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Standing Committee

Verbatim record (*English*)¹

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¹ *Italics* indicate text machine-translated from original French or German version into English.

1. Opening of the meeting by the President of the Parliamentary Assembly

The President:

Good morning, dear colleagues. May I ask you to take your seats? I would like to welcome you to the meeting of the Standing Committee in the sunny and beautiful Monaco. Isabelle and me, we met on Wednesday in Strasbourg when the Maltese flag was raised, and she promised me sun, and she kept her promise, so thank you very much for that. I want to express my sincere gratitude to the Monegasque authorities and, personally, to His Excellence Mr Thomas Brezzo, President of the National Council of Monaco, who will join us shortly, for organising our gathering here and for the exceptional hospitality which we experience.

Last week, I represented the Assembly at the 135th Ministerial Session in Chisinau – an event that concluded the Presidency of Moldova in the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe and transferred the Presidency to Monaco. And it was indeed a memorable and important session that will have serious and protracted impact. I consider myself particularly fortunate to witness there the adoption of the Resolution on the establishment of the Enlarged Partial Agreement on the Special Tribunal for the crime of Aggression against Ukraine. The idