegration process as it will be considered in the moment.

As for the human rights situation in the region, it is being constantly monitored by the Moldovan authorities, including in the context of the European Court of Human Rights judgements concerning the Russian Federation.

Let me thus recall the International Conference on the execution of judgements as part of the Convention system that was organised in December 2025 as part of the Committee of Ministers' Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, which also discussed the means to ensure the execution of the judgements regarding human rights violations in the Transnistrian region of the Republic of Moldova, for which the Russian Federation was found responsible.

Now, when it comes to the developments in the Middle East, the conflict unfolding in Iran, Israel and across the Gulf has a far-reaching impact in the Middle East and beyond, on the loss of civilian life and infrastructure, as well as on economic stability and energy supply. A ceasefire has been announced, but the ongoing closure of the Strait of Hormuz is greatly damaging the global economy.

The developments in Iran and the wider region also threaten regional and global security. International law, including the principles of the United Nations Charter and international humanitarian law, should be respected by all parties. The Committee of Ministers recalls that although the membership of the Council of Europe is limited to European countries and that the Organisation has no direct responsibility or authority to resolve the conflict, this does not mean that it remains untouched and unaffected by the multiple consequences of the crisis in the Middle East and the regional instability generated.

Among the consequences of the crisis, the rise of antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred in Europe also raises grave concerns. The Committee of Ministers is taking the impact of the conflict on European societies very seriously. We deplore the alarming upsurge in antisemitic incidents in Europe since the beginning of the conflict, as well as manifestations of hatred and intolerance, including xenophobia and Islamophobia.

The Committee of Ministers reminds all Member States of the revised general policy recommendations of the European Commission against racism and intolerance, on prevention and combatting anti-Muslim racism and discrimination, as well as on preventing and combatting antisemitism and encourage them to redouble on their efforts to implement it.

The Committee of Ministers stands in support of member states close to the region and remains extremely vigilant in these issues to prevent the poison of hatred and racism from growing in our societies, as well as on other issues, such as the potential impact of the crisis on member states that are neighbours to the conflict zone, such as migration.

Thank you.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

We start the last group of three questioning with Ms Larysa BILOZIR from Ukraine.

Ms Larysa BILOZIR (Ukraine, ALDE): Minister Mr Mihail POPSOI.

The continuing presence of Russian troops in the Transnistrian region of Moldova, along with an estimated 20 000 tonnes of ammunition stored there, poses a persistent risk to our shared regional security.

Therefore, Ukraine's south-western flank – often seen as more potential dormant front, I would say – can be used by Russia in the future.

How does Moldova assess this risk today?

What concrete steps can be taken to prevent destabilisation and ensure security in this sensitive area?

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Now we listen to Mr Armen GEVORGYAN from Armenia.

Mr Armen GEVORGYAN (Armenia, ECPA): Mister Deputy Prime Minister,

Azerbaijan has bent the activities of important international humanitarian organisations, in particular the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), making objective information about Armenian prisoners in Baku extremely limited.

Azerbaijan is also disregarding decisions of international courts, including those of the European Court of Human Rights on this matter.

Despite the fact that the Azerbaijani delegation is not present in this hemicycle, the country continues to bear obligations towards this organisation.

In this regard, I would like to ask, what steps will the Committee of Ministers take to ensure Azerbaijan's compliance with international humanitarian law?

Thank you.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Finally, Mr Andrian CHEPTONAR from the Republic of Moldova.

Mr Andrian CHEPTONAR (Republic of Moldova, EPP/CD): Mister Minister,

The Russian Federation was expelled from the Council of Europe in March 2022.

Waging a full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine is against the core values of the Council of Europe, and Russia's exclusion was the only possible decision in this context.

Though Russia also ceased to be part of the European Convention on Human Rights, it has a binding legal obligation to implement judgments and decisions from the Court.

In this context, Mister Minister, could you tell us how the Committee of Ministers is ensuring the supervision of the execution of judgments against the Russian Federation?

Thank you.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Mr Mihail POPSOI, in case you are quick, we also can take the last two on the speaking list.

Mr Mihail POPSOI (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova, President of the Committee of Ministers): Well, first, on Ms Larysa BILOZIR's question, I would first take the opportunity to yet again thank our Ukrainian friends and neighbours for the incredible sacrifice they are making for keeping not just their country safe, but also the Republic of Moldova and in fact, all of us, in light of the incredible sacrifice that they are making daily.

When it comes to the Transnistrian issue and the risks that it poses, I would emphasise the fact that since the Russian annexation of Crimea 2014, there hasn't been any rotation of the illegal Russian military presence in the Transnistrian region of Moldova. So the roughly 1 200 Russian personnel there, which we often cite and reference, it's not exactly reflective of the reality anymore. Since not having been able to rotate for over a decade now, the number of actual Russian soldiers in the Transnistrian region has decreased dramatically. So it's literally a couple hundred left. The rest are being recruited from within the region, including from among Moldovan citizens. And since last year, the Moldovan authorities have taken decisive actions to discourage this practice by withdrawing citizenship to those who are serving – if that is the right word – in the illegal Russian military presence in the Transnistrian region of the Republic of Moldova.

This should act as a significant deterrent for any other Moldovan citizen who would consider to earn a living this way. There are plenty of jobs in the Republic of Moldova. In fact, we are struggling with not enough labour force in Moldova, so serving in the illegal Russian military presence is highly problematic, to say the least. So these actions will hopefully and most definitely serve as a deterrent when it comes to this particular situation.

And the same goes for the over 20 000 tonnes of ammunition that are often cited in this context. Those stockpiles have also been depleted over time because the illegal Russian troops, but also the so-called Transnistrian military, has used those stockpiles throughout the years. So the numbers have decreased to a significant degree, as well. But of course it is incumbent on us as the international community and Moldovan authorities, first and foremost, to build, to create the fertile ground and to build a strong international coalition to nudge the Russian Federation into withdrawing its troops and munitions from the Republic of Moldova as they committed themselves under the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Istanbul summit of 1999. And of course, we'll continue to work tirelessly in that direction.

Now, on the question of Mr Armen GEVORGYAN. Indeed, further to the decision taken by our Assembly in January 2024 not to ratify the credentials of the Azerbaijani delegation, this delegation is no longer present in our Assembly. This is regrettable and I hope a solution will be found. Azerbaijan is a full fledged member of the organisation, entitled to the same rights as any other member, while of course having the same obligations in terms of commitment to the Council of Europe's standards. Accordingly, all persons under the jurisdiction of Azerbaijan continue to enjoy the protection afforded by the instruments of the Council of Europe and in particular the European Convention of Human Rights. The safeguards guaranteed by the Convention apply to all individuals imprisoned in the country, including Armenian prisoners, who continue to have access to the European Court of Human Rights.

Let me conclude by recalling that peace and stability in the Caucasus region are of key importance for the Council of Europe as a whole. I'm looking forward to the day that the peace agreement is finally ratified and certainly, in these very turbulent times that we are living, it's a sign of hope when we see the normalisation process in the Caucasus between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Now when it comes to the question of Mr Andrian CHEPTONAR. The Russian Federation ceased to be a high contracting party of the convention on 16 September 2022, but it remains bound by the obligations under the Convention, including in implementing the judgments of the Court. The Committee of Ministers continues to supervise the execution of the judgments against Russia, but it's a challenging task since Russia's authorities have ceased all communication with the Committee. The Committee deplored the continued lack of co-operation on the Russian authority side. It also strongly urged the Russian Federation to comply with their obligations under the international law and the Convention to fully abide by the Court judgments, including by paving the just satisfaction along with the interest accrued also in the interstate and interstate-related cases.

The Committee has reacted in flexible and innovative ways to ensure that it can still cast a light on the situation in these cases pending against the Russian Federation. The Committee decided to bring in its decisions in case against Russian Federation to the attention of other relevant international organisations such as the UN, to increase pressure on that state.

Under the Moldovan presidency, on 12 December, an occasion of the International Conference on the European Convention System and execution of judgments on the European Court of Human Rights was organised. The event also tackled possible avenues under international law aimed at securing the payment by Russia to just satisfaction awarded by by the Court in these cases, including conflict related cases and in interstate cases.

In 2025, the committee examined for the first time two interstate cases against Russia. The first of them was Ukraine versus Russia regarding Crimea, concerning numerous violations stemming from the occupation of Crimea by the Russian Federation. The second case was the historic judgement Ukraine and the Netherlands versus Russia, finding multiple human rights violations that occurred in the context of the conflict in Ukraine since 2024 and following the full scale invasion from February 2022, including the downing of the flight MH17 in July 2014 and the killing of all on board. The Committee invited Member States to explore all possible means to ensure execution of these judgments.

Thank you.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Then we managed the last two as well.

Thank you very much, Ms Yelyzaveta YASKO.

But you also have to insert your badge to speak.

Ms Yelyzaveta YASKO (Ukraine, EPP/CD): 1, 2, 3, 4. Yes.

Dear Minister,

My question will be very short.

Moldova has been quite successful in fighting Russian propaganda and banning pro-Russian parties.

Could you please share your lessons from that? What more can be done.

What lessons can you share with other members of this Parliamentary Assembly and in other countries, who also want to fight Russian propaganda in their countries?

Thank you.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

The last one is Mr Benjamin DALLE from Belgium.

Mr Benjamin DALLE (Belgium, EPP/CD): Prime Minister,

In view of the Political Declaration of Chișinău, it is essential that the Committee of Ministers fully respects the independence of the European Court of Human Rights.

References to so-called innovative solutions on migration, such as third-country procedures or return hubs must be clearly framed and compliant with international law, including non-refoulement and access to asylum procedures.

How will the Committee ensure that these concepts are precisely defined and aligned with Convention standards?

Thank you.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Mr Mihail POPSOI.

Mr Mihail POPSOI (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova, President of the Committee of Ministers): Thank you.

On Ms Yelyzaveta YASKO's question, the challenges of Russian propaganda have become clear by now, I think, to every member of this Assembly and to all the states of the Council of Europe. But the intensity of the propaganda and the tools that are being used vary from one country to another.

Moldova has this dubious honour of being the Petri dish of Russian propaganda, where they've tried every tactic in the book in the hope of seeing which one works in order to take them on the road and apply them in your member countries. Moldovan society has resisted and continues to resist this hybrid warfare that we are enduring. But we have also learned that you have not only the right, but the obligation – and I am actually quoting here a member of the Venice Commission who told us as much – that we have not just the right but the obligation to defend democracy.

Because if we stand idle, hoping that things will somehow work out, that democratic institutions will somehow magically be able to defend themselves against these hybrid warfare tactics, this is not the case. If there isn't clear political will to engage, but also very importantly to engage in defending democracy while not overstepping and not getting carried away, because the temptation can be quite high sometimes.

But we have managed – and call me biased – but I think we've managed in Moldova to make sure that we defend our institutions. And there have been some cases where political parties have been banned by the courts, but not because they are pro-Russian or anti-Russian, but because they clearly violated Moldovan legislation, particularly when it comes to campaign finances. When you have politicians running around with cash, distributing this cash to voters, this is not democracy anymore. When you have illegal cash coming from the Kremlin into Moldova to bribe and provide funding to anybody who would take it, in fact, to undermine Moldovan democracy, to hijack Moldova's European future, that is not a level playing field.

But, of course, you need to take action within the democratic system. And we've done our utmost to make sure that we defend this against this interference, while always being reminded of the values that we have been voted to defend, the democratic rights and freedoms of our citizens.

And that is why it's so important, and I've mentioned it earlier, that we find the common ground to agree on a framework convention on on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), so that every country has a basic starting point from where to not only inform its society, but also the means to defend its society against interference from wherever it comes. So this is an important element in our agenda.

When it comes to the question about the migration issue and the independence of the Court, I have mentioned that extensively in one of the previous answers. It's a very delicate balance, again, just like between this proverbial debate between liberty and security, which is highly consequential. The same can be applied here between independence and the Court and the rights of the countries to decide their immigration policy.

We will do our utmost to make sure that we provide a level playing field to reach a reasonable compromise in the declaration, and the expert members have been working hard to reach precisely that consensus. We are now on the final stretch to agree on this declaration to be adopted at the ministerial in Chișinău, bearing in mind, at the same time, the concerns of the countries that face these challenges when it comes to migration, but also bearing in mind the paramount principle of the independence of the court.

Thank you.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): On behalf of the Parliamentary Assembly, I want to thank you very much for answering our questions this afternoon, Mister Deputy Prime Minister.

I wish you a very positive and successful conclusion of the Moldovan presidency.

Thank you very much.

[Applause].

Debate (continued): Violence and hate speech against politicians: a threat to democracy

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): Dear colleagues, the next item on the agenda is the continuation of the debate on the report titled "Violence and hate speech against politicians: a threat to democracy", presented by Ms Elisabetta GARDINI on behalf of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy, with an opinion by Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK, on behalf of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination.

And I'll remind you, colleagues, that speaking time is limited to 2 minutes and we have to conclude the debate at 5:25 p.m. So I propose that we interrupt the list of speakers at about 5 p.m. to allow time for the reply and the vote.

So now we continue. I call next Ms Ivanka VASILEVSKA to have the floor. You have the floor.

Is Ms Ivanka VASILEVSKA not here?

Ms Ivanka VASILEVSKA (North Macedonia, EPP/CD): Thank you, Mister Chair.

Across Council of Europe member states, elected representatives from local councillors to national leaders face rising threats, intimidation, verbal abuse, physical attacks, online harassment and dehumanising rhetoric.

Countless officials endure daily hostility that drives self-censorship, altered decisions, reduced public engagement and withdrawals from politics. This especially deters women, minorities and youth, eroding diverse representation and trust in institutions.

When this happens, our political systems become less inclusive and less representative of the societies they serve.

European leaders reaffirm their commitment to protecting democratic participation through the Reykjavík Principles for Democracy.

These principles remind us that political life must remain free from violence, harassment, hate speech and discrimination.

However, commitments alone are not enough. We must also strengthen our ability to understand and address this growing phenomenon.

For this reason, I welcome the recommendation of the Parliamentary Assembly to establish a Council of Europe platform or observatory dedicated to monitoring threats and violence against politicians at local, regional and national levels.

Such a mechanism will play an important role in collecting and analysing information on incidents of violence. By identifying patterns and trends, it would help us better understand the scale of the problem and develop more effective prevention and response strategies.

It would also raise awareness across member states and encourage co-operation and protection, protecting those who serve in public office.

Protecting politicians from violence is not only about protecting individuals. It is about protecting democracy itself.

Thank you very much.

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

The next speaker is Ms Larysa BILOZIR. You have the floor.

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

Distinguished colleagues,

I would like to thank the rapporteur Ms Elisabetta GARDINI for her very timely report and my colleague Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK for her opinion.

As violence and hate speech against politicians is no longer abstract, it is a daily reality across all Europe.

Online and offline threats, harassment, intimidation, the release of private information.

In my case, follow me to find out my place of living and public release by journalists with Russian links of my address, where I live and where my children live.

It is important to mention that 71% of parliamentarians report experiencing violence.

Thousands of cases are recorded every year across Europe.

Behind every number is a person, someone who considers to step down.

It silences voices. It pushes people out of politics. And that is the goal: to weaken democratic representation.

We must be clear about the causes: polarisation, the normalisation of hate speech.

Yes, we need stronger laws. Yes, we need protection. But protection is not enough.

We must defend the respect of political debate. We must reject hate as a political tool.

Dear colleagues,

Let me return to turn to Ukraine.

For us, this issue goes further. Violence and hate speech are not only internal challenges, they are fuelled from outside.

Russia uses disinformation, deepfakes, co-ordinated hate campaigns and cyber attacks. This is the Russian strategy. The goal is to destroy trust and weaken the state, that threatens the statehood itself.

Ukraine is living proof that violence against politicians can be used as a tool of hybrid warfare.

Colleagues,

Every politician must be able to work without fear, because when politicians are silenced, citizens lose their voices and when citizens lose their voices, democracy loses its meaning.

Thank you.

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

And the next speaker is Mr Denis BEGIC. You have the floor. Mr Denis BEGIC.

Mr Denis BEGIC (Sweden, SOC): Thank you, Chair.

Dear colleagues,

As a Social Democrat from Sweden, I came from a political tradition that has seen the worst consequences of political hate. Our Prime Minister, Olof PALME, was murdered. Our Foreign Minister, Anna LINDH, was killed.

"You and your family should be two metres underground, not in Parliament." That is a message I have received. So this debate is not abstract for me. I know what it means to receive threats and hate, not only as a politician, but also as someone who came to Sweden as a refugee.

This is not only personal. It is an attack on democracy. The goal is to silence. And when people in politics start to hold back or stay quiet, something is already broken.

If we accept this as normal, we must ask: who will step forward next? Who will take this role if their family becomes a target? That is why we must act. Yes, we need stronger laws. We need better protection. But we also need responsibility as politicians. Hate grows in the climate of polarisation and "us and them". We all share responsibility for that.

I know that politicians on the right also face hate. And I stand with you against that. Because this is not an issue about left or right. It is about defending democracy.

Thank you.

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

Now it's Ms Yelyzaveta YASKO, you have the floor, please.

Ms Yelyzaveta YASKO (Ukraine, EPP/CD): Dear colleagues,

When we had this discussion in our Committee, it was very interesting to hear that almost all of us had had quite crazy stories of the hate against us, as politicians. Some of us have had it more, some of us less.

I also want to share just my entrance into politics seven years ago, and the way I actually encountered hate speech at that moment.

It happened to me during the first months of being a member of the parliament. At that time I was appointed as the head of our delegation to the Council of Europe. There was huge media attention on me. Then, suddenly there was a lot of hate and fake photos saying that "I'm a lesbian" or "I am having very strange relationships with Mr George SOROS". I was called a "Soros agent". They also were searching for information about my family. My father is a musician, so they found that he played Tchaikovsky's music 15 years ago – and I was called a "traitor".

Most of us know what it means to be under huge security threats – not only verbal, but also physical. This is very hard, but today I want to address all the people who actually want to enter politics.

Please don't wait for politics to be very pleasant to you! I don't think that for any of us, politics brings so much pleasure and joy. It's a huge amount of hard work. As my colleague here, Ms Albana VOKSHI, said today, the challenge is not to enter politics, but actually to stay in politics.

In the meantime, you may have so many threats against you, but if you find that purpose and the courage in leadership, you should continue.

So my congratulations to the rapporteur.

[Light applause].

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

The next speaker is Mr Armen GEVORGYAN. You have the floor.

Mr Armen GEVORGYAN (Armenia, ECPA): Dear colleagues,

This document is largely driven by the growing radicalisation of political discourse in Europe. However, for a number of states, including my own, this issue has a broader dimension. It is directly linked to the functioning of democratic institutions and the relationship between the ruling majority and the rest of society.

Violence is unacceptable in any form. However, ignoring its root causes makes efforts to combat it ineffective. When public rhetoric of ruling parties and their leaders is dominated by aggression, intolerance and the dehumanisation of opponents, this inevitably shapes society and creates an environment of confrontation.

Holding a majority is often perceived as a licence for permissiveness, but not a great responsibility, for upholding pluralism, ensuring fair political competition and respecting opponents. If it is not a reality, then checks and balances are weakened, and the space for politically correct and rational dialogue is reduced. The political struggle moves beyond democratic procedures.

Therefore, when discussing the protection of politicians from violence, we must also speak about protecting democracy itself from the abuse of power and irresponsible political rhetoric. For instance, the framing by the ruling majority, in my country, of the election campaign in the spirit of "if not we, then war" creates an atmosphere of hopelessness and a lack of real democratic choice. Such a way of communication raises internal aggression, increases societal division and brings a new portion of hatred. It leads to democratic degradation and the loss of trust in institutions.

Mister Chairman,

It is crucial to focus on holding the ruling politicians accountable for their words and actions. Only then will we be able to truly strengthen democracy, rather than merely addressing its shortcomings.

Thank you.

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

And I call the next speaker. It's Mr Namık TAN. You have the floor.

Mr Namık TAN (Türkiye, SOC): Mister President,

Democracy is built on shared commitment to dialogue, pluralism and mutual respect. When these principles are undermined, democracy is placed at risk.

We are witnessing an alarming rise in threats, harassment and violence directed at politicians, from physical assaults and intimidation to the pervasive spread of hate speech and incitement online.

This trend has far-reaching consequences. First, it creates a climate of fear. When politicians are subjected to threats and abuse, their ability to serve freely and effectively is compromised. Second, it erodes public trust. When political debate is reduced to hostility and personal attacks, citizens lose confidence in democratic institutions. Third, and most fundamentally, it undermines the rule of law.

In short, violence and hate speech are not democratic expressions; they are direct violations of them.

In addressing this challenge, we must uphold fundamental rights and avoid any measures that could unduly restrict legitimate expression. Political leadership is equally vital. As public figures, our words matter. The language used in political debate can either foster a culture of respect or fuel discrimination and hostility.

Finally, we must reaffirm a simple but powerful truth: disagreement is not enmity. In a true democracy, opposing views are not threats to be silenced, but contributions to be debated.

Dear colleagues,

Protecting politicians from violence and hate speech is not about shielding individuals from criticism. It's about safeguarding our democratic space.

Thank you.

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

The next speaker is Ms Regina BASTOS.

Ms Regina BASTOS (Portugal, EPP/CD): Thank you, Mister President,

Colleagues,

Allow me first to congratulate our rapporteur, Ms Elisabetta GARDINI, for the clarity and relevance of her report, and I also congratulate the rapporteur for opinion.

Political violence is not something new to our time. History reminds us of this.

John KENNEDY was shot dead in the year 1963, before the eyes of the world. Olof PALME, Prime Minister of Sweden, was assassinated in the year 1986 while walking home from the cinema, in a country that believed itself protected from such violence.

Today, however, the threat often begins long before any physical attack. It begins when insult replaces argument, when political opponents are treated as enemies, and when intimidation becomes normalised.

The answer to violence and hate speech against politicians requires effective laws, serious investigation, accountability from digital platforms and civic education, but it also requires a more demanding political culture.

In Portugal, my country, we recently witnessed a regrettable case: a candidate for parliament, during the legislative elections, waited outside the family home of the Prime Minister and re-candidate, staging an offensive and provocative confrontation for social media.

Politicians must be the agents of good example, not the authors of intimidation, hostility or public humiliation.

Thank you very much.

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

And the next speaker is Mr Bob De BRABANDERE.

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

Violence against politicians and political participation is not some abstract threat. It is a daily reality. And it is right that we are discussing it here today, but I do have to say this plainly.

The hypocrisy of the left on this issue is simply staggering!

I come from Brussels and what do we see there? A pattern of co-operation between violent far-left activist groups and the local left-wing government.

Time and time again, we see the same script. Left-wing street militia, so-called Antifa. They threaten peaceful gatherings of people with different views. Then the mayors use this as a pretext to ban those same gatherings.

In practice that means fundamental rights like the freedom of speech and the freedom of assembly are being crushed.

The hypocrisy goes even further, ladies and gentlemen, it is out in the open.

I am referring to what happened in the European Parliament in the case of the Italian terrorist Ms Ilaria SALIS.

This woman was suspected of being involved with the so-called "Hammerbande" (Hammer Gang). A Hammer Gang that was attacking innocent people with hammers. You can call that what it is. It is attempted murder. And what did we see? In a secret vote, it was ensured that her immunity was not lifted and that she did not face the trial that she deserved. It was done by her partners, the same people here who are going to be agreeing with this report.

So yes, it is right that political violence is raised here today, but please stop the horrible hypocrisy.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): And the next speaker is Ms Lesia VASYLENKO.

Ms Lesia VASYLENKO is not here.

Okay, then we move on to Mr Carlos SILVA SANTIAGO, you have the floor.

Mr Carlos SILVA SANTIAGO (Portugal, EPP/CD): Mr Chairman, dear colleagues,

Violence and hate speech against politicians today represent a real threat to European democracy. If those who choose to serve the public interest do so in fear of threats, attacks or reprisals, then democracy itself is undermined. This phenomenon is neither isolated nor marginal. It is on the rise, crossing the entire political spectrum and affecting all levels of governance. Its consequences are far-reaching: self-censorship, alienation of citizens, abandonment of political life, and weakening of pluralism.

A democracy in which citizens are afraid to participate ceases to be fully democratic. We must also recognise the causes, the growing polarisation, the deterioration of public debate and the amplifying role of social networks where hatred and discrimination spread rapidly. But understanding is not the same as accepting. The response must be clear. Zero tolerance in the face of violence, always respecting freedom of expression.

That is why I support this draft resolution. It goes in the right direction: strengthening the protection of political leaders, combating online abuse and manipulated content, and investing in civic education. But there is one essential point: our own responsibility. As politicians, we must set an example, reject inflammatory language and systematically condemn violence, whoever the victim.

Dear colleagues, protecting politicians means protecting democracy. And protecting democracy means guaranteeing free, pluralist and fearless debate.

Thank you very much.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you. And the next speaker is Ms Wanda NOWICKA. You have the floor.

Ms Wanda NOWICKA (Poland, SOC): Mister President,

Violence and hate speech against us politicians is a rapidly growing pathology of our political and public life. Many of us, if not all, have been badly attacked, some people even killed. In Poland, the President of Gdansk, Mr Pavel ADAMOWICZ, was murdered on the stage during the final ceremony organised by the most successful Polish charity foundation, which yearly collects millions to support medical purposes.

An extremely violent and hateful campaign that had been carried out against the female member of parliament, Ms Magdalena FILIKS, led her son to a tragic act. He committed suicide. Ms Danuta JAZŁOWIECKA, who is sitting right there, a former member of the European Parliament, was one of six members of the European Parliament whose pictures were hanging on the gallows. Women fighting for women's rights, including the right to abortion, myself included, had our pictures next to Mr Adolf HITLER, pictures on billboards carried out all over the country.

Violence and hate speech is a systemic form of political war, of blocking progressive changes such as the recognition of the rights of discriminated communities, including LGBTI, religious and national minorities, and women. Democracy, although not perfect – it's still the best political system that has been developed by humankind – is not immune to hate speech, violence and horrific acts.

We need to do more as soon as possible to protect ourselves against this very pathology of our political life. We need to be proactive and start with early education at Schools for Peace. We have to agree that freedom of expression, if it hurts anybody, is a violation of individual rights and and a weapon of war, not the human right of the oppressor. I call for zero tolerance.

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

And the last speaker will be Ms Dominique VIEN. You have the floor.

Ms Dominique VIEN (Canada): Dear colleagues,

Mister President,

It is an honour and a privilege for the Canadian delegation to be with you today.

The issue we are debating is an important one, because it affects each and every one of us in this House, and of course more broadly concerns the health of our democracies.

Canada is no exception. For example, according to those responsible for security in the House of Commons, harassment of parliamentarians by members of the public has increased by almost 800% in the last five years alone. This trend clearly illustrates that the rise in threats and intimidation against elected representatives spares no democracy. The rise in violence against politicians affects their psychological well-being and, of course, the quality of public life.

At local level in Quebec, more than 1 000 elected municipal officials, mayors and councillors left office between 2021 and 2025. Those who resigned cited a difficult climate and a lack of respect from the public among the factors that motivated their decision. On another level, a number of Members of Parliament have left political life in recent years. One of them recently attributed her decision to the constant misogynistic threats and harassment she had been subjected to.

Protecting the physical and psychological integrity of our elected representatives is not just an institutional requirement; it is a fundamental condition for guaranteeing diverse representation that reflects the image of our societies.

To conclude, a word about women. I am extremely concerned about the safety of women, who must always be on hypervigilance, knowing that a woman is murdered every 48 hours in Canada and that, unfortunately, there have already been nine alleged feminicides in Quebec since the beginning of the year alone.

Thank you very much.

Ms Irena FERČIKOVÁ KONEČNÁ (Czechia, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Colleagues, we are witnessing a dangerous transformation of our public square. Online hatred has become a factory of normalization, allowing people to say behind a screen what they would never dare say to a human face.

Many of you in this room know the 'rabbit hole' of haters. You have seen your mentions flooded by fake profiles.

This is the new frontline of political violence, powered by AI, bots, and troll farms. We must be clear: Freedom of expression is a human right. Our rights belong to humans, not algorithms, as emphasised by the CoE AI Convention.

When we allow 100,000 automated accounts to drown out 1,000 real people, we aren't protecting free speech, we are allowing an artificial crowd to steal the human right to be heard."

Finally, let us remember that while we face this as politicians, we are not the only targets.

Hundreds of human rights defenders, those fighting for migrants, minorities, for sex workers, and for the most marginalized in our society, are being systematically silenced by this same machinery of hate.

I stand here today in solidarity with them.

They are the essential actors of our policy-making, often without the protections we enjoy.

If we fail to protect our information ecosystem, we lose more than just a debate.

We are facing a fundamental crisis where machines pretend to be humans, and in that digital deception, the voices of the most vulnerable are being erased.

Democracy cannot survive if we allow artificial voices to silence the human.

Mr Armağan CANDAN (Cyprus* [Resolution 1376 (2004)]): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Mr. President,Distinguished Members,

Hate speech remains a growing challenge, affecting not only public discourse but also the sense of safety and dignity within our societies across Europe. While open debate is a fundamental element of democracy, the increasing normalisation of hostile and exclusionary language risks deepening divisions and undermining social cohesion.

In such an environment, politicians inevitably become among the primary targets of this hostility and are often exposed to the most direct and intense forms of hate speech and acts of violence. As rightly underlined in the draft resolution before us, such acts create a climate of fear, discourage political participation, and ultimately weaken pluralism and democratic representation.

In countries with a history of ethnically based violence, such as Cyprus, hate speech, as a widespread phenomenon predating social media, must be viewed in a particularly sensitive context. The island's history and its continuing realities mean that both peoples remain especially vulnerable to narratives that fuel mistrust, division and hostility.

Indeed, politicians in Cyprus can easily become targets of hate speech and hate-motivated violence. The experience of our former President, Mehmet Ali TALAT, illustrates this reality. While a bomb was once placed in front of his house, years later he was physically assaulted in southern Cyprus by a Greek Cypriot fascist group. This demonstrates that public figures who advocate dialogue and reconciliation in Cyprus may become targets of radical elements on both sides of the island.

Clearly, the rapid spread of hate speech through social media further amplifies these challenges, allowing hostile narratives to circulate quickly and widely, often without accountability.

Nonetheless, it must be underlined that hate speech targeting politicians cannot be addressed in isolation. Unless the broader phenomenon of hate speech within society is effectively tackled, efforts to curb hostility directed at political figures will remain insufficient.

Turning again to Cyprus, in recent years hate speech against Turkish Cypriots has increased significantly, which resulted in multiple documented attacks against Turkish Cypriots. Regrettably, certain narratives in public discourse, including hate speech employed by public figures such as senior Greek Cypriot politicians and members of the clergy, as well as narratives embedded within the education system in southern Cyprus, risk reinforcing intolerance from an early age.

I would like to reiterate that any meaningful effort to counter hate speech directed at politicians will remain insufficient unless the phenomenon of hate speech is addressed in a serious and effective manner.

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

President, Colleagues,

The murders of Jo COX and Sir David AMESS serve as permanent reminders that the line between words and violence can, and does, get crossed. The attack on Sir Stephen TIMMS further illustrates that this is not a historical concern but an ongoing reality. Yet what concerns me today is not only those extreme cases, but the normalisation of what sits beneath them.

For many in politics and public service, threats and abuse have become an accepted part of daily life. I speak from personal experience: I have been threatened with violence while carrying out my duties, required police support at events, been confronted in public based on misinformation, and on one occasion this year was removed from an event for my own safety after being surrounded by protesters. Colleagues across the political spectrum report the same, particularly women in public life.

This is not without consequence. It creates a chilling effect on democratic participation. Representatives begin to weigh whether an event is worth the risk. Colleagues step back, say less, or choose not to stand for office at all. When that happens, we lose voices, diversity, experience and ultimately, the strength of our democracies.

The scale of this problem is unprecedented. It is persistent, coordinated and increasingly driven by online spaces where abuse spreads rapidly and personal information can be weaponised in ways previously unimaginable.

None of this is a call for censorship. Democracy depends on robust debate, disagreement, and yes, even anger directed at those who represent it. But there is a clear line between criticism and intimidation, between disagreement and dehumanisation. Once that line is crossed, it is no longer democratic participation, it is an attempt to silence it.

This resolution responds proportionately. Stronger protections, clearer online accountability, and better support for those in public life, balanced with an unwavering commitment to freedom of expression.

It protects politicians, and it protects the conditions that make democratic life itself possible. I urge colleagues to support it.

Mr Axel KASSEGGER (Austria, ECPA): *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in German*

Ms Nerea AHEDO (Spain, ALDE): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

I must begin with the necessary and explicit condemnation of any form of violence, especially violence directed at politicians, who serve the community. An attack on a politician is an attack on the community, on society, and on democracy itself.

And I know what I am talking about. I am Basque, and for far too many years we suffered as the terrorist group ETA murdered, kidnapped and extorted those who thought differently. More than a thousand politicians lived under police protection, and some were unable to continue with their work. In 2011 we breathed a sigh of relief when ETA stopped killing, but we can see how violence of other kinds, from other spheres, continues.

The problem arises when we normalise violence, when it becomes routine. When we accept it as normal. Because then values are eroded and even social cohesion is ultimately destroyed.

We are witnessing how parties and populist movements of different persuasions encourage threats, extortion, manipulation and lies as a way of operating. An atmosphere is created that capitalises on discontent, dissatisfaction and disenchantment. A new narrative is constructed, a new way of relating and communicating, one that is threatening and generates tension. A space where threats, insults and outbursts become the new and normal way of addressing those who are different or who disagree. This is even more pronounced on social media, where anonymity provides cover.

Faced with this, we cannot allow the normalisation of verbal or physical violence. Nor can we fall into the trap of action and reaction, responding in the same way and with the same tools, thereby creating an atmosphere of hostility and polarisation.

And we must also banish something we see all too often: the idea that when something is done to me it is a threat or an aggression, but when I do it, it is freedom of expression or legitimate defence.

As politicians, as representatives and servants of society, we must set an example through both our words and our actions.

We must work from a place of respect, tolerance and healthy divergence. We must build a genuine political culture, in the fullest sense of the word, restoring to language its true meaning.

All of this is essential to strengthen democracy and to prevent disillusionment and the loss of citizens' trust.

Mr Ivan RAČAN (Croatia, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Public life is undergoing a dangerous transformation. What was once a space for robust debate has become, in many corners of Europe and beyond, a toxic space of intimidation. Violence against politicians is alarmingly on the rise, and we must be clear: any attack on a representative, regardless of their political banner, is an attack on the foundation of democracy.

The data tells a grim story. A staggering 71% of parliamentarians report experiencing hostility from the public. In just the last few years, we have seen assassination attempts on leaders like Robert FICO and Donald TRUMP, the assault on Mette FREDERIKSEN, and the tragic killing of activists like Charlie KIRK and Quentin DERANQUE.

Public life now carries an invisible tax of psychological and physical harm. While women and minority groups face a disproportionate barrage of misogynistic and racist threats, we also see those defending traditional or conservative values being vilified and silenced.

This isn't just about "thick skins." This violence creates a chilling effect where elected officials are forced to censor themselves, avoid their constituents, or choose not to run for re-election out of fear for their families. When fear replaces dialogue, democracy backslides.

Our digital "echo chambers" have turned political opponents into enemies to be dehumanized. To reverse this, we need more than just better security? we need a New Democratic Pact. Politicians must lead by example, rejecting inflammatory rhetoric and standing in solidarity with their peers across the aisle.

Service should not require a sacrifice of safety. It is time to renew our social contract and restore a culture of respect, before the silence of the intimidated becomes the permanent soundtrack of our institutions.

Ms Mira NIEMINEN (Finland, ECPA): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Madam President, dear colleagues,

This report highlights a problem that concerns us all. Hate speech, harassment and direct threats against politicians are increasing. The language is getting harsher, and the behaviour more aggressive. Anonymity, especially on social media, makes this worse in a time when information spreads fast.

This is not about freedom of speech or strong opinions. This is about actions that have real consequences for democracy.

When politicians are threatened with violence, when families are intimidated, and when everyday life is made difficult on purpose, democracy starts to shrink. People withdraw. Self-censorship grows. Fewer people are willing to stand as candidates or stay involved in politics. Democracy does not end suddenly. It weakens quietly.

Hate speech targets politicians across the political spectrum. But it does not affect everyone equally. Women politicians face more dismissal, more sexualised harassment, and more threatening behaviour. This is not about individual strength. It is a structural problem that decides whose voices are heard and whose are pushed out of politics.

It is also deeply concerning that hate speech is increasingly used to influence elections. Artificial intelligence makes this even more dangerous. Automated abuse, fake accounts and realistic false content spread faster than any individual can respond. Fear is used to influence decisions and election outcomes.

Democracy does have resilience. But only if we recognise these threats and act together. Responsibility cannot be placed on individual politicians by asking them to simply tolerate more. No one can act freely under fear.

Democracy deserves protection. At its core is the right to participate without intimidation, today and in the future.

Ms Meritxell ALCOBÉ (Andorra, ALDE): *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in French*

Ms Dumitrina MITREA (Romania, ECPA): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Dear colleagues,

Today, we are discussing a topic that is not just about words, but also, about consequences: violence and hate speech against politicians, a direct threat to democracy.

Democracy is not just about institutions and procedures. It's also based on a minimal social agreement: we can disagree, but the political opponent remains a human being and a legitimate participant in public life. When hate speech targets politicians, the logic changes - they stop debating ideas and start building "sides".

They no longer criticize policies; they attack people. And once hatred becomes a tool, the temptation to move from words to deeds from intimidation to violence becomes real. There's the fact that, this violence is not always spontaneous. It's sometimes visibly supported by some politicians to power as a strategy.

Instead of competing through programs and arguments, they undermine the credibility of opposition politicians. This leads to emotional manipulation: citizens are pushed to hate and fear the "other side", not based on facts, but on questions intentionally planted in public opinion. In this way, hate-motivated propaganda becomes a control mechanism.

Unfortunately, this degradation even reaches the national leadership. For example, the current president of Romania divides his own citizens into pro-Europeans and anti-occidentals, thus fuelling hostility between the two sides. And the leader who should unite the country, risks turning citizens into "internal enemies".

Hate speech is not only condemnable in itself, it has effects: it justifies hostility, normalizes aggression and paves the way for the destruction of democracy, especially when it's used by political power to reduce the freedom of expression of the opposition and to delegitimize the democratic alternative.

Democracy is not defended with hatred, but with clear rules and the protection of everyone's rights.

Thank you.

Ms Claudia ARPA (Austria, SOC): *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in German*

Mr Marc RISCH (Liechtenstein, ALDE): *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in German*

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you. I now must interrupt the list of speakers.

But the speeches of members on the speakers list who have been present during debate but not have been able to speak may be given these speeches to the Table Office for publication in the official report. They must not exceed 400 words. And I remind you, colleagues, that the typewritten text can be submitted electronically for possible no later than 4 hours after the list of speakers is interrupted.

And I would now call on Ms Elisabetta GARDINI, the Rapporteur, to reply. You have 3 minutes.

Ms Elisabetta GARDINI (Italy, ECPA, Rapporteur): Yes, thank you, Mister President.

I really want to pause to thank all the colleagues who spoke, even those who did not speak but who participated in the work, but it was particularly good to listen to them today, because there was a kind of *idem sentire* from all sides of the hemicycle.

We heard the same words, the same shared experiences.

A series of personal testimonies, even painful ones, many also brought data, which confirmed that the problem is there, the phenomenon exists, it is growing and it is really damaging our democracy.

I was struck by the experience of the young Romanian colleague, who spoke of these young people who were presenting themselves – almost all young people who were presenting themselves for the first time to political life – who were attacked, so much so that this stopped them and many withdrew.

Regardless of our affiliation, this phenomenon really affects everyone.

And I firmly believe that our work reaffirms some central points that I would like to mention here.

First of all, we must renew the social contract with citizens, through initiatives that involve the whole of society and that guarantee protection for victims, prevent abuse and restore the recognition due to those who dedicate time and commitment to public life, at whatever level.

The role of parties is important, because parties must set an example, politicians themselves must set an example, respecting their peers, condemning all forms of violence, especially when perpetrated against colleagues from different parties.

This is another point I would like to emphasise.

Just as I would like to emphasise what the report asks of the Committee of Ministers: it asks that they consider creating a mechanism to identify and monitor threats and incidents of violence against politicians at the local, regional and national levels.

This mechanism could indeed take the form of a Council of Europe platform or observatory and would help us to better understand, prevent and react more effectively to this phenomenon.

Moreover, this proposal is the same one that was put forward on 1 April by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities.

This is particularly important, because locally elected representatives are often among the first and most exposed targets.

Dear colleagues, any violent attack on a political representative is an attack on democracy itself.

I reiterate this, because you have all emphasised it strongly.

I therefore urge you to support the adoption of the resolution and recommendation. Although we often disagree on other issues, I believe that here we are united and could bear witness, because the health of our democracy really depends on it.

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

Does the Chairperson of the Committee wish to have the word?

You have 3 minutes.

Ms Deborah BERGAMINI (Italy, EPP/CD, Second Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): Thank you President and thank you colleagues.

On behalf of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy I would like to express my thanks to the rapporteur Ms Elisabetta GARDINI, as well as to Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK, who is the rapporteur of the opinion of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination. Sincere thanks to each and every one of you for all your contributions.

I believe that the debate that has taken place around this report has been an extremely qualifying one for our Assembly, certainly a sincere one, and one that has seen us united in a unanimous condemnation of violence against those who are appointed, elected, to represent their fellow citizens.

For us, this is a debate that, in my opinion, is vital, because it helps shape the future of our democracies and calls our Assembly to a responsibility: that of taking a strong and decisive stand against violence against politicians.

Many emphasised this during the debate: violence cannot be part of democratic debate and violence against politicians, whatever form it takes, is a direct attack on everything we believe in, everything that unites us.

We have the right to have our opinions, we have the right to defend them, we have the right to discuss them, even very passionately and heatedly. We cannot deny this, just as we cannot and must not deny the right of each individual to express his or her opinions, because this is the food of our democracies.

But freedom of expression stops if there is incitement to hatred or violence. And we have a moral obligation and a political obligation to ensure that politicians at all levels are protected from verbal and physical violence, online and offline.

This is crucial, because it allows us and our colleagues to devote all our best energies to serving our fellow citizens, without fear. And it is also important because we must ensure that everyone can feel safe when they decide to engage in politics, regardless of their background.

Democracy is truly such if all voices are heard, within the limits of mutual respect, and as politicians we are called upon to set an example.

This is why I conclude this speech with a final appeal to all of us: let us adopt this text as a message of strength, unity and commitment. Let this House stand firm in its condemnation of all forms of violence against politicians, at all levels and of all political affiliations.

Thank you.

Vote: Violence and hate speech against politicians: a threat to democracy

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much, and now the debate is closed. And we go to the consideration of the amendments.

The Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy has presented a draft resolution, to which 16 amendments have been tabled, and the draft recommendation, to which no amendments have been tabled.

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

Any amendment which has been unanimously approved by the Committee seized for report shall not be put to the vote in plenary and shall be declared as definitively approved, unless 10 or more members of the Assembly object. And I understand that the Vice-Chairperson of the Committee wishes to propose to the Assembly that amendments 11, 13, 8, 3, 14 and 15 to the draft resolution, which were unanimously approved by the Committee, be declared as definitively approved. Amendment 10 was also unanimously approved but has 3 sub-amendments, so it will not be subject to this procedure.

Is this correct, Ms Deborah BERGAMINI?

Ms Deborah BERGAMINI (Italy, EPP/CD, Second Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): Off mic: "Yes, that is correct."

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

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

There is not.

Amendments 11, 13, 8, 3, 14 and 15 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 6 and 7 to the draft resolution, which were rejected by the Committee with a two-thirds majority, be declared as definitively rejected.

You can just nod, Ms Deborah BERGAMINI, if you are right.

Yes, thank you.

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

It is not the case.

Amendments 6 and 7 to the draft resolution are therefore rejected and will not be called.

Then, we go to Amendment 12.

I call Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK to support Amendment 12. You have 30 seconds.

Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK (Ukraine, ALDE): Chair, this is an amendment that was approved and proposed by the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination and basically it proposes to replace the word "homophobic" with the following word: "LGBTI-phobic", which is a broader term and we believe it would reflect all of the community.

And besides, it was mentioned in the explanatory memorandum this term. So it could be wise to have it in the resolution as well.

Thank you.

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

And does anybody want to speak against this amendment? Okay, what is the opinion of the Committee?

Ms Deborah BERGAMINI (Italy, EPP/CD, Second Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): The amendment was approved.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): So the Committee is in favour.

I will now put the amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

So now the vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

Amendment 12 is agreed to.

We now turn to Amendment 4.

I have to recall that Amendment 5 will fall if this amendment is adopted.

I call Mr Emmanuel FERNANDES now to support Amendment 4.

You have 30 seconds.

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

Paragraph 8 refers to the populist movement, a term that we feel is too vague, and we think it would be better to be more precise rather than mixing up different phenomena. It is a question of naming what is already established.

In fact, our Assembly already identified in 2023, in report number 2511, adopted on 11 October 2023, the fact that the extreme right has a specific role in the rise in violence, in the dissemination of extremist discourse and in attacks on elected officials, which is the purpose of this amendment.

Thank you very much.

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

Does anybody want to speak against this amendment?

What is the opinion of the Committee?

You have the floor.

Sir Edward LEIGH (United Kingdom, ECPA): This is a ridiculous amendment. It's just totally one-sided.

The fact is, we all know there is far-right and far-left hate. But just to attack the so-called far right is just ludicrous.

We should oppose this amendment.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): And what is the opinion of the Committee?

Ms Deborah BERGAMINI (Italy, EPP/CD, Second Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): The amendment was rejected.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): The Committee is against.

I shall now put the amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

I now close the vote. The vote is closed.

I call for the results to be displayed.

Amendment 4 is rejected.

We now turn to Amendment 5.

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

In the same vein, this is a minimalist amendment.

As I said in 2023, this House itself acknowledged the fact that extreme right-wing violence had risen sharply in Europe and that attacks on elected representatives showed the growing danger of this extreme right-wing movement.

Therefore, to state that hate speech is becoming normalised without specifying who, in several states, is making a powerful contribution to this normalisation, well, is to fall short of what our Assembly already recognised in 2023.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): I now call for anyone to speak against this amendment.

Yes, you have the floor.

Sir Edward LEIGH (United Kingdom, ECPA): It's the same argument, you know, it's totally one-sided. We rejected it last time, just reject this.

Really the far-left need to get their act together, stop being so blinkered. Hate comes from the far-right and the far-left, just grow up for once.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): And what is the opinion of the Committee?

Ms Deborah BERGAMINI (Italy, EPP/CD, Second Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): It was rejected.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): So the Committee is against.

I'll put it to the vote.

The vote is open.

And now I close the vote.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

This amendment is rejected.

We now go to Amendment 6 – sorry we go to Amendment 1.

I will call on Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO to support Amendment 1.

30 seconds.

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

Dear colleagues, this is an amendment about the unfortunate events which are happening. It's about violence against politicians organised by foreign states.

In this case, we're speaking about Russia organising an extraterritorial hunt for politicians and trying to kill them. Unfortunately, we have many examples of this hunt and even the Speaker of the Ukrainian Parliament, an incumbent member of the Ukrainian Parliament, was killed last year.

So I think it is very important when we are speaking about violence against politicians that we name different origins and sources of this violence.

So I ask you to support it. Thank you.

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

Anybody who wants to speak against the amendment?

What is the opinion of the Committee?

Ms Deborah BERGAMINI (Italy, EPP/CD, Second Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): The Committee rejected this amendment.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): The Committee is against.

I put the amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

And I now close the vote.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

It's rejected.

Thank you.

I now turn to Amendment 2, and that's also Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO.

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

Dear colleagues,

This amendment already mentions the concrete case of Mr Andriy PARUBIY, who was here in our Assembly, who was speaking from this tribune. He was killed in cold blood by an assassin who was found and prepared and co-ordinated by the Russian intelligence service. And I think we need to mention such things in order to prevent these things to happen again. And only thanks to the Ukrainian counterintelligence service there is not many more victims of the Russian hunt against politicians, which can be Ukrainian, but can be anybody else. So I think it is very important to add this to the report. Please support.

Thank you.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): Does anybody wish to speak against the amendment?

What is the opinion of the Committee?

Ms Deborah BERGAMINI (Italy, EPP/CD, Second Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): The Committee rejected this amendment.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): So the Committee is against.

I now put the amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

I now close the vote.

The vote is closed.

I ask for the result.

The amendment is rejected.

We now go to Amendment 10.

I understand there is an oral sub-amendment proposed to Amendment 10.

I first call Mr Serhii SOBOLIEV to support Amendment 10.

You have 30 seconds.

Mr Serhii SOBOLIEV (Ukraine, EPP/CD): It is a technical amendment.

It was supported unanimously, and we agreed to have this amendment as a separate chapter.

Thank you.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): I have been informed by the Committee of the following oral sub-amendment.

In Amendment 10, replace the words "in paragraph 20.1 after the words "where appropriate", insert the following words:" with "after paragraph 20.1, insert the following paragraph:"

The effect of this would be to insert the text as a new paragraph after paragraph 20.1, rather than forming part of paragraph 20.1.

So it will have its own paragraph. So that's the idea. It will have its own paragraph.

In my opinion, this sub-amendment is in order under our rules.

However, do 10 or more members reject that?

Is anybody objecting? No. So that's not the case.

I call on the rapporteur to support the sub-amendment on behalf of the Committee.

And the Rapporteur supports?

Ms Elisabetta GARDINI (Italy, ECPA, Rapporteur): Yes, I support.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): Does anyone want to speak against?

That's not the case.

And we know that Mr Serhii SOBOLIEV is in favour. He said that already. So the Committee is in favour of the sub-amendment. So is Mr Serhii SOBOLIEV.

So I now put it to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result.

The sub-amendment is agreed to.

And now we come to the main Amendment 10 as a sub-amendment.

Does anyone want to speak against this? No.

So what is the opinion of the Committee?

Ms Deborah BERGAMINI (Italy, EPP/CD, Second Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): Approved, this amendment.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): You are in favour.

And now I put it to the vote.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the results.

It is agreed to.

So now we move to Amendment 9.

I call Mr Emmanuel FERNANDES to support Amendment 9.

You have 30 seconds.

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

The purpose of this amendment is to reaffirm a fundamental reality of democratic functioning.

Of course, we must promote dialogue between the parties and a political culture based on transparency, respect and responsibility.

We must, and do, unambiguously condemn violence and hate speech, but that does not mean that democratic debate should be sanitised or reduced to an artificial consensus.

It can legitimately be confrontational and based on deep political disagreements, because pluralism, of course, by definition, implies the confrontation of ideas, but without violence and without hatred, of course.

Thank you all very much.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): Does anybody want to speak again against this amendment?

What is the opinion of the Committee?

Ms Deborah BERGAMINI (Italy, EPP/CD, Second Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): The Committee rejected this amendment.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): The Committee is against.

I now put it to the vote.

The vote is open.

I now close the vote. The vote is closed.

I call for the results.

The amendment is rejected.

We now go to Amendment 16.

And that is an amendment to the title of the draft resolution, to amend the title of the report.

I call Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO to support Amendment 16.

Oleksii, you have the floor.

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

I think that the report should be called about what is said in this. And this is a report about violence against politicians, which is super important. I want to thank the rapporteur for the job that was done. But it's about violence, which should be prevented and stopped, and I think it is important that the text of the report in the resolution will have its understanding from the title. So I propose to delete the following words and hate speech and to leave violence against politicians and threat to democracy.

Thank you.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): Does anybody want to speak against the amendment?

Mr Damien COTTIER.

Mr Damien COTTIER (Switzerland, ALDE): Thank you, Mr President.

I think that this amendment is dangerous, because while not all hate speech automatically leads to violence, all violence begins with hate speech, and so we must already take action. And this is very well described in the report and in the rest of the resolution, and for the title to be consistent with the rest of the resolution, I think we should leave the original title.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): What is the opinion of the Committee?

Ms Deborah BERGAMINI (Italy, EPP/CD, Second Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): The committee approved this amendment.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): So the Committee is in favour.

I will put the amendment to the vote.

Sorry? Sixteen.

Once again, what is the opinion of the Committee?

Ms Deborah BERGAMINI (Italy, EPP/CD, Second Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy): The committee approved Amendment 16.

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): The Committee is in favour of the amendment.

The vote is now open.

Okay, I now close the vote and call for the result.

The amendment is rejected.

And now we will proceed to vote on the draft resolution as a whole, contained in Document 16363. And we need a simple majority.

The vote is open.

And I now close the vote. The vote is closed. I call for the result.

And the draft resolution is adopted.

Thank you. And we will now proceed to vote on the draft recommendation contained in the document. And a two-thirds majority is required here.

The vote is open.

And I now close the vote and call for the results.

And the draft recommendation is adopted.

Thank you very much.

And now, colleagues, the next debate is "Countering discrimination based on religion and protecting freedom of religion or belief in Europe".

And we just need to have a shift on the bench before we can start.

Debate: Countering discrimination based on religion and protecting freedom of religion or belief in Europe

Mr Mogens JENSEN (Denmark, SOC, President of the Assembly): Dear colleagues,

The next item of business is the debate on the report titled "Countering discrimination based on religion and protecting freedom of religion or belief in Europe", presented by Mr Francesco VERDUCCI on behalf of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination.

In order to finish by 7.15 p.m. I will interrupt the List of Speakers at around 7 p.m. to allow for time for the replies and the votes.

I will now call on Mr Francesco VERDUCCI, the rapporteur.

You have 7 minutes now and 3 minutes at the end to reply to the debate.

The floor is yours.

Mr Francesco VERDUCCI (Italy, SOC, Rapporteur): Thank you, Mister Chair.

Dear colleagues, everyone should have the right to believe or not to believe and to live free and equal in the fullness of their being.

Yet this is not the case for many people today, even in our countries of the Council of Europe. And this is a major political issue, which concerns our democracies.

Among the causes of religious intolerance, the main one is war. Our time, again, is marked by traumatic events. In February 2022, Russia's criminal aggression against Ukraine, on 7 October 2023, Hamas's *pogrom* against the Israeli population, and then the devastating reaction of the Netanyahu government, the destruction of Gaza, the catastrophe of the Palestinian people: a time of war that violates international law and humanitarian law and, with them, risks overwhelming the rule of law, which is the pillar of all religious freedom.

Nowadays, dangerous forms of nationalism return to instrumentally fan the flames of religious conflicts, of the clash of cultures, poisoning public opinion with obsessive fear of the other, and religious discrimination is the most widespread violation of human rights in the world today. It often overlaps with other forms of discrimination and social inequalities and disparities. And always, in all its forms, it feeds on prejudice, stereotypes and is characterised as a form of racial discrimination.

This is why, first and foremost, we must affirm that the most effective and structural way to recognise and defeat religious discrimination, in all its forms, is to fight every form of discrimination, every rhetoric of hatred, every blow against minorities, against all minorities.

This battle concerns everyone, it concerns the quality of our democracy, it concerns civilised co-existence, and therefore our entire society.

The anti-Semitic writings that reappear on the walls of our cities affect us all. They are a disturbing regurgitation of the infamous time that was fascism, Nazism, as well as the fact that it can be dangerous for Jewish people to live freely, for children to go to school or to synagogue, for an adult to wear a *yarmulke*.

Anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, discrimination against Christians where they are in the minority, restrictions of belief that are a personal violation are growing in this time, albeit in different forms.

And this, all of this, is the subject of our resolution.

To prepare this text, I paid a visit to the United Kingdom and I was very struck by the account of the events in Southport in late July and early August 2024: the assaults and violence against the Islamic community, when, following the murder of three girls, extreme right-wing groups spread false news attributing the blame to a Muslim asylum seeker.

Here, I want to mention this episode, Mister President, because it recalls an often distorted representation, fuelled by the media. And I want to strongly raise the issue of responsibility and correctness in public discourse.

In preparation for this report, Mr Marco GANCI, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the Council of Europe, gave me a phrase that I want to share with this Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe: "avoid the risk of unduly restricting freedom of religion". And therefore, I want to add, to build, to have the duty to build an inclusive society, where the freedom of each person never comes at the expense of the freedom of another. Where freedom is such because it respects the principle of non-discrimination, the principle of dignity of each person, which very often lies precisely in the expression of religious freedom.

There is a special responsibility for everyone who holds public office: to counter discriminatory and manipulative language, to counter the instrumental political use of religion, which is one of these manipulative languages, the misuse of religion to feed stereotypes and prejudices, to stigmatise individuals or social groups, to gain an electoral advantage. This comes at an unsustainable price for our democracies.

That is why, Mister President, I want to conclude by relaunching the proposal and the objective of establishing a permanent, stable and formally recognised platform for interreligious, interconfessional dialogue within the Council of Europe, to overcome fears that are very often artfully fuelled by malevolent politics or by pundits who use algorithms and new technologies to monetise hatred, but do so to the detriment of our democracies. And this is a big political issue.

Mister President, our work, which took two years and involved many colleagues – whom I want to thank, just as I want to thank, along with the Committee's Secretariat, for its support – this work of ours, I think, can contribute not only to the work of this Assembly, but to the urgency, often even dramatic urgency, of the times we live in.

And the work also chimes with the objectives of the New Democratic Pact, which is today one of the main pillars of work of this organisation, of the Council of Europe, which still today, amidst a thousand difficulties, is a point of reference by so many who believe in democracy, in the rule of law, in equality, and in emancipation. And who see their right to self-determination, to religious freedom as something essential and fundamental, which it is the duty of all of us to protect and support.

Thank you Mister President,

Thank you colleagues.

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

As I now open the general discussion, I remind you that the time limit for spokespersons for political groups is 3 minutes. For everyone else it is 2 minutes.

And for the debate, I now call Ms Sandra JÄCKEL from the European Conservatives, Patriots & Affiliates. You have the floor.

Ms Sandra JÄCKEL (Austria, ECPA, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you very much, Mister President.

Honourable colleagues,

Today, we are discussing a document that is designed to counter discrimination, but at the same time, I fear that there is a risk of undermining established structures and tried and tested models in Europe. Yes, education is the key. This is also emphasised in this report, and we expressly support it. But the problem begins precisely where it becomes concrete. Because if it is demanded that religious education must be objective and not denominational, then this is not progress, but an interference in established education systems. And let me make it quite clear: religious education without a confession of faith is no longer religious education. It is a theoretical debate without a foundation of values. Religious education as we know it in Austria not only imparts knowledge, but also attitude, responsibility and respect. Because only those who have their own point of view are capable of dialogue. Those who relativise everything do not create tolerance, but disorientation.

This is not just about education; it is about a fundamental right. Freedom of religion, enshrined in Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights, obliges states not only to exercise restraint, but also to actively protect this right. This also includes the right of parents to decide on the religious education of their children. However, if denominational education is pushed back, then it is precisely this right that is jeopardised in practice. When we talk about discrimination, it must be combated consistently and without distinction.

One example of this is the situation of many Christians in Europe, who are increasingly confronted with attacks on places of worship, vandalism and restrictions on their public expression of faith. If we take discrimination seriously as a problem, then we must not turn a blind eye here.

And one more thing: this document shows an area of tension that does not resolve itself. On the one hand, religion is to be more neutralised in education, while on the other, more space is demanded for the practice of religion in everyday life. So which is it? There is a lack of a clear and coherent line here. I say quite clearly: Europe does not need one-size-fits-all solutions from above. Europe needs respect for the established systems of its member states. And it needs the freedom to live, teach and represent religion without unnecessary state intervention.

Our Austrian model shows that diversity and cohesion are not mutually exclusive. And that is precisely why we reject regulations that weaken functioning structures without actually solving the problems mentioned.

Thank you.

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

Now for the next speaker.

Mr Dominik OBERHOFER, you have the floor.

Mr Dominik OBERHOFER (Austria, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Dear colleagues,

Religious freedom is not a comfortable, feel-good issue; it is a stress test, a stress test that we undergo on a daily basis. It forces us to endure contradictions. Diversity versus cohesion, individual freedom versus common rules.

Today I would like to speak plainly. Everyone has the right to believe or not to believe. This right stands above political ideologies, above majorities and, above all, above moods. But let's stop fooling ourselves. Religious freedom is not a carte blanche. Those who live in Europe, those who practise their faith here, stand on the ground of our common values: democracy, the rule of law, equality, human rights. I therefore say quite clearly: no religion is above the constitution, no tradition justifies restrictions on freedom. Cultural practices must not relativise fundamental rights.

This is not a provocation, it is a foundation of Europe. And this is precisely where our future will be decided. Not in abstract discussions, but in schools, in the classrooms of our children. Where young people develop, where they learn who they are, where they realise what unites them. That is why Europe today needs the courage and a clear statement in favour of compulsory ethics lessons for all pupils, without exception. A space in which people are not divided, but brought together. A space in which young people learn that freedom also means responsibility. If we do not create this common ground, then we leave the field to those who divide.

At the same time, I also say "yes" to denominational voluntary religious education. Not in a back room, not outside our control. Voluntary, religious, denominational religious education must take place within a state framework and, above all, in the classroom. Not to restrict faith, but to protect it. Because a faith that conflicts with freedom, equality and human dignity is not a contribution to Europe. It is a danger to our society. Religious freedom does not mean avoiding conflict. Religious freedom means enduring them and clearly showing where the boundaries are. Europe is strong when it is free, but it will only remain free if it is sure of its values.

Thank you for listening.

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

The next speaker is Mr Emmanuel FERNANDES.

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

Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank the rapporteur for the high quality of his extremely well-documented work, which is of particular importance at a time when discrimination based on religion is increasing almost exponentially, not only in our member states but – it has to be said and we should be alarmed – throughout the world.

Discrimination, whether religious or otherwise, is fracturing our societies and democracies, and undermining our ability to live together. It increases as the far right gains ground, and the accession to power of leaders who themselves hold the fallacious concept of a "clash of civilisations" amplifies the spread of inter-religious hatred. Combatting this discrimination and those who use it as the basis of their political agenda must therefore be a priority for our Assembly and for all our member states.

We fully support the guidelines set out in the draft resolution: prevention, education from the earliest age and lifelong learning are essential tools for deconstructing prejudice and combatting hatred in the long term.

This also involves the media.

In France, nine people own 90% of the press. They include Mr Vincent BOLLORÉ, who uses the media to promote Islamophobic views. On 29 January, on CNEWS, a channel owned by Mr Vincent BOLLORÉ's empire, a local politician said that knife attacks had a "cultural character" linked to Islam. These remarks help to trivialise discrimination. Fighting discrimination also means fighting capitalism and the media conglomerates that promote hatred.

We also need to analyse discrimination more effectively, using an intersectional approach. Religious discrimination is often combined with other forms of unequal treatment. Women, for example, are particularly vulnerable, as are LGBTQIA+ people and people with disabilities. Religious discrimination is intertwined with patriarchy, LGBTphobia and ableism.

And while Islamophobia is on the rise in Europe and around the world, anti-Semitism remains a persistent form of discrimination. Memory is an essential key to combatting this hatred, and it is time to put in place genuine public policies to combat this discrimination. Similarly, it is just as important not to exploit it: opposing the policy of the genocidal Israeli government cannot be equated with taking an anti-Semitic stance.

Finally, we need effective institutions.

In France, the Defender of Rights is a useful tool for combatting discrimination and guaranteeing access to rights. This type of institution exists in many member states and we advocate their generalisation, provided that it is independent, has sufficient resources and is known to the public.

Fighting discrimination based on religion means defending freedom of conscience. It is a collective responsibility that we must fully assume, which is why my group will vote in favour of adopting this text.

Thank you for your support.

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

The next speaker is Mr Gerardo GIOVAGNOLI. You have the floor, Gerardo.

Mr Gerardo GIOVAGNOLI (San Marino, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister President.

I thank Mr Francesco VERDUCCI for the thorough and balanced work carried out on the basis of a motion I submitted, which took its cue from a global campaign called bpur.org to implement an international treaty to end the political abuse of religion, cited in the report, which I hope may reach the United Nations.

Religious freedom is one of those fundamental rights on a par with freedom of thought and conscience as recognised by Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights. In 2015, a report was adopted against discrimination and intolerance towards Christians, and in 2022, two further reports addressed antisemitism and Islamophobia.

There are two great enemies of tolerance of religious freedom: ignorance and malicious political propaganda. The first creates the ground on which the second easily takes root. It is therefore welcome that the resolution gives a key role to education to prevent stereotypes and distortions.

I would like to highlight in particular the following point: "Provide religious literacy training for public officials, law enforcement officers and the judiciary, and provide teachers in schools with training and guidance on religion, based on a pluralist and inclusive approach with a view to fostering respect, mutual understanding and preventing conflicts."

Religious identity is one of the deepest aspects of the human person. We must therefore do everything possible to allow its expression in daily life. This, however, also means that the aforementioned identity must allow the expression of others and that tolerance must be bidirectional: towards believers and from believers towards everyone else. The two principles, just recalled, must also apply to those who are not believers: atheists, agnostics and humanists.

But the first people who must refrain from using discriminatory and hateful language are political leaders. While it is true that being able to freely affirm one's faith, even in a political sphere, is a right to be defended, this is not the case when the political discourse becomes discrimination against the religion of others or the supremacism of one's own religion over the rest of the world.

How can we fail to mention in this context a disturbing novelty, the American schism? It seems we are witnessing a new medieval struggle between Guelphs and Ghibellines. Emperor TRUMP, who seeks the role of anointed by the Lord, who attacks the Pope and reminds him of the Avignon Captivity, and who evokes the hand of a civilisation that, however, corresponds also with a faction of Islam, namely the Iranian Shiite one. How can we fail to mention the supremacist words of some minister of the Israeli government that would like to justify an action that no longer has the legitimate contours of defending one state, but rather of occupying another's land, justifying the direction by what is written in the Bible, using intolerable violence against communities that again belong to other religions?

I will finish. Another time, it has been Islamic political leaders who use inflammatory and hateful language and rhetoric. Religiously framed rhetoric is among the most dangerous. Once again, thank you to the rapporteur for this timely report.

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

And our next speaker, on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party, is Ms Andrea EDER-GITSCHTHALER.

Ms Andrea EDER-GITSCHTHALER (Austria, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you very much.

Dear colleagues,

No one should be discriminated against because of their membership of a religious community or because they do not belong to a religious community. This is an important principle and one that we should of course all support. That is why this report is so important and necessary. Many thanks to the rapporteur for two years of work. We have also worked together in committee.

It should also be noted that Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights and the Additional Protocol stipulates that the right to religious education and upbringing is in principle vested in parents. It would therefore be contrary to the Convention on Human Rights to reject denominational religious education in principle, because freedom of religion, Article 9 of the Convention on Human Rights, and freedom of expression, Article 10 of the Convention on Human Rights, also expressly guarantee education as part of the right to freedom.

I believe that parents who bring up their children in a denominationally bound religious way can give them an important instrument for leading a successful life and participating positively in society. And this denominational religious education can make an important contribution to the development of children in a democratic order that is committed to human rights.

Denominational schools are an important educational institution, especially in Austria, and are open to all. That is why it was so important for us as the Group of the European People's Party to emphasise in this report that religious education and upbringing make an important contribution to a democratic society and to state this clearly. The religious communities therefore have a great responsibility to pass on their faith, and thus also to convey respect for other religions and religious convictions, and to ensure that religious education and upbringing contribute to peaceful coexistence and social cohesion.

I would therefore like to expressly thank the rapporteur once again for including our amendments in the motion and for the work he has done.

After all, we have a common goal: to organise our coexistence in the best possible way, in an appreciative manner, without any form of devaluation or discrimination.

Thank you very much for your support.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Madam. Then we go to the list of speakers who will be started by Mr Georgios STAMATIS.

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

Allow me to speak in Greek.

Thank you.

Someone said famously that we need Gods. We all need Gods and that our Gods know everything. Now, what many people do not know, is that everybody should have a right to freedom of religion.

Freedom of religion is a very fundamental tenet of our democracies. And in our countries I think we have outstanding examples of coexistence between Jews, Christians, Muslims and atheists – let's not forget the atheists. Freedom of religion also applies to atheists. Now, I think that Mr Francesco VERDUCCI's report goes very much in the right direction. And it gives us a steer to follow, education, in particular, which is of crucial importance.

When you start educating young citizens, young people, young men and women who will become officials of our states at some point in the future, by educating them you are educating future generations on this whole principle of freedom of religion.

Also, of course, there is UN Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18, which we shouldn't forget in this context. It emphasises the important role played by local authorities, and it also emphasises the importance of civic participation in local affairs. That is another way of promoting freedom of religion.

Furthermore, I think we need to be very rigorous. When we see the representatives of certain dogma that speak but do not speak for the whole religion, do not actually represent the whole religious community, this can create a lot of problems. It has created problems in Greece with the Muslim community.

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

The next speaker will be Mr Sam RUSHWORTH.

Mr Sam RUSHWORTH (United Kingdom, SOC): –Thank you.

I welcome this report and the recommendations it makes around education, political leadership, and combating hate speech to protect people’s freedom of religion or belief across Europe.

Earlier, on the other side, Sir Christopher CHOPE argued against curbing hate speech in the name of free speech, saying "people shouldn’t be wimps." I disagree.

People are free to criticise, blaspheme, and mock religious beliefs and practices. That is not hate speech. Hate speech is when language targets people to stereotype, discriminate, exclude, threaten, and legitimise violence towards them.

As a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a minority Christian denomination, I grew up facing misconceptions and prejudice that I had to shake off. But I have never feared for my physical safety, unlike many other Christians around the world.

I realised how significant that is when I visited a Jewish school in London and had to pass through airport-style security to get in. I remember wondering what it must feel like to grow up needing that protection.

In recent years, attacks on synagogues and Jewish organisations in the United Kingdom have increased. Jewish communities face vandalism, threats and violence, often linked to conflicts far beyond their control.

At the same time, Islamophobia is rising – and what is especially concerning is that it is not coming from the fringes. It is being legitimised by senior politicians on the political right.

When politicians describe public Muslim prayer as an “act of domination,” or suggest that visible expressions of faith are inherently threatening or incompatible with British life as the Leader of the official Opposition did recently, that language filters down. It fosters suspicion and paints ordinary people as threats.

When a Reform Party MP claims that London – one of the world’s safest most vibrant cities – is under the control of “Islamists,” it goes even further, spreading fear and division based on falsehoods.

This kind of rhetoric stokes tension between communities for political gain.

And so I congratulate Mr Francesco VERDUCCI and I welcome his report, which I will vote for.

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

Ms Ivanka VASILEVSKA (North Macedonia, EPP/CD): Thank you, Chair.

Distinguished guests, dear colleagues.

Today I stand before you to address a topic that lies at the very heart of democratic societies: countering discrimination based on religion and protecting freedom of religion and belief in Europe.

Europe has long been recognised as a region committed to human rights, diversity and inclusion.

The protection of freedom of religion or belief is not only a moral obligation, but also a legal one, embedded in a strong and multilayered framework.

At the core of this framework stands the European Convention on Human Rights, particularly Article 9, which guarantees every individual the freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This includes the right to practise and express one's beliefs openly or privately.

Complementing this is the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights, where Articles 10 and 21 ensure both the freedom of religion and strict protection against discrimination.

Turning to my home country, the constitution ensures equality regardless of religious belief and explicitly protects the freedom to express faith.

The Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination, adopted in 2020, clearly prohibits discrimination based on religion in all areas of life, including education, employment and access to services.

Furthermore, the legal framework allows religious communities to register and operate freely, guaranteeing them rights and recognition. Several institutions are tasked with protecting these rights.

The Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination (CPPD) handles complaints and promotes equality.

The ombudsman safeguards citizens against violations by state authorities, while the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups (CRRCG) fosters co-operation and dialogue.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Protecting freedom of religion and belief is not only about laws and institutions. It is about building a culture of respect.

Thank you.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): And after we have Ms Larysa BILOZIR.

Sorry, I skipped one. I skipped one. Sorry. I'm very sorry.

Mr Armen GEVORGYAN is first, and then Ms Larysa BILOZIR, please.

Mr Armen GEVORGYAN (Armenia, ECPA): Madam Chair,

This debate is not abstract, specifically for my country. For more than a year, representatives of the Armenian Apostolic Church have been subjected to politically motivated criminal proceedings, often justified by the claims that the Church has no right to engage in public or political discourse. Religious leaders are under pressure for speaking on behalf of their faithful, including on issues about Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh that have been subjected to ethnic cleansing, and where Armenian religious and cultural heritage is at serious risk of full destruction.

And on top of everything, the electoral programme of the ruling party explicitly includes a roadmap to remove the Catholicos of All Armenians, which means direct interference in the internal life of a religious organisation.

The draft resolution reaffirms that religious communities have the right to organise themselves freely and to express their views publicly without interference. It is a binding legal standard under Article 9 of the Convention, alongside the understanding that autonomy of religious organisations is a cornerstone of a democratic society.

In Armenia, religion is being actively used by authorities in political discourse, portrayed as a potential threat and associated with external forces. This creates a situation where religion is both instrumentalised for political purposes and subjected to attempts of institutional control by the Armenian ruling party. In other words, both prohibitions outlined in this resolution are being violated in Armenia right now.

Dear colleagues,

To be democratic means to uphold a fundamental balance, where religion must not be used as a political tool and political power must not subordinate religion. This is precisely what this resolution seeks to prevent. If the Council of Europe remains silent about such practices in Armenia, it will confirm that today there are more double standards than standards.

Thank you.

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

And now, Ms Larysa BILOZIR.

Ms Larysa BILOZIR (Ukraine, ALDE): Distinguished colleagues,

I thank the rapporteur, Mr Francesco VERDUCCI, for this important report.

Freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental right.

Today, in the context of Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, it is under direct attack.

Russia uses religion as a tool of control. It is clear that the Moscow Patriarchate acts as an instrument of state ideology, promoting the so-called "Russkiy Mir" ("Russian world") in support of the aggression.

Since 2014, in the occupied parts of Donetsk and Lugansk, hundreds of religious communities have been closed: Greek Catholics, Protestants, Muslim, Jewish communities all have been facing repression, seizure of their places of worship and systematic pressure.

Only structures loyal to Moscow were allowed to operate freely.

Since the start of the full-scale invasion this repression has been accompanied by destruction. Hundreds of churches, mosques, synagogues have been damaged or destroyed by shelling and drone attacks.

Priests, pastors have been killed, abducted or persecuted for staying with their communities and refusing to co-operate with the occupation authorities.

At the same time, religion is being used to justify war. Mr Vladimir PUTIN presents the war of aggression against Ukraine as a holy mission. This shows clearly that religion is being weaponised by Russia.

Dear colleagues,

Freedom of religion must be protected, but it cannot be used to justify war, to silence people or to destroy diversity.

If we truly stand for this freedom, we must defend it not only in wars, but in action, because in Ukraine today, we are not only fighting for our land, we are fighting for the right to believe freely.

That is a fight that concerns all of us.

Thank you very much.

[Light applause]

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

The next speaker is Ms Kate OSAMOR.

Ms Kate OSAMOR (United Kingdom, SOC): Thank you.

Thank you very much for calling me.

I stand in support of this very timely report by our rapporteur.

Freedom of religion or belief is one of the most fundamental commitments shared across the Council of Europe. Yet we continue to see individuals and communities facing discrimination, exclusion and hostility because of their faith or because they choose to not follow any faith. These challenges require not only our concern, but our collective leadership.

Across Europe, we are seeing worrying examples of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. But alongside these challenges, there are also encouraging examples of resilience and solidarity. In several member states, interfaith councils have brought together Jewish, Muslim, Christians and non-religious organisations to respond jointly to hate incidents. Local communities have organised open days for places of worship to build understanding. Schools and youth groups have launched programmes that teach respect for different beliefs and encourage dialogue rather than division.

These initiatives show that when communities stand together, prejudice loses its power. Our responsibility is to ensure that such positive efforts are supported by local public policy. Member States must continue improving the reporting and investigation of hate-motivated incidents. It is our job to keep all of our community safe.

Colleagues,

Europe's strength lies in its ability to embrace diversity while defending shared values. By countering discrimination based on religion and supporting freedom of religion or belief for all, we reinforce the foundations of our democratic societies. Let us continue working together so that every person in Europe can live according to their conscience, without fear, without discrimination and with full dignity.

Thank you.

[Applause]

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

The next speaker is Sir Edward LEIGH.

Sir Edward LEIGH (United Kingdom, ECPA): Thank you, Madam President.

Of course, we all believe in freedom of religion.

I personally, and none of us here, would attack any person's religious belief. Nobody would do something so outrageous as to burn the Koran or anything like that, or to criticise Islam, but having said that, we have to fight for freedom of expression.

The truth is that I'm a Catholic. The overwhelming prejudice, martyrdoms, attacks on people around the world are because they are Christian. People feel it, even in the West, perfectly socially proper to poke fun at Christianity, do cartoons in a way that they wouldn't dare to attack other religions, but I mean, I take it in good heart. I do not believe that we should use the law to regulate free speech.

Now I just want to support my colleague here sitting in front of me, Ms Sandra JÄCKEL from Austria.

It's very important that we don't think that the state has a right to impose some sort of relative dogma on religious education and on faith schools.

I'm a Catholic, as I said, but I work on behalf of Orthodox Jews and their very literal interpretation of their religion. I support the right to have their own schools. I support the Plymouth Brethren who have a very literal version of the Bible which I don't necessarily agree with, but they have a right to run their own schools in their own way.

So whilst we've got to of course oppose hate speech and picking out people because they are of a certain religion, we cannot allow the state to decree what we say in public about other religions.

We have a right to have formidable debate and that is what we should fight for in this Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Thank you.

[Light applause]

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): [Applause]

The next speaker is Ms Jurgita ŠUKEVIČIENĖ.

Ms Jurgita ŠUKEVIČIENĖ (Lithuania, SOC): Thank you, Madam President.

This significant report provides a balanced and timely response to one of the key challenges facing our societies today. Freedom of religion or belief, including the right not to believe, is a cornerstone of democratic society. It is inseparable from equality, human dignity and non-discrimination. As clearly stated in the report, this freedom is protected under Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights and remains essential for ensuring pluralism and peaceful co-existence in Europe.

At the same time, we cannot ignore the worrying rise of intolerance across our continent. Anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and other forms of religious hatred are increasing, often fuelled by geopolitical tensions and amplified through online platforms. These trends are not only threatening individuals and communities, but also undermine social cohesion and trust in democratic institutions.

We welcome the report's strong emphasis on the responsibility of states to act. Measures to combat extremism and terrorism must never be applied in a discriminatory or disproportionate way. Security and freedom must go hand in hand. We also underline the importance of education, dialogue and religious literacy. Building mutual understanding between people of different beliefs, religious or non-religious, is essential for preventing prejudice and fostering respect.

Finally, we support the call for political leaders to refrain from the misuse of instrumentalisation of religion. Responsible leaders are crucial in shaping inclusive and respectful public discourse. This resolution references our shared commitment to human rights, equality and democratic values. It sends a clear message: Europe must remain a place where everyone can feel free, or believe or not believe, without fear or discrimination.

Thank you.

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

Mr Jan Filip LIBICKI (Poland, EPP/CD): Dear colleagues,

I would like to thank Mr Francesco VERDUCCI for his important and timely report on religious freedom in Europe. It draws attention to issues that require our continued vigilance.

Although legal standards exist, the protection of religious freedom remains uneven. In many countries, it is guaranteed in law, but not always respected in practice. This is particularly visible in cases concerning offences against religious feelings, where the balance between freedom of expression and respect for believers is sometimes lost. This is not about limiting free speech, but about exercising it responsibly.

Today, discrimination is often indirect. It may take the form of seemingly neutral policies that, in reality, restrict the ability to practice religion in daily life.

Freedom of religion is not just one right among others; it is a cornerstone of social order. Its protection is essential for real participation in society and for peaceful coexistence.

However, laws alone are not enough. We need consistent public policies, education that fosters mutual understanding, and responsible public debate.

We should also remain attentive to developments in some countries, where proposals such as banning children's confession are deeply concerning and we are firmly opposed to them, as they risk undermining both religious freedom and the rights of parents.

This shows a broader problem: rights may exist on paper, but still be weakened in practice.

That is why we must treat freedom of religion as a concrete reality requiring constant care and shared responsibility.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you. The next speaker is Ms Lesia VASYLENKO.

Not here. Then we will go down the list. Ms Meryem GÖKA. Please.

Ms Meryem GÖKA (Türkiye, NR): Dear President and colleagues,

I want to thank the rapporteur, Mr Francesco VERDUCCI, for this timely report.

As someone born in Germany as part of the Turkish diaspora, I know this is not an abstract debate. It's a lived reality.

We stand firmly against all forms of intolerance, racism, anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim racism and xenophobia.

Freedom of religion is not optional. It is a fundamental right protected under the core international human rights instruments. Yet across Europe, discrimination based on religion is unfortunately intensifying.

According to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 47% of Muslims report experiencing racial discrimination. Among visibly Muslim women – especially those wearing a headscarf – this rate even rises further. They face what the international institutions define as a "triple penalty": for being women, for belonging to an ethnic minority and for being a Muslim.

These are not just statistics; they have real consequences.

Denying a woman employment because of her faith is not neutrality. Defending attacks on sacred values as free speech is not freedom.

This goes beyond individual prejudice. What we are witnessing today is the normalisation of anti-Muslim racism and the institutionalisation of exclusion.

It is reinforced through "othering" in public discourses and policy frameworks, and intensified by stereotyping and stigmatising narratives, especially in media and digital spaces.

At the same time, online hate and new technologies amplify existing biases. And this is only the visible part. Many victims do not report discrimination, reflecting a growing loss of trust. When trust erodes, it becomes not only a human rights issue, but it's a threat to democratic stability and social cohesion.

Dear colleagues,

Europe cannot afford to normalise discrimination or institutionalise exclusion. What we need is clear – more dialogue, more responsible public discourse and genuine inclusion.

Türkiye will continue to stand firmly for a system where freedom of religion is universal, and dignity is indivisible.

Thank you.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you. And then Lord Leslie GRIFFITHS.

Lord Leslie GRIFFITHS (United Kingdom, SOC): Thank you Madam Chair, and thank you to my friend Mr Francesco VERDUCCI for such a wonderful report that has got us all thinking.

And I would just like to come to this debate perhaps from a different angle. Of course, I support all that's been said about fundamental human rights and the dangers of the moment, but my angle is a different one because I am, and have been, a religious leader myself, the head of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, and still have a considerable role to play there in the United Kingdom.

And for me, what I wish for, is educated journalists, who, when they report stories, would understand what it is they're reporting. Often there are nuances from history that are lost on journalists, who simply want to file their material very quickly in broad, black-and-white terms. Similarly, I've heard politicians, people in this room, even, as I've sat here, so blandish us with exaggerated and stereotypical ways of thinking that again, I want educated politicians who take the trouble to understand what religion is all about. And then finally, I want church leaders to be educated in how to present the religion that they stand for, how to make it accessible, a gateway to all that is as noble in human society as anything can be.

My entire humanity has been coloured and shaped and built because of my religious faith. And I'm not going to stand in a secular body in a debate like this and pretend it's otherwise. I'm very careful in secular debates elsewhere to toe the line and not to be sanctimonious and religious in the wrong way. So I call, really, for greater sensitivity and better educated sectors commenting on religion. And I hope that we can make that something we can centre on.

[Light applause]

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

The next speaker is Ms Victoria TIBLOM.

Ms Victoria TIBLOM (Sweden, ECPA): Madam President,

Sweden used to be a safe haven for Jews, but not anymore. Some have now left Sweden. Others are advised not to wear a kippa in public.

This is not a minor issue. It is a failure.

At the same time, we see large, aggressive demonstrations linked to the Middle East conflict taking over streets across Europe – not only in Sweden. Public spaces are being dominated, tensions are escalating, and ordinary citizens feel pushed aside.

And the question must be asked: where are the limits?

Because freedom of expression and freedom of assembly were never meant to justify intimidation, hatred, or the erosion of public order.

This report is clear: antisemitism is rising across Europe. Not quietly – but openly. In our cities, on our streets, and online. And too often, the response has been too weak, too slow, or simply absent. A society that cannot protect its Jewish population cannot claim to fully protect freedom of religion. And a society that allows extremist voices to set the tone in the public space risks losing something even more fundamental: trust.

We need to be honest about this. Importing conflicts from other parts of the world into European streets has consequences. Ignoring those consequences has even greater ones.

Our responsibility as political leaders is not to explain this away – but to act.

That means enforcing the law without hesitation. It means setting clear boundaries for what is acceptable in the public space. And it means defending our democratic values with confidence – not apology.

Because freedom of religion is not just about rights on paper. It is about reality in everyday life. And right now, for many Jews in Europe, that reality is deteriorating.

That should not only worry us. It should force us to change course.

Thank you.

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

And I will now give the floor to the next speaker, Ms Stephanie KUSIE, observer from Canada.

Ms Stephanie KUSIE (Canada): Honourable colleagues,

"Dear colleagues" [spoken in French],

I would like to thank the rapporteur, Mr Francesco VERDUCCI, for his excellent work in preparing such a comprehensive and informative report. I share rapporteur Mr Francesco VERDUCCI's concern that rising exclusion and intolerance on religious grounds are a matter of serious concern in Europe.

Unfortunately, this tragedy extends beyond Europe. According to the latest statistics, religion was the second-most common motive for police-reported hate crimes in Canada in 2025, after race and ethnicity. The Conservative Party of Canada, which I represent, is guided by founding principles that affirm individual freedoms, including those of speech, worship, assembly and association.

In recent high-profile parliamentary debates on hate speech in Canada, we have reaffirmed our commitment to defending freedom of religious expression and to upholding the right to read and share sacred texts. Furthermore, we have a long track record in government of consistently upholding this principle, including by promoting it beyond our borders.

In February 2013, former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper established an Office of Religious Freedom within the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. This Office was given a mandate to advance freedom of religion and belief as a key priority in foreign policy. Having proudly served in Canada's diplomatic service and been posted abroad for several years, I saw great merit in creating this entity. Regrettably, a subsequent federal government closed this institution in 2016, only three years after it opened.

As recently as January 2026, the Conservative Party of Canada renewed its call for the Office of Religious Freedom to be re-established, so that Canada can promote religious freedom around the world and stand for persecuted minorities. As parliamentarians, we must all work to ensure that religious communities across our countries are able to practise their faith publicly and freely without fear of discrimination and intimidation.

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

Thank you very much.

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

And the next speaker is Ms Yelyzaveta YASKO, please.

Ms Yelyzaveta YASKO (Ukraine, EPP/CD): Religious discrimination usually doesn't come as an isolated form of discrimination. It usually comes together with ethnic or gender discrimination. But, actually, it's religious discrimination that is so often being used as a weapon by many authoritarian regimes.

And in my speech, I want to mention how Russia is actually using religion to persecute many ethnic groups inside Russia. And I also want to mention the Crimean Tatars and Crimea.

When Crimea was annexed in 2014, what Russia was doing was organising raids to persecute and to arrest hundreds of Crimean Tatars, especially during the religious masses that they were having. Always, if there is someone who is a Crimean Tatar, Russians find them quite suspicious, and they would think that they are not entirely loyal to the Russian system.

And I also want to tell a brief personal story. Many years ago, when I was in Moscow, which was the moment when I learned what Russian imperialistic thinking is and what Russian racism is. Because one woman in Russia was telling me how she was dreaming that there would be no people in that country that would celebrate such holidays as Kurban Bayramı, which is a Muslim holiday. That was the moment when I was quite shocked, and I learned about religious-based racism. And I just want all of these stories to be heard and all of the people who face this persecution to be freed.

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

We'll give the floor to Ms Luz MARTINEZ SEIJO. Please.

Ms Luz MARTINEZ SEIJO (Spain, SOC)*: Madam President,

Today we are debating a report of great relevance for the democratic health of our societies.

Over these last few years, we have seen an alarming rise in religious intolerance; anti-Semitism and Islamophobia have grown alarmingly, often fuelled by international tensions that are polarising public debate and amplifying hate discourse, particularly on social media.

Now, that drift is not compatible with the values of the Council of Europe. It requires a firm response.

We can't simply ignore the fact that some political actors are also contributing actively to this atmosphere.

In Spain, you have the extreme right that has promoted initiatives that are excluding, they present Islam through a very alarmist and generalist optic, they unjustifiably link it to the religious practice of millions of people. They associate that with alleged risks or security, or with national identity.

These positions are not supported by any kind of empirical base. They promote stigmatisation. They seek to restrict the expressions of religious freedom that are perfectly legitimate in a public space, such as dress or places of worship. They actually lead to approaches that could be understood as a form of cultural cleansing.

Political instrumentalisation of religion does not lead to greater security nor more social cohesion, it actually leads to political authoritarianism, and religious extremism.

Let's be clear: a xenophobe cannot be a real Christian, much as they might profess to be such.

Nobody should be held responsible for acts perpetrated by others on behalf or in the name of religion. Nor should anyone be the victim of collective prejudice because of their name, their faith, their origin, their appearance.

Religious discrimination is particularly affecting women who are identifiable through their dress. It also disproportionately affects migrant people, or people from ethnic minorities.

This requires policies that are mindful of these vulnerabilities.

Education is key; we need to work towards greater literacy that is plural and objective, and we need to do so from an early age.

Protecting religious freedom is reaffirming our project here in Europe which is one of co-habitation, pluralism and democracy is essential for us all.

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

And the next speaker is Ms Mónika BARTOS.

Ms Mónika BARTOS (Hungary, ECPA): Dear Madam Chair, thank you for the floor.

Dear fellow members,

I would to thank the rapporteur for bringing this extremely important issue to our attention.

In my opinion, the study conducted in the United Kingdom and the conclusions drawn from the findings there are a very important part of the report. I believe that we can only find solutions after gaining a thorough understanding of the circumstances and background.

I consider it essential that we translate the goals set out in theory and national and international regulations into practice.

I come from a country whose 1 000-year history as a nation is rooted in Christianity, and which has experienced the nation-preserving power of Christianity many times throughout its history. Unfortunately, today, Christianity is the most persecuted religion in the world. 388 million Christians are suffering persecution today because of their faith. Unfortunately, violence and discrimination against Christians are also present in Europe and are on the rise.

When examining the causes, I see that the accelerated changes in the world, such as mass illegal migration, have created situations for which many communities in Europe were unprepared. They are now suffering the consequences. But it is not only them, it is also the newcomers who have lost their roots and are living their daily lives without a foothold in a foreign environment, striving to reshape it according to their own traditions.

Laws are important, but they are not enough. Politically correct statements, meanwhile, obscure the truth. Without the truth, however, we will never achieve the reconciliation that is a necessary prerequisite for lasting peace.

Pope Saint John Paul II said that peace is based on truth, justice, solidarity and freedom. His words provide good guidance for our further work.

Thank you for your kind attention.

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

Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK (Ukraine, ALDE): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, rapporteur, dear Mr Francesco VERDUCCI, for being so inclusive during the work on this report, listening to so many voices and really bringing together a very good document.

And we hear during our speeches, dialogue, training sessions, you know, "let's build bridges". But what if your neighbour wants to wage a holy war on your country? That's what's happening with the Russian Federation against Ukraine. The Russian Orthodox Church and Patriarch KIRILL called this war of aggression a holy war, basically giving their blessing to soldiers to kill Ukrainians, to kill civilians, to target them, and it's as if they're saying, "Actually, it's not a sin. You can go to heaven after this holy war".

And right now, more than 700 different religious sites of different faiths are partially or totally destroyed in Ukraine. Sixty-seven clergy members of different convocations have been killed; some of them are still in captivity.

And this happens when there is a political instrumentalisation of religion and when a faith becomes a state religion. The Russian Orthodox Church is part of the regime. It's part of the Russian world ideology, and it's not independent. That's what happens when religion loses independence and does not act for love, for having peace in people's souls, but actually to cause violence.

And we will rebuild the churches and mosques that were destroyed, and Ukraine will always be welcoming to different faiths and to different religions. But the religion cannot be instrumentalised by aggressor states.

Thank you.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): I give the floor to Mr Rónán MULLEN. Please.

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

I think it was Abraham LINCOLN that, when somebody said to him that "God was on our side", he said something like. "I rather hope, gentlemen, that we are on God's side".

When we talk about freedom of religion, freedom not to have a religion, and freedom to change one's religion, these are all vital components of a civilised and democratic society.

What we must always work for is a healthy pluralism which doesn't seek to reduce religion or to confine it to the private space. And I want to commend some of the amendments here today, those which recognise that there are proportionate and legally prescribed measures that are legitimate to safeguard public safety but also that uphold the rights of religious communities to live and teach and to convey their belief. Because it isn't just freedom of religion that's important or freedom of belief, but freedom to manifest it.

If there is language that I regret in this otherwise great report, it's the suggestion that religious education must be inspired by pluralism and be objective and non-confessional. Well, pluralism, yes, but let's not try to have some kind of a house-trained religion. People are entitled to look to the horizons with their eyes and their hearts.

And that is, I think, why most of our societies have taken the benefits, as has been pointed out by writers such as Tom HOLLAND and his excellent book *Dominion*, from the influence of Christianity, the Judeo-Christian principles that have really been at the foundation of what we call human rights today. And that's not to forget the high points of the Islamic tradition as well.

So let's remember that it sometimes seems at the moment like it's Pope Leo XIV who's trying to hold society together and to say that respect for human dignity is indivisible. The person who is deprived of a chance to be a practising doctor because he or she opposes abortion, that person is suffering religious discrimination. The person who wants to protect the climate is often operating from a higher sense that nature is something given to us and not just something for us to control and manipulate according to our will.

So let's honour religion by not instrumentalising it, to allow people the freedom of their spiritual search and to recognise that the state is entitled to proportionately take measures so as to ensure an orderly and just society and all of that.

Thank you.

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

And then I give the floor to Ms Sandra ZAMPA.

Ms Sandra ZAMPA (Italy, SOC): Religious freedom and the principle of non-discrimination arise from the same matrix: human dignity, which we are the custodians of.

Yet, religious freedom and human rights are experiencing a period of crisis today: restriction of freedom, violence, persecution for reasons of faith are more numerous, certainly in Africa and Asia, but they do not spare the West either. Authoritarianism, religious nationalism, identity ideologies and, of course, the new terrorism have also brought to the West and everywhere increased forms of intolerance and violence against faiths and religions.

Yesterday, in Lebanon, a statue of Jesus Christ was desecrated by an IDF soldier. And yesterday, in Milan, in my country, a serious act of anti-Semitism took place.

Buddhists, Christians, Jews, Hindus and Muslims suffer discrimination, violence, arrests and kidnappings.

Yet religious freedom is at the heart of human rights, and when it is violated, we can argue that all other rights are equally violated.

This is why politics must take up this issue strongly and support local communities that have implemented good practices, help and, above all, invest in the most important form we have to combat religious discrimination: teaching and culture.

We must return to investing heavily in teaching, in the education of our young people, so that respect is taught and learned and interpreted first and foremost personally.

I express my appreciation to my colleague, Mr Francesco VERDUCCI, for this important and interesting report.

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

And the next speaker will be Ms Wanda NOWICKA, please.

Ms Wanda NOWICKA (Poland, SOC): Thank you Madam Chair.

Diversity, pluralism and freedom. These are the values I believe myself. I do believe that a world is possible where people can believe in whatever they want without any pressure, any influence from others, free from all kinds of pressures.

Religion and other beliefs are very important aspects of our identities and and they should be defended. But still it is not the case in many parts of the world, especially where there is one religion that dominates, when one religion is dominant in a given country, there is always a tendency to impose this given religion on others. And this is not what should happen.

Moreover, we should remember also about the role of the religious institutions. I mean, personal beliefs are one thing, but the role of the religious institutions in our states is sometimes very problematic, especially in the countries where again religion dominates. So, for example, in Poland, religious institutions are trying always to - and actually they do it successfully - to impose certain values. Like, for example, they are against abortion, they are against LGBTQI persons, that's why we still in Poland cannot have those rights.

But even sexuality education is something that has been questioned by the Polish Catholic Church. So this is not the way how religious institutions in democratic societies should be operating. So let's hope that we will be able to change that so that everybody in the world is different and equal and can practice whatever religion or belief they want to practice.

Thank you.

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

And I now give the floor to Mr Rostyslav TISTYK.

Mr Rostyslav TISTYK (Ukraine, ECPA): Dear Chair, dear colleagues,

Today's topic is extremely important for Ukraine. Our Constitution guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as well as the separation of Church and State. For this reason, freedom of religion for us is not just an abstract slogan, but an integral part of the European democratic model that we defend every day.

However, Russia views religion in a completely different way. For it, religion is not a space of freedom, but an instrument of control, propaganda and war. The Russian Orthodox Church has for years drawn closer to the Russian state and its military machine. Reuters has previously documented the practice of blessing Russian weapons, including nuclear arms, while Patriarch KIRILL has openly supported the war against Ukraine, presenting it as a civilisational confrontation.

In the temporarily occupied Ukrainian territories, Russia is systematically suppressing freedom of religion. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has documented that under occupation, Russia restricts freedom of belief, persecutes people for lawfully exercising this right and imposes its own cultural and ideological space.

This is particularly painful when we look at the situation of Ukrainian churches and clergy. The OHCHR reported that two Greek Catholic priests who had been detained by the Russian occupation authorities since November 2022 were released only during an exchange in June 2024. One of them described torture, regular beatings, prolonged stress positions and cruel treatment while in detention in the occupied territory of the Donetsk region. In another documented case, a priest detained in the occupied part of the Zaporizhzhia region described his imprisonment with the words: "Faith in God helped me not to lose my sanity."

Protecting freedom of religion today also means protecting the right of people to remain who they are – without fear, without pressure, without torture and without being forced to renounce their church, their community and their national identity.

Thank you.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): I now give the floor to Mr Patryk JASKULSKI.

Mr Patryk JASKULSKI (Poland, EPP/CD): Dear colleagues, freedom of religion or belief is one of the foundations of European civilization. It is a basic human right thus must always be protected.

It doesn't matter if someone believes or does not believe. We cannot accept a world where people are punished for their faith and where religion places become targets of the violence.

Today we see this very clearly in Ukraine. Russian aggression is not only destroying cities and infrastructure, it is also destroying churches, temples and places of prayers. It is destroying the space for religious freedoms. And this exactly what happened to Polish churches in Lviv a few weeks ago. This is a clear violation of of human rights.

Poland strongly supports freedom of religion or beliefs. We propose the United Nations resolution that created the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief.

But declarations alone are not enough. We must respond strongly. We must respond together to every case of religious violation. We must protect religion, minorities and we must support people who defend human rights.

Europe cannot stay silent about religion's persecution. Europe must remain a container of freedom.

Thank you.

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

The next speaker is Ms Lucia PLAVÁKOVÁ.

Ms Lucia PLAVÁKOVÁ (Slovak Republic, ALDE): Thank you, Chairwoman.

And thank you, Mr Francesco VERDUCCI, for this important report.

In our liberal group, we are committed to promoting two fundamental principles. First, the freedom of religion for all groups that respect democratic values; and second, the protection of human rights, including safeguarding minorities from religiously motivated discrimination or the erosion of their rights.

In the Slovak Parliament, together with my colleagues, I submitted a resolution addressing these two principles, similar to the one we are discussing now, here. Although, it was debated, unfortunately, it was not adopted. Nevertheless, we remain committed to advancing and defending these values, back home and also here.

In Slovakia, smaller religious groups face discrimination because they are not allowed to register officially. A few years ago, the law was amended to require 50 000 supporting signatures. In a country of our size, this effectively makes registration unattainable for smaller communities, and in practice restricts freedom of religion.

At the same time, we are seeing an increasing number of laws influenced by religious views, alongside significant involvement of the Catholic Church in public affairs. This raises concerns about the secular foundations of our state. Just as no one seeks to interfere with how churches govern their internal matters, religious institutions should not impose their rules on society as a whole.

That is not what democracy stands for, and, I believe we must firmly resist such developments.

Thank you.

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

And then I give the floor to Mr Murat Cahid CINGI.

Mr Murat Cahid CINGI (Türkiye, NR): Thank you, Madam President.

Dear colleagues,

I would like to thank the rapporteur for shedding light on one of the most pressing and sensitive challenges facing Europe and the entire world today.

As is stated in the report, freedom of religion or belief is not a secondary right. It is a cornerstone of democratic life and of co-existence in Europe.

The report also underlines that discrimination based on religion is growing across Europe and that Islamophobia has become one of the most visible and alarming manifestations.

Let me be clear about how serious this challenge has become in Europe recently.

According to the EU Commission's recent data, Muslims are the second largest religious group in the EU with around 26 million people, which amounts to a rate of 47%, meaning one in two Muslims say that they experience racial discrimination. In some European countries, this figure even exceeds 70%.

Islamophobia shows itself in different ways. Far-right campaigns account for 25% of incidents. Hate speech around 20%, and verbal and physical attacks around 15%.

These figures point to a broader democratic challenge for Europe because exclusion and discrimination based on religion weaken both social cohesion and equal citizenship.

Our duty must be to protect freedom of religion and belief for everyone, to encourage dialogue and mutual understanding, and to defend a world where diversity is respected, not feared.

Thank you.

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

At this moment, I want to inform you that around 7 p.m. I have to cut the list. So, also we will change the Chair. So, it's not personal where to put the line. But then keep the time and we can get more people to speak.

Next one is Mr Piero FASSINO, please.

Mr Piero FASSINO (Italy, SOC): Thank you, President.

First of all, I would like to express my appreciation for the report by Mr Francesco VERDUCCI, which seemed to me to have solid arguments and a framework that we can only agree with.

I would like to draw your attention, in the few seconds of my speech, to one of the aspects of discrimination that we are currently experiencing, and that is the uprising of anti-Semitism in many places all over the world.

Now, we are well aware that these phenomena of anti-Semitism are very much linked to the profound crisis that has hit the Middle East, involving the wars that have flared up in that region in recent months, and all this, of course, can only worry us greatly.

But the point that I think cannot be accepted is that political criticism of those who trigger the wars, political criticism of the Israeli government or President TRUMP, cannot be translated into prejudice against all Jews.

There is no reason why a Jew, wherever he lives in the world, should be held accountable for the acts of the current Israeli government. Just as there can be no acceptance of the idea that any event that happens in the Middle East can only be blamed on Jewish identity, rather than on the choices of the current government, which, like all governments, can be criticised and challenged. And I criticise and challenge it.

This is why I believe we have a duty to make a very clear distinction between polemics and political criticism and forms of intolerance, such as anti-Semitism, which poison society and only lead to greater conflict.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you. Next is Mr Niklaus-Samuel GUGGER.

Mr Niklaus-Samuel GUGGER (Switzerland, EPP/CD): Dear President,

Dear colleagues,

Religious freedom is not a marginal issue, it is at the heart of a free society. I would like to thank the rapporteur, but I would like to make it clear that Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights is not enough. We need to extend it, not restrict it.

I would like to thank my esteemed colleague from Austria, Ms Andrea EDER-GITSCHTHALER, whose objection points in the right direction. Article 9 must also protect teaching, education and the transmission of faith.

A question for this House: are we aware that Christians are the most persecuted religious community in the world? Worldwide - and especially in Europe, a continent of Christian tradition. Attacks on churches, synagogues, pastors and converts are on the increase. We must not look away. Interestingly, the European Union has a coordinator against anti-Semitism and against anti-Muslim hatred. But for anti-Christian hatred? None. This unequal treatment must come to an end.

Firstly: religious freedom is indivisible. It applies to everyone or to no one.

Secondly, state neutrality does not mean hostility towards religion. The state should not believe, but it must enable belief.

Thirdly, religious freedom ends where the rights of others begin. No tradition justifies violence or discrimination. In Switzerland, religious diversity is part of everyday life, not a threat, but a strength.

Thank you.

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

Our next speaker is Mr Jon ENGEN-HELGHEIM.

Mr Jon ENGEN-HELGHEIM (Norway, ECPA): Thank you, Madam President,

Across Europe, states are confronted with serious challenges related to radicalisation, failed integration and harmful social practices. These challenges require preventive action.

Freedom of religion is a fundamental right. But it is also well established that this right is not absolute. Article 9 of the Convention recognises that the manifestation of religion may be subject to limitations where this is necessary to protect public safety and public order.

The European Court of Human Rights has therefore recognised a margin of appreciation for states when assessing what is necessary in their own societies. This principle is not a loophole. It is a safeguard that allows democratic states to act responsibly.

If states are denied sufficient room to adopt proportionate, neutral and preventive legislation, we risk undermining their ability to address radicalisation and coercive practices before they escalate.

Protecting individual autonomy sometimes requires setting clear legal boundaries. Measures aimed at preventing coercion, extremism or social pressure are not acts of discrimination when they are grounded in law and pursue legitimate aims. On the contrary, they can be essential to safeguarding the very freedoms this Council exists to protect.

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

And the next speaker is Mr Hasan TAÇOY.

Mr Hasan TAÇOY (Cyprus* [Resolution 1376 (2004)]): Mister Chair, distinguished colleagues,

Freedom of religion or belief is not only a fundamental human right, but also a cornerstone of democratic societies.

Yet, as highlighted in the draft resolution before us, manifestations of intolerance and discrimination based on religion are on the rise, including in the form of hate speech, exclusion and violence.

In Cyprus, this challenge can be observed in a particularly concerning manner. Turkish Cypriot people, with their distinct cultural and religious identity, continue to face various forms of discrimination and hostility, often rooted in anti-Muslim sentiment and ethnic prejudice.

There have been repeated attacks against places of worship and cultural heritage. Mosques in cities such as Limassol, Larnaca and Episkopi have been subjected to arson and vandalism, while Ottoman cemeteries continue to face desecration and neglect.

Inflammatory rhetoric further contributes to this environment. Extremist political parties and important religious figures have described Muslims as a “threat”. These narratives do not remain without consequence.

In recent years, Turkish Cypriots have been subjected to physical attacks and acts of violence. Civilians have been assaulted, vehicles vandalised, and groups of young people attacked. In some cases, individuals have been attacked both verbally and physically including a young woman suffering injuries in Ayia Napa in 2023.

Distinguished Colleagues,

As rightly emphasised in the draft resolution, education must promote dialogue, pluralism and understanding – not reinforce stereotypes or division.

Public discourse must also reflect responsibility. Political and religious leaders have a duty to refrain from stigmatising language and to actively counter hatred and discrimination. Ensuring freedom of religion or belief requires more than legal guarantees. It requires a genuine commitment to equality, respect and coexistence in practice.

Thank you.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you. Ms Susanna VELA is the next speaker.

Ms Susanna VELA (Andorra, SOC)*: Thank you,

Firstly, I'd like to thank Mr Francesco VERDUCCI for the excellent work done in this very opportune and necessary report. What we are discussing is very important.

The right of conviction is a fundamental right and a central and essential pillar in our democratic societies. Public powers have the responsibility to prevent any form of discrimination.

This means that all people can exercise their beliefs, or the absence of them, both publicly and privately. So, this should be a guiding principle in the separation of church from state.

I'd also like to highlight the key role of education. Only through this can we combat prejudice, promote mutual respect and promote dialogue between different beliefs.

This should lead us to more inclusive societies.

Might I share one thought about my national context?

In Andorra, our own context means various religions come together. This has impacts on education, health, or the right to sexual and reproductive rights and also gender rights. It shows that it is not just about discrimination between religions, but it can also amount to discrimination of other kinds, so we need to ensure there is a balance; religious freedom should co-exist with the other rights, but we should never put one above the other.

Andorra has made significant progress when it comes to enforcing human rights, but we must continue doing this to ensure that the respect and the full implementation of these rights always prevail over the imposition of anything due to belief.

Thank you.

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

And I will give the last two speakers the floor before I go for the rapporteur and the Chair.

So the next one will be Ms Tamila TASHEVA.

Ms Tamila TASHEVA (Ukraine, ALDE): Distinguished colleagues,

Thank you for this important report.

Freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of democratic societies. And yet, today we see growing manifestations of religious intolerance, discrimination, and misuse of religion across Europe and beyond.

Unfortunately, conflicts and political tension increase political intolerance. And this is especially true during armed conflicts and foreign occupation, with religious freedom often being restricted and religious communities becoming targets of persecution.

Ukraine unfortunately knows it all too well. Since Russia’s illegal occupation of Crimea in 2014, religious freedom on the peninsula has been significantly restricted. Before the occupation, there were more than 2 200 registered religious organisations in Crimea. By 2024, that number dropped to fewer than 1 000. Religious communities that do not align with occupation authorities face intimidation, restrictions, and forced closures.

Members of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, Muslim communities, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Protestant groups, and others have all experienced pressure and persecution. Crimean Tatars, the indigenous people of Crimea, are particularly affected. Many religious leaders and community members have faced detention, searches, and politically motivated prosecutions.

At the same time, religion is often dangerously used as a tool of state propaganda. In the temporarily occupied territories, structures affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church are often used to legitimise the occupation, spread pro-war narratives, and undermine religious plurality.

This all shows how religion can be misused to suppress identity and to silence communities. This is why protecting freedom of religion and belief is not only a human rights issue – but an essential part of peace, stability, and democratic resilience.

Thank you for your support and thank you for this brilliant report.

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

And then the final speaker on the list, Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO. Please.

Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO (Ukraine, EPP/CD): Thank you, dear President,

I'm lucky to speak last, but not least, I hope.

Colleagues,

When we open Google search, it's very simple to see that the Russian Federation unfortunately destroyed hundreds of churches and more than 60 priests of different confessions and religions were killed, not just wounded. Recently in Ukraine, one of the houses of prayers works was completely destroyed, leaving dead and wounded.

I think Mr Francesco VERDUCCI will reassess his leadership of this important paper later in history. Because, on both sides, on one end it talks about the freedom of religion, on the other hand – and thank you dear rapporteur that you included that – it talks about the oppression of the freedom of religion. And we talk about different nationalities, different religions. In the holy books of Koran, Torah, Bible, it says one cannot oppress, one cannot kill and one cannot possess other freedom. But unfortunately, a common aggressor for us is doing that, it is conducting that on a daily basis.

Colleagues,

When we were promoting an amendment, talking about the Russian Orthodox Church, which was forbidden by law in Ukraine, taking the consideration that it's the house of propaganda, not the house of religion, and its leader, Patriarch KIRILL, is a former KGB agent, we were trying to protect you, to prevent this propaganda of non-religion from spreading across member states. I do hope we can all tackle it and the real freedom of religion will prevail.

Thank you rapporteur for your report. I call colleagues to support this important document.

Thank you, President.

Mr Gergely ARATÓ (Hungary, SOC): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Madam President,

Distinguished colleagues,

First of all, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the rapporteur and the Committee for their hard work on this essential report. This document provides a comprehensive and timely overview of a challenge that is becoming increasingly visible across our continent: the rise of intolerance and religious discrimination.

Protecting the freedom of religion and belief is not just a legal obligation under the European Convention on Human Rights; it is a moral imperative. In a truly democratic Europe, no individual should ever face hostility, exclusion, or violence because of their faith, or their lack of it. This report correctly identifies that we must strengthen our legal frameworks and promote a culture of "reasonable accommodation" to ensure that pluralism remains a source of strength, not a source of division.

However, as we move forward with these vital anti-discrimination measures, we must maintain a crucial balance.

While we must defend the autonomy and the rights of religious communities, we must be equally firm on one fundamental principle: no institution, religious or otherwise, is above the law.

Freedom of religion can never be used as a shield to bypass the common legal standards of a democratic state. Whether it concerns labor rights, transparency, or the protection of the vulnerable, especially the children, religious organizations must operate within the same rule-of-law framework as any other civil society actor. Religious autonomy ends where the fundamental rights of others or the core values of our secular, democratic societies begin.

In conclusion, I fully support the goals of this report. Let us fight discrimination with all our strength, but let us also ensure that in our pursuit of religious freedom, we never compromise on the equality of all citizens before the law.

Thank you, Chair.

Ms Bernadeta COMA (Andorra, ALDE): *Speech not pronounced (Rules of Procedure, Art. 31.2), only available in French*

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

I thank Mr Francesco VERDUCCI for this timely report.

Freedom of religion or belief is fundamental to democracy. It protects the right to believe, to practise freely, to change religion, or to have no religion at all. But this freedom is hollow if people fear entering a place of worship, wearing a religious symbol, or being judged, excluded, or attacked because of their identity.

Since the beginning of the genocide in Gaza, antisemitism and anti-Muslim racism have risen sharply across member States, both online and in threats, hate crimes and attacks against individuals and places of worship.

All forms of intolerance require strong action. Antisemitism remains a grave threat. Many member States have adopted common definitions and policies to identify incidents and guide responses. These must be implemented effectively. At the same time, as international human rights organisations have stressed, broad definitions must not be misused to restrict freedom of expression, peaceful protest, or legitimate criticism of Israeli government policies.

Political will to combat anti-Muslim racism remains far weaker, despite UN warnings that it has reached epidemic proportions. There is no widely applied common definition. Monitoring is inconsistent. In many member states, anti-Muslim hate crime is not recorded as a separate category, if it is recorded at all. This leaves Muslim communities, especially visibly Muslim women wearing headscarves, more exposed to fear, exclusion, and violence.

Anti-muslim discrimination disproportionately affect Muslim women. They face profound inequality as they experience a “triple penalty”: discrimination based on gender, religion, and ethnicity. In my report “Women in the economy: employment, entrepreneurship and gender-responsive budgeting” adopted last year, I called for an intersectional approach that recognizes these multiple layers of discrimination, which often reduce Muslim women to stereotypes and prevent their full participation in public life.

There must be no hierarchy of protection. Jews, Muslims, Christians, smaller religious communities, and those with no religious beliefs must all enjoy equal dignity and protection. No person or community should be blamed for the actions of extremist governments or armed groups.

As parliamentarians, we must speak out against religious hatred and religious supremacy and reject rhetoric that fuels division and hostility. Europe’s diversity and pluralism are not threats to democracy. Intolerance is. Let us support this resolution and defend freedom of religion or belief for everyone, equally and without discrimination.

Baroness Thérèse COFFEY (United Kingdom, ECPA): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

I am particularly concerned about people in our Jewish communities right now. Attacks on synagogues. People feeling intimidated walking down the street. Can people wear the Star of David openly? Anti-semitism is rife and I know that we, together, condemn that.

I fear for Christians in various countries around the world. I think now of the hundreds of girls and women abducted in Nigeria just a few months ago. Many are still missing. That was not a one-off. There are still girls missing after being abducted in Chibok in 2014.

But religious discrimination goes further than basic, crude intimidation.

The UK has become very much a secular society. Frankly, you are considered weird if you go to church regularly. In my political career, I have long been held under suspicion or experienced outright disdain and hostile attacks just for me being a person of faith, usually holding views different to their own. That has come from politicians, journalists and lobbyists or campaigners. This particularly happened when I became

Secretary of State for Health in the UK government. It is also happening now in our current debate in Parliament on proposed legislation for assisted dying or physician-assisted suicide. It is as if my faith is something that I can just switch on and off. It is not. It is just a part of me. But I am also a democrat. We have debates, we have votes on a variety of ethical issues. Sometimes my perspective wins out, sometimes not. While we may disagree, we do need to respect each other. Unfortunately, that appears most of the time to be a one-way street in our political discourse on this matter.

Where there has been a good reversal in recent years is more freedom for faith schools to expand. Even in a secular society like the UK, faith schools are very popular with parents. Where I was slightly concerned in this report was in paragraph 8, as it was not clear to me if it suggested that all religious education must be non-confessional. I agree that a proactive curriculum which educates and informs children about other religions is key, though that should not stop faith schools actively educating children on the designated religion adopted by that school. That should also continue to allow proactive selection of children to attend a school on the basis of their practising a particular religion.

Ms Cristina Gabriella DUMITRESCU (Romania, ECPA): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Dear colleagues,

We do have religious discrimination.

The Romanian Orthodox Church in Ukraine is not legally recognized, even though it serves a community of over 130 Romanian Orthodox parishes.

Between the two world wars, these romanian parishes were forcibly taken over in 1944 by the Moscow Patriarchate, afer the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact. Today, these communities wish to return to the Mother Church.

They established a religious association in August 2024 and applied for its registration with the Ukrainian authorities. Since then, the response has been continuous delaied, without a clear decision.

Furthermore, this registration is unlawfully conditioned on accepting subordination to another religious structure supported by the ucrainean state. Such a requirement violates the principle of state neutrality in religious matters, stipulated by the European Court of Human Rights.

Romanian priests who attempted to affiliate with the Romanian Patriarchate were threatened, including with mobilization to the front line.

The lawsuit filed by this association against the authoritie remains pending without resolution in the Ukrainian courts, concluding a violation of the right to a fair trial and to an effective remedy.

So, we are facing: unjustified administrative refusals, illegal conditions, pressure on the clergy, and the denial of access to justice. So? Do they have fundamental rights, minorites rights, democratic values and the rule of law? I think Ukraine should learn that, as a neighbor, you must also give, not only receive. In this context, i call on the institutions of the Council of Europe and this Assembly to closely monitor this case, to seek explanations from the Ukrainian authorities, and to support the effective respect for religious freedom.

I also call on the Government of Ukraine to register the religious structure of the Romanian Orthodox without delay, to respect the freedom of choice regarding canonical affiliation, to cease pressure on the Romanian Orthodox clergy, and to ensure real and prompt access to justice.

Thank you.

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

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

Dear Colleagues,

The right to freedom of belief is indispensable. Yet, in 21st-century Europe, this right is being systematically destroyed. The most striking and painful example is found in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine.

Nearly 70 clergy members of various denominations have been killed by Russian occupiers since the full-scale of invasion. Over 600 churches, mosques, synagogues, and prayer houses have been destroyed or damaged. Some priests were killed during religious services. What else can this be, if not the deliberate destruction of religious freedom?

Russian occupants persecute everyone falling outside the control of the Moscow Patriarchate. Churches are forcibly “re-registered,” communities are dissolved, and clergy are deported or intimidated. This is the imposition of a “single correct” faith under control of an aggressor state. We must call things by their proper names: Russia has turned religion into an instrument of war. The Russian Orthodox Church has effectively become part of the state apparatus of aggression it blesses the war, justifies violence, and works toward the destruction of Ukrainian identity.

And this is no longer a matter of faith; it is a matter of security. It raises questions for all of Europe: how to balance freedom of religion with security; how to prevent stigmatisation of communities; and how to ensure extremists do not speak on behalf of religions? A Muslim is not a terrorist. A Christian is not a propaganda tool. Faith is not a weapon.

Fight against discrimination, thus, requires education, dialogue, and political leaders' accountability for their words. Hate speech begins with words, but ends with actions. Returning to Ukraine: despite the war and daily attacks, we continue to uphold freedom of religion. Different denominations coexist, and individuals have the right to believe or not to believe. Because we understand: freedom of belief is not a weakness of the state, it is its strength. The protection of freedom of religion is a foundation of social unity and peace. It is the guarantee that every individual has a place in society.

Today, this freedom is under threat. I call for concrete action: to support victims, to document crimes, to hold perpetrators accountable, and to protect every individual’s right to believe or not to believe, free from coercion and fear. Because it is precisely this right that defines who we are as Europe.

Thank you

Mr Ričards ŠLESERS (Latvia, NR): *(Undelivered speech, Rules of Procedure Art. 31.2)*

Dear colleagues,

Freedom of religion isn't just an abstract theory; it’s a vital part of any real democracy. As a Christian, I believe we must protect everyone’s right to hold their faith close and, just as importantly, to live it out in the open.

The report before us shows worrying trends. Intolerance is growing across Europe, affecting both minority and majority groups, including Christians. We’ve seen acts of hostility against Christian places of worship that cannot be ignored. Too often, faith is being "unduly limited" by local laws and policies.

Look at the case of Finnish MP Päivi Räsänen. Facing years of legal trouble for sharing a Bible verse online shows how easily the state can overstep. We must ensure our laws don’t become tools for silence. Treating faith as a problem instead of a partner risks crossing a "red line" into oppression.

To move forward, we need a "common sense" approach. "Reasonable accommodation" is a practical way to let people follow their faith without creating an unfair burden. We also need "religious literacy" training for officials so they can protect freedom of belief consistently.

If we push faith out of public life, we risk cutting off the roots that built our freedoms. A confident Europe does not fear belief, it protects it. It does not silence conscience, it defends it.

Finally, as political leaders, our responsibility goes beyond legislation. Religion must never be exploited to divide societies. Instead, we should recognize faith communities as partners in building trust and peace. If we fail to do so, we are not only failing believers, we are failing Europe itself.

Thank you.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you so much for the lively debate. I must now interrupt the list of speakers.

The speeches of members of the speaker list who have been present during the debate but have not been able to speak may be given to the Table Office for publication in the official report, max 400 words. I remind colleagues that typed-written texts can be submitted electronically, if possible, no later than 4 hours after the list of speakers was interrupted. So tonight.

And now I call Mr Francesco VERDUCCI, rapporteur, to reply. You have 3 minutes.

"Please" [spoken in French].

Mr Francesco VERDUCCI (Italy, SOC, Rapporteur): Thank you President.

First of all I want to thank all my colleagues.

It has truly been a debate of great richness, of great depth, and I think it is a full part of this resolution of ours and also an incentive to keep this issue alive in our work, given its urgency and importance.

I will not be able to quote everyone, I will mention three colleagues representing such a complex debate.

The first quotation I want to make goes to my colleague Ms Meryem GÖKA. She said at one point: "it is not statistical to refer to discrimination based on religious oppression". It is not statistics, I would add, it is real life. This is the real issue we have: the feeling for those who are victims of this discrimination that they are always under potential attack. The shrinking of spaces of freedom, spaces of security and spaces of citizenship is a major democratic issue. We must recognise it and address it.

To this I attach a consideration, that of my colleague Lord Leslie GRIFFITHS, on the issue of public discourse, which is in my view fundamental. Lord Leslie GRIFFITHS said, 'the importance of having a fair account of the facts'. I add the complexity, the diversity of facts, not the stigma, not the stereotype. And I want to add a further consideration, which echoes other elements of this debate: freedom of expression that prevents others from expressing themselves is a bogus freedom. It is a freedom that self-destructs, because choosing the freedom of the oppressors against the freedom of the oppressed is a false openness. Religious affiliation can never be a cause of incompatibility. All minority groups have a right to leadership in societies and this distinguishes democratic societies from authoritarian regimes. We have a duty to guarantee this right.

Let me mention two other issues.

Education has been continually emphasised here and, together with this, as an antidote to polarisation, the theme of inter-religious cooperation, I also mean the dialogue between cities, the dialogue between religious places in different cities, the collection of data on intolerance, on discrimination, on the basis of gender, ethnicity, nationality, religious affiliation of the victims: this allows us to have full knowledge of the phenomenon and the appropriate, concrete tools to be able to counter it.

Then let me say, Mr President, something in conclusion, in the words, and this is the third quotation I want to make, of my Ukrainian colleague Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK. You said something very strong at one point, which also belongs to us: "we will rebuild the churches that have been torn down". Yes, we must do this, we must say: "never again churches that tear down other churches, but churches that rise up together, one with the other, to make our society rich, free, autonomous, open, in which we can live together in peace with one another".

Thank you, President and colleagues.

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

Does the chairperson, Ms Béatrice FRESKO-ROLFO from the Committee – do you wish to speak?

You have also 3 minutes.

Ms Béatrice FRESKO-ROLFO (Monaco, ALDE, Chairperson of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination): Thank you, Madam Chairman,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

For many of us, religion and spirituality are an important dimension, part of our consciousness and even our identity. For those who believe in human rights, religion is above all a right, a fundamental freedom, the freedom to have and practise a faith. Or, it should be emphasised, the freedom to change one's beliefs or not to have a religion at all.

Religious affiliation can also become a ground for discrimination, which is often added to or interacts with other grounds. Think of all the situations where a person is discriminated against both as a woman and because she belongs to a certain religion, or where faith intersects with nationality or ethnic origin.

The Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, true to its mandate and that of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in general, could not but approach religious issues from these two angles: freedom on the one hand and non-discrimination on the other.

The report does not conceal another problematic aspect: the fact that religion is sometimes used to exclude or stigmatise certain individuals and groups, often on the basis of stereotypes or genuine misinformation. We accompanied the report in its exploration of this theme, which proved particularly interesting. Indeed, guaranteeing freedom of religion and belief also means highlighting several dimensions of humanity and comparing different cultural and political traditions.

In light of these considerations, I can only congratulate the rapporteur on the work he has done, and I am sure that we can count on the strong and wholehearted support of this House for a positive, constructive text that aims to help build a just, free and inclusive Europe.

Thank you very much.

Vote: Countering discrimination based on religion and protecting freedom of religion or belief in Europe

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): "Thank you, Madam President" [spoken in French].

Thank you. The debate is now closed. We will move to the amendments and the votes.

The Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination has presented a draft resolution to which 5 amendments have been tabled.

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

I understand that the Chairperson of the Committee wishes to propose to the Assembly that Amendments 3 and 4 to the draft resolution, which were unanimously approved by the Committee, be declared as definitively approved.

Is that so Ms Béatrice FRESKO-ROLFO?

"Thank you" [spoken in French].

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

No.

Amendments 3 and 4 to the draft resolution are therefore approved and will not be called for the vote.

Then we will go for the rejection of the amendments.

I understand that the Chairperson of the Committee wishes to propose to the Assembly that Amendment 5 to the draft resolution, which was rejected by the Committee with a two-thirds majority, be declared as definitively rejected.

Is that so Madam Chair?

Ms Béatrice FRESKO-ROLFO (Monaco, ALDE, Chairperson of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination): That's right, Madam President.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): "Thank you" [In French].

So, if there are no objections, I will consider Amendment 5 to be rejected.

Are there any objections?

I don't see any, so *Amendment 5 to the draft resolution is rejected and will not be called*.

And then we go to Amendments 1 and 2.

So Amendment 1. I understand that there is also an oral sub-amendment to be proposed.

I first call Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO. Please, to support Amendment 1.

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

Dear colleagues,

In Amendment 1, we are just referring and citing our own resolution of our Assembly, Resolution 2540 from 2024, about the fact that the Assembly reiterates its recognition that the Russian Orthodox Church is being used as an instrument of Russian influence and propaganda by the Kremlin regime. It stresses that the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church, led by so-called Patriarch KIRILL, functions as an ideological extension of the Kremlin regime.

It's our text. The only thing I propose is to put it in this report. Please support.

Thank you very much.

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

I have been informed by the Committee of the following oral sub-amendment: In Amendment 1, leave out “the Assembly reiterates its recognition that the Russian Orthodox Church is being used as an instrument of Russian influence and propaganda by the Kremlin regime. It stresses that the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church, led by Patriarch KIRILL, functions as an ideological extension of the Kremlin regime and is complicit in war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in the name of the Russian Federation and in the pursuit of the Russkiy Mir ("the Russian World") ideology."

So, in my opinion, the oral sub-amendment is in order under our rules.

However, if 10 or more members object the oral sub-amendment being debated...

I don't see any. So that is not the case.

I call the rapporteur to support the sub-amendment on behalf of the Committee.

Mr Francesco VERDUCCI.

Mr Francesco VERDUCCI (Italy, SOC, Rapporteur): Thank you Mister President.

As you said, and for the sake of greater understanding of colleagues, we only approved part of the amendment by Ms Mariia MEZENTSEVA-FEDORENKO and Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO, who I thank, citing Resolution 2540 to which they refer, and citing the issue precisely of the use of hybrid war propaganda, and expunging the final part of the amendment due to the fact that we have already included references to Ukraine and Russian oppression regarding religious discrimination in Paragraph 11. Accepting other amendments in the Committee with full support from the rapporteur himself, so that they would be accepted, regardless of the very wide debate, which I will not summarise here, that took place in the Committee.

Thank you.

The proposal is therefore to accept only the sub-amendment and not the amendment by Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO in its entirety.

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

So that is the rapporteur's suggestion to leave out the last part of Amendment 1. Does anyone wish to speak against the sub-amendment presented by the rapporteur?

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO.

Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO (Ukraine, ECPA): Dear colleagues,

Once again, this is quoting our own resolution.

We, as an Assembly, voted for this in 2024, with these words.

What is the sense now to say okay, let us take it because somewhere mentioned – it's our words!

If we said this, we never declined this resolution. It was never taken back.

So just let us be in line with our previous decisions.

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

So, the opinion regarding moving the main amendment is against? Yes.

So the committee is in favour of the sub-amendment. Chair?

Ms Béatrice FRESKO-ROLFO (Monaco, ALDE, Chairperson of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination): Yes, Madam President, the Committee was in favour of the sub-amendment.

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

I shall put the sub-amendment to the vote.

So the sub-amendment as amended by the rapporteur is plus, and then the original is minus... sub-amendment, sub-amendment yes, we will put a vote on the sub-amendment and the vote is open...

I now close the vote.

I call for the results to be displayed.

67 in favour, 19 against, 11 abstention. So it's agreed, this sub-amendment.

We go back now to the main Amendment 1 as amended.

So so does anyone wish to speak against this amendment as amended now, to take away the last part?

No.

What is the opinion of the Committee?

Madam Chair?

Ms Béatrice FRESKO-ROLFO (Monaco, ALDE, Chairperson of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination): The Committee was in favour of the amendment as amended.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): So now I will put the amendment, as amended, to the vote.

The vote is open.

And I close the vote and I call for the result to be displayed.

It's 86 in favour, 1 against, 8 abstained.

So Amendment 1 as sub-amended is agreed.

Thank you. And then we go to Amendment 2.

So I call Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO to support Amendment 2, please.

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

If we said, and I remind you that we said with you in 2024 in the resolution, that Patriarch KIRILL and the Russian Orthodox Church is just a part of the Russian system of suppression and aggression, in this case they should be sanctioned.

So this is Amendment 2. It's about this, that Patriarch KIRILL should be sanctioned and restrictive measures should be taken against him and other top hierarchy of the so-called church.

Thank you.

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

Does anyone wish to speak against Amendment 2?

No.

What is the opinion of the Committee on the amendment?

Madam Chair?

Ms Béatrice FRESKO-ROLFO (Monaco, ALDE, Chairperson of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination): The Committee rejected it; had rejected the amendment.

Ms Miapetra KUMPULA-NATRI (Finland, SOC, President of the Assembly): So I will put the amendment to the vote now.

Yes means for the Amendment 2, and against is what the Chair was saying.

So I declare the vote to start and open the vote.

I declare the vote be closed.

Again I ask to see the results.

That is 36 in favour, 51 against and 9 abstentions. So this is rejected.

So no more amendments.

We will now proceed to vote on the whole draft report.

A simple majority will be required.

I declare the vote to be opened.

Now the vote is closed.

I ask to for the results to be displayed.

It's 83 in favour, 11 against and 6 abstentions.

I congratulate the rapporteur and the Committee.

Thank you.

Debate: Procedure for the election of judges to the European Court of Human Rights

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): The next item of business this afternoon is a debate on the report titled "Procedure for the election of judges to the European Court of Human Rights" (Document 16361). The report is by Ms Petra BAYR and presented by Ms Agnes Sirkka PRAMMER on behalf of the Committee on the Election of Judges to the European Court of Human Rights.

In order to finish by 8 p.m., not myself, but Mr Ruben RUBINYAN, who will take the floor after me, will interrupt the list of speakers at about 7:50 p.m. to allow time for the reply and the vote.

And before I call Ms Agnes Sirkka PRAMMER, I just want to mention that in the course of my political life, I got to know many international courts and how they work and about their procedures, and also how they elect the judges. And I can tell you that the Court of Human Rights here in Strasbourg for sure is a gold standard court in the terms of how we make decisions, how we find new judges and how democratically and transparently we do that. So I can really say that the Committee takes informed decisions.

But in Austria we have a saying, "the good is the enemy of the better". And because of that, there are many reasons to make small adaptions and to try to further develop the system we are using, and also to fix some shortcomings and smoothen the processes between us as the Parliamentary Assembly, the Committee of Ministers and the Member States, which is, I think, quite important.

So I call now. Ms Agnes Sirkka PRAMMER, you have 7 minutes now and 3 minutes after the debate to reply. Please. The floor is yours.

Ms Agnes Sirkka PRAMMER (Austria, SOC, Rapporteur): Thank you, Madam President.

Dear colleagues,

At a time when the European Court of Human Rights is facing criticism and international law is under pressure, it is essential for this assembly to uphold the integrity of the Convention system, and the authority of the Court. That authority ultimately depends on the quality and independence of its judges.

For 75 years, since the Convention was signed in Rome, the Assembly has held the exclusive responsibility to elect the Court's judges. This cornerstone of the Court's democratic legitimacy, especially at a time when that legitimacy is being questioned in the name of international sovereignty.

With this responsibility comes a duty to ensure the transparent and rigorous election process that results in the most qualified candidates selected for strong national procedures.

Important progress has been made in recent years, particularly since the establishment of the Committee on the Election of Judges in 2015, which I have the honour to serve as second vice chair.

The draft resolution before you, based on a report by Ms Petra BAYR, the Committee's Chair in 2024 and 2025, reviews current practises, identifies shortcomings and proposes concrete improvements. In preparing this report, she engaged in a very constructive exchange with the Advisory Panel of Experts and the Court, both bilaterally and with these bodies as a whole.

At the national level, we still see recurring weaknesses. While states retain some flexibility, they should fully implement the Committee of Ministers Guidelines and the Assembly standards.

The resolution highlights good practises, minimum application periods, more predictable and balanced selection bodies, stronger gender balance, greater involvement of civil society and legal professionals and proper assessment of language skills.

One key point: selection bodies should not be dominated by the executive. A significant proportion, ideally a majority, should come from outside governmental structures. We therefore invite the Committee of Ministers to update its Guidelines accordingly.

Regarding candidates, we express concern about increasingly young and less-experienced nominees and the continued under-representation of women. We underline the importance of solid knowledge of national legal systems, the expertise in human rights, while recognising the value of diverse professional backgrounds.

We are seriously concerned about delays by states in submitting candidate lists. These delays either prolong judges' mandates indefinitely or leave seats vacant. To address this, we propose an amendment to the Convention to limit extensions to one additional year. We are aware that amending the Convention is difficult, but the current situation contradicts both the latter and the spirit of Protocol No. 14. Our proposal creates real incentives for governments to act on time. If they fail to do so, the seat would remain vacant after the 10th year.

As for the Assembly's own procedures, the report suggests targeted technical clarifications. For example, the withdrawal or replacement of lists, on how to proceed if a candidate withdraws, and on the role of the Committee's chair in the plenary.

We also address recommendations to other actors. Governments should respect timelines and standards. National parliaments, human rights institutions, civil society and professional bodies should actively monitor and contribute.

We further propose stronger cooperation with the Advisory Panel of Experts and the Court. We invite the Panel to be more explicit about shortcomings and we call on the Committee of Ministers to give it formal mandate to advise on national procedures.

Finally, to attract the best candidates and safeguard independence, we propose addressing the post-mandate situation of former judges. Supporting their professional reintegration will make the position more attractive and strengthen independence.

I ask you to support this report and send a clear signal, even in challenging times, this assembly remains fully committed to the quality, legitimacy and effectiveness of the Court.

Thank you.

Ms Petra BAYR (Austria, SOC, President of the Assembly): Thank you very much.

Now I call, on behalf of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, Ms Elena-Simona SPĂTARU for her remarks.

Please.

Ms Elena-Simona SPĂTARU (Romania, ALDE, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Madam President,

Dear Colleagues,

These days, it has become even more important that human rights values be heard throughout the world and protected by judges and those who possess the highest level of competence, independence and impartiality. Therefore, the procedure for electing these judges must be transparent, efficient and fair. I would like to thank President Petra BAYR and, of course, our rapporteur for this comprehensive report, which covers all these requirements.

Let us remember that the current procedure for electing judges to the European Court of Human Rights was developed through a series of resolutions and recommendations of this assembly, adopted over the last 30 years.

The time has come to adapt to realities that force us to be even stricter. Stricter both with regard to the national election process and with regard to the competencies of future candidates. In both respects, this report is clear and proposes that the Assembly support forward.

States must ensure a minimum period of one month for the submission of applications. The executive should not dominate the composition of the body that carries out the national selection procedure. Civil society should have the right to participate as an observer in this procedure. Presenting candidates who have extensive judicial experience at the highest national courts. Also, candidates should have knowledge of the national legal system of the member State for which they would be elected. The Assembly regrets, and we know also, that women are underrepresented at the Court, as they account for less than 40% of the total number of judges in office.

That's why the lists submitted should contain at least one candidate from the underrepresented gender. Of course there are several important proposals with which the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe group agrees and declares its full collaboration so that the procedure for electing judges to the Court reflects the values of this assembly.

Thank you.

Mr Ruben RUBINYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

The next speaker will be Mr Emmanuel FERNANDES from the Unified European Left Group.

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

The election of judges to the European Court of Human Rights is one of the most essential responsibilities entrusted to our Assembly by the Convention. It is not just another technical procedure. It is about ensuring that the women and men called upon to protect the fundamental rights of over 400 million Europeans are the best qualified, the most independent and the most impartial.

The report before us today is a continuation of work that has been going on for a long time. Significant progress has been made in recent years, both in national selection procedures and in our own election practices. But this progress needs to be consolidated and deepened, which is the purpose of this report,

because the requirements set out in article 21 of the Convention are not merely formal criteria; they are the foundation of the Court's legitimacy, which is why it is essential that the entire process be fully fair, transparent and in line with these requirements.

The current system is based on a clear balance: the States propose three candidates with the support of the advisory panel and the Assembly elects the most qualified. The aim is not to call this balance into question, but to improve it, and that means strengthening transparency, cooperation and trust between all the players. A number of issues merit our full attention in this respect, including the evaluation of national procedures, the rigorous interpretation of eligibility criteria, guarantees of independence and impartiality, including the prevention of conflicts of interest, language skills and the conditions for exercising the mandate.

The work carried out with the advisory panel, with the Court itself, and with former judges and high-level experts has shown one thing: the quality of the selection process is inseparable from the quality of the justice delivered. And at a time when the Court is facing increasing challenges, it is our collective responsibility to ensure that the best people continue to join the Court. Improving the election procedure also means enhancing the attractiveness of the position, guaranteeing clear and demanding rules, and ensuring greater recognition of the role of judges even after their term of office.

Dear colleagues,

This report does not propose a break with the past, but rather a necessary change, a change that serves a simple objective: to preserve the excellence, independence and credibility of the European Court of Human Rights.

With this in mind, our group will support this report.

Thank you very much.

Mr Ruben RUBINYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you. The next speaker is Baroness Shami CHAKRABARTI on behalf of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group.

Baroness Shami CHAKRABARTI (United Kingdom, SOC, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister President.

It is a pleasure to support this report on behalf of my group, not least as it was prepared by a young rising star of this assembly... What's the matter? Do you not hear me?

OK, sorry about that.

Mister President,

It is a pleasure to support this report again on behalf of my group, not least as it was prepared by a young rising star of this assembly: Ms Petra BAYR.

As a member of the Committee on the Selection of Judges, I am happy to observe that in my experience, that body operates in a particularly non-politically partisan manner in its deliberations on appointment recommendations for this Assembly. Because democracy and the Rule of Law are not in permanent tension. Instead, the Rule of Law is a vital precondition for any civilised society, let alone a democratic one.

Our forbears understood this. Hence the Court of Human Rights is the jewel in the crown of this Council of Europe and the most effective human rights enforcement mechanism in human history. But, friends, now is no time for complacency with the Court and Convention under attack from parts of the political right and, sadly, even some parts of the left. This makes the integrity, credibility, and legitimacy of the Court more important than ever.

But we can only select from the candidates shortlisted by member State governments. So whilst I support every word of this report, I draw the assembly’s special attention to the passages on national selection procedures and how important it is that they are as widely publicised, legally credible and independent of all governments as possible.

Mr Ruben RUBINYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): The next speaker is Mr Rónán MULLEN, on behalf of the Group of the European People's Party.

Mr Rónán MULLEN (Ireland, EPP/CD, Spokesperson for the group): Thank you, Mister Chairperson.

I join others in welcoming this very important report and indeed to note the many important things in it.

Central, I think, is ensuring that the executive of state parties does not overly dominate the composition of national selection bodies. The vital importance of allowing civil society to be present during interviews at the national level of prospective candidates and, of course, the draft recommendation's important call on the Committee of Ministers to draw up an amending protocol to try and exclude the automatic and indefinite extension of mandates of sitting judges beyond their terms of office.

Of course, there are many important things in this report. I would like to note the particular concern about judges over-sitting their mandates, as has been mentioned. It can be a challenge, it has been said, and it is correctly said, I think, for some smaller countries that may have difficulties getting suitable candidates, particularly if they want to make sure that their nominees are national citizens. I, as a member of the Committee, have to say that I'm also very impressed at the collegiality, impartiality and the determination to pick the right people from among the nominees presented to us.

Language is a serious issue, and solid proficiency in English and French, or at least in one of those, is vital, and I think it's fair to say, continues to be a challenge. I want to echo as well, though, what Baroness Shami CHAKRABARTI said about the danger of complacency. So much hinges on our pursuit of excellence. And when one looks at the highly politicised process around the appointment of judges in the United States, there might be a temptation to be smug. But the reality is that politics is everywhere, and there is nowhere more political than the domain of human rights.

So we must always be concerned about potential conflicts of interest. And these don't, to be fair, only arise out of the closeness sometimes between candidates for judicial office and the government of the state parties. Article 21 provides that candidates must possess high moral character and have the qualifications required for appointment to high judicial office or to be "jurisconsults of recognised competence".

But say we're electing academics or professors or lawyers, and if we require them to have a practice in human rights-based activities, what if a judge is ever ruling in a case involving the NGO they worked with before being elected? That would be a problem. So we should remember that there can be no perfect objectivity. Everybody has a judicial philosophy, and this will have a bearing on how cases are decided. And that's why there is now a very sensitive situation where the Committee of Ministers at their meeting in Moldova will formalise a political declaration on issues related to migration and the European Convention and the operation of the Court. And we have to face that head-on and look it straight in the eye.

And as we look for suitable judges, we must always acknowledge that we have a challenging balance to strike between freedom and independence for the judge on the one hand, and yet the inevitability of personal judicial philosophy. And perhaps it's in seeking diversity of judicial philosophies that we can best address that conundrum.

Mr Ruben RUBINYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): The next to speak is Sir Christopher CHOPE from the European Conservatives, Patriots & Affiliates.

Sir Christopher CHOPE (United Kingdom, ECPA, Spokesperson for the group): Mr President, selecting the best possible candidates to hold judicial office is essential and in my time as a member of the Committee and its predecessor sub-committee, I think there have been significant improvements.

I think one can say fairly now that all the women elected as judges are elected on merit, and it wasn't always that way. And secondly, many of the conflicts of interest identified in a series of critical reports by the European Centre for Law and Justice have been addressed, although there are still some that need to be.

But there are still problems. There's an inconsistency and lack of transparency on the part of the Advisory Panel. And most recently, that was manifest when we were selecting Hungarian judges because the Hungarian list comprised three well-qualified candidates and they turned up for interview in Paris. And then it turned out, because the Advisory Panel started to change its mind, that the Committee decided to reject the list in total. So we rejected three good-quality candidates because the Advisory Committee had decided that it was going to lift the veil on the selection process much deeper, much earlier on than had been the case before.

There's also an issue around national parliamentarians being excluded from the process of choosing judges who sit in judgment on their countries. That currently affects Azerbaijan and Georgia. Why should those countries respect the Court's decisions if it has no involvement in the appointment of the judges? And in the case of Azerbaijan, that has led to that country refusing to implement judgments of the Court because they say that they don't have any say in the membership of the Court.

We need to have some common sense and flexibility, it seems to me, in this area. And I would like myself to see the Azeri delegation back as members of this Assembly.

There's also an issue around the delays in replacing judges whose nine-year term has expired; this is referred to in the report and particular attention is drawn to the bizarre case of Bosnia and Herzegovina where a judge should have left in 2021 and is still serving. My point would be: why are we going to extend this to ten years? Why don't we say, "once your nine years is up, it's up"? It's the same as attaining the age of 75; you don't stay on judicial office beyond that point.

So that's why I think that this report is good in parts, but there's plenty more to do.

Mr Ruben RUBINYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

I call next in the debate Mr Gergely ARATÓ.

...He is not here?

Mr Damien COTTIER.

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

First of all, I would like to thank the rapporteur, or should I say the rapporteurs, since there have been two successive rapporteurs on this issue, for her work, and also to congratulate our colleague, Mrs Petra BAYR, for her chairmanship for the last two years of the Committee on the Election of Judges to the European Court of Human Rights, now excellently replaced by our colleague Mr Sergiy VLASENKO, since this is a Committee that does important work and has done excellent work.

It has been an opportunity to produce this report, which basically enables us to take stock and improve this procedure, to rectify a few points or to clarify a few elements that basically guarantee that the procedure is objective, that it is good at the level of the Assembly and that it is of high quality, also with a certain amount of uniformity, despite the independence that countries have and must maintain in their national procedures.

This is a report and a draft resolution, a recommendation that I propose that you support because it is very important to gradually strengthen, as we have done over the last few decades and years, this procedure for electing judges to this body that is absolutely essential for our organisation, namely the European Court of Human Rights.

Please allow me to qualify the recommendations on the procedure for the national body, to make it clear that our countries have different traditions and structures and that, while there are recommendations on how the body should be composed, we can imagine different formulas that are just as objective and just as effective, as is the case in Switzerland.

I would like to emphasise one point that is mentioned in the report, and that is the importance of language. We have a Court that is bilingual, we have an organisation, the Council of Europe, that has several languages. It's important that judges not only have a very remote passive knowledge of one of the languages, particularly French, but that this knowledge actually exists. And this is something that we must test and that we must demand so that this diversity is actually experienced and not just claimed.

As for the delays in appointing judges, they are currently unacceptable, and the proposal to limit the extension of the term of office to one year seems to me to be a good one. I propose that you support these proposals.

Thank you for your support.

Mr Ruben RUBINYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): The next speaker is Ms Kate OSAMOR.

Ms Kate OSAMOR (United Kingdom, SOC): Thank you, Mister President, for calling me.

And I want to congratulate the two rapporteurs on this excellent report. At a time when international institutions are under pressure – they're being attacked, they're being undermined – it is essential to recognise that this election system is not perfect, but it is legitimate. Because it carefully looks at the balanced judicial selection processes, which in many European countries we could maybe debate on another day, but if we're looking at the actual selection process, it is balanced, and this is something which is very important.

The first test is the pluralism and diversity in nominations. This really prevents any government from putting forward a single preferred nominee and expecting automatic approval.

The second test, before any vote takes place, the advisory panel of experts evaluates whether each candidate meets the high standard required by the European Convention on Human Rights. This is not a symbolic step. This shows that the process is genuinely merit-based.

Third is the democratic legitimacy test. Judges are elected by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), which is us, and we are a body composed of democratically elected representatives from all member states. Unlike many national judicial appointments, this process is transparent and accountable to the public.

And finally, the robust protection test of judicial independence. Because judges are elected by representatives from across Europe, not only by their own governments, the system itself must not allow itself to influence the courts. We need to be separate. So this is essential if we want to be respected in the work that we are doing here in PACE.

And I see my time is coming to an end.

Okay, I'll sit down. Thank you.

Mr Ruben RUBINYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you. The next to speak is Baroness Thérèse COFFEY.

Baroness Thérèse COFFEY (United Kingdom, ECPA): Judges at every level should be respected by default. And the role of appointing judges to the European Court of Human Rights is actually the most important role that this Parliamentary Assembly undertakes.

But in addition to the qualities highlighted in the report, I strongly believe it is essential that candidates for European Court of Human Rights should be practising judges. Not people who've just done it in theory, done academic studies, but people who've actually been in courts and making those judgments affecting citizens in their own country.

I also strongly believe this should not just be considered desirable, but essential. It also concerns me that it's been suggested that the field should also come from activists. Judges should not only be independent, but they seem to be independent and impartial, and not allow themselves that respect to be undermined, when decisions, particularly, we've seen this in parts of the UK, where we've seen activist people, barristers, become judges, and as a consequence then have been removed from presiding on cases.

That is a real issue which I hope that this report, I know it does not endorse at all, but I strongly support more broadly the principles set out in the procedures in this report today.

Mr Ruben RUBINYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Mr Titus CORLĂŢEAN.

Mr Titus CORLĂŢEAN (Romania, SOC): Colleagues, we are debating right now an extremely important report which reflects one of the main competencies of the Parliamentary Assembly: the procedure of the elections of the judges to the European Court of Human Rights.

And I want also, as a member of the Special Committee of our Parliamentary Assembly, to congratulate our Rapporteur, Ms Petra BAYR, but also the Secretariat of our Committee for a very good, comprehensive and detailed report which contains also concrete proposals for modifying and improving our procedures.

These proposals are coming on the basis of our previous debates that we had within our Special Committee for the Election of Judges, from our practical experience during the years, from our consultations and co-operation with the Panel of the Committee of Ministers, but also on the basis of our contacts with the judges of the European Court of Human Rights.

This proposal concerns both the elements related to the national selection procedure, but also some concrete substantive criteria related to the conditionalities related to the professionalism and the independence that all three candidates which are listed on the national list should fulfil. And I underline all three national candidates.

And there were cases indeed, during the years, when our Committee was obliged to reject national lists because either some of the conditionalities related to the national selection procedure, the procedure grounds, were not fulfilled, but also for some substantial criteria. We had, for instance, some difficulties when we have received the signal from the Panel that there were some candidates that have been considered borderline candidates and we needed to take some concrete decisions. In some cases we have rejected the list.

I draw your attention to a very important and delicate subject, the status of the judges at the national level after finishing their mandate at the national level, and also the delay that we saw in some cases for the transmission of the national list.

As a conclusion, it's a good report, and I will also support the adoption of the report and the resolution.

Thank you so much.

Mr Ruben RUBINYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

I call Mr José María SÁNCHEZ GARCÍA.

Sorry, Mr Nikolla CAMAJ first.

Mr Nikolla CAMAJ (Montenegro, ALDE): Thank you.

Dear colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to express my support for this resolution and to thank the rapporteur for her dedicated and thoughtful work on this important matter.

The European Court of Human Rights remains one of the strongest pillars of our democratic order. Its authority depends not only on the quality of its judgments, but also on our collective readiness to respect and implement them from the very beginning. It reflects our genuine commitment to the rule of law and to the protection of every individual.

This is why I particularly welcome the emphasis of this resolution on ensuring that the selection and election of judges will be fair, transparent, and based on clear and consistent criteria.

I also find it important that the resolution draws attention to gender balance, transparency, and the need for continued co-operation between all actors involved in the process.

For Montenegro, the independence of the judiciary is of particular importance. We are fully aware that a strong and impartial judiciary is the foundation of a functioning democracy. This remains central to our reform efforts, especially in light of our aspiration to join the European Union and our objective to successfully conclude the post-monitoring dialogue within the Council of Europe.

This is not only part of our international obligations, but also a reflection of our own commitment to strengthening democratic institutions at home.

I therefore encourage all of us to continue acting with determination, to respect the authority of the Court, and to ensure the full and timely implementation of its judgments.

By supporting this resolution, we reaffirm our dedication to the values that unite us and the protection of every individual at the heart of our democratic societies.

Thank you very much.

Mr Ruben RUBINYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

The next speaker is Mr José María SÁNCHEZ GARCÍA.

Mr José María SÁNCHEZ GARCÍA (Spain, ECPA)*: Thank you, Mister President.

It goes without saying, at least in my opinion, that the main body of the Council of Europe is the European Court of Human Rights. Why? Because it is a court that functions as such, despite being an international court, since its judgments should in principle be implemented by member states. That is part of the European Convention on Human Rights and the protocols, they have to be adhered to.

In addition, as is the case in Spain, and in many countries, the courts follow the precedent of the European Court of Human Rights when it comes to interpreting human rights violations. Therefore, it's work is very important. It cannot be compared to our work here, an Assembly that is "Parliamentary" in name but without legislative powers.

Knowing this, I think it is of great concern indeed that this court has become a downright ideological court, if not a politicised one. And this is due to the fact that the selection of judges is skewed. There have already been complaints about the proven bias of some judges, and these complaints have not been addressed. Therefore, the recommendations contained in this text seem to me to be clearly insufficient.

For example, in Spain, the process to select a new judge began a little over a month ago, even though the current Spanish judge’s term is not set to expire for over a year. What does this mean? It means that the current government is acting a year in advance and wants to control the selection process. This is unacceptable. It is so unacceptable that a candidate to be appointed by Spain as a judge has challenged Spain's internal selection procedure. And therefore, all of this should be taken into account by the Council of Europe.

That's all. Thank you.

Mr Ruben RUBINYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you.

Dear colleagues,

All the speakers from the list have now spoken.

And now I call Ms Agnes Sirkka PRAMMER to reply. You have 3 minutes.

Ms Agnes Sirkka PRAMMER (Austria, SOC, Rapporteur): Thank you, Mister President.

I would like to sincerely thank all colleagues who have contributed in this debate. It has shown both the strong support for the European Court of Human Rights and the seriousness with which the Assembly approaches its responsibility in electing the judges. Many of the points raised today underline a shared understanding that the quality, independence and legitimacy of the Court start with the way we select the judges.

Yes, conflicts of interests can arise from time to time. What matters, however, is how the judges concerned deal with them. That is also why it is important to exercise great care in this election process. It is important that all those involved, the national selection bodies, the Advisory Panel of Experts and the Committee on the Election of Judges, take their roles seriously by respecting each other's role and having confidence in one another's integrity. This is the prerequisite for a well-considered vote here in the plenary. If the Committee of Ministers decides to follow the recommendations, this can be achieved.

In closing, I would like to express my sincere thanks to the rapporteur, Ms Petra BAYR, for her excellent and thoughtful work, and to the Secretariat for their continuous and highly professional support throughout this progress. This report is both timely and necessary. It strengthens procedures, addresses existing shortcomings and reinforces the credibility of the Court.

I therefore invite you all to support the draft resolution and recommendation, and to send a clear signal of this Assembly's commitment to the European Court of Human Rights.

Thank you.

Mr Ruben RUBINYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you, Ms Agnes Sirkka PRAMMER.

Does the Chairperson of the Committee wish to speak? You have 3 minutes.

Mr Sergiy VLASENKO (Ukraine, EPP/CD, Chairperson of the Committee on the Election of Judges to the European Court of Human Rights): Sure, Mister President. Thank you very much.

I would like to start with the statement that I totally disagree with the position of Mr José María SÁNCHEZ GARCÍA.

For my 12 years in this Committee, I could state that the election of judges by this Assembly is absolutely transparent and independent. So, as the second, there was a little bit of discussion about how many rapporteurs have that report, one or two. I would like to congratulate a rapporteur, Ms Petra BAYR, who was, at that time, on 12 January 2026, when the report was adopted, still a member of our Committee and my predecessor in the position of the Chairperson of the Committee on the Election of Judges.

As you know, our Committee is not about the report; we are conducting interviews with the candidates, and we have left the privilege of the reports to other committees. But sometimes even our Committee, the Committee on the Election of Judges, needs to have some improvements in our job. That's why we have that report. That report helps us to improve the national selection procedure. It helps us to improve the job of the national selection bodies. It improves the communication between the Committee and the Advisory Panel. And it also helps our Committee in the selection procedure and in advising the Parliamentary Assembly of the most qualified candidates to the position of judges of the European Court of Human Rights, which, as Baroness Shami CHAKRABARTI is normally saying, is a pearl in the crown of the conventional system.

And I would also like to disagree with some speakers who were saying that only judges should be presented in the Court. That's a little bit contrary to paragraph 21 of the European Convention on Human Rights. And as a result, I would also like to call the Committee of Ministers to look seriously at the amendment of the Convention, because we really have a big problem of over-sitting of judges in the European Court of Human Rights. There are a lot of examples, including my home country, Ukraine, where the judge was over-sitting for three years. And that position, which is absolutely, to my mind, contrary to the provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights.

So, I would like to end by thanking the Secretariat for their brilliant job with that report, and I will kindly invite everybody to vote in favour of the resolution and recommendation.

Thank you very much.

Vote: Procedure for the election of judges to the European Court of Human Rights

Mr Ruben RUBINYAN (Armenia, EPP/CD, President of the Assembly): Thank you Mr Sergiy VLASENKO.

The debate is now closed.

Colleagues,

The Committee on the Election of Judges to the European Court of Human Rights has presented a draft resolution and recommendation to which no amendments have been tabled.

We will now proceed to vote on the draft resolution contained in Document 16361.

A simple majority is required.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The draft resolution is adopted.

We will now proceed to vote on the draft recommendation contained in Document 16361. A two-thirds majority is required.

The vote is open.

The vote is closed.

I call for the result to be displayed.

The draft recommendation in Document 16361 is adopted.

The Assembly will hold its next public sitting tomorrow morning at 10:00 a.m. with the Agenda approved on Monday.

The sitting is adjourned.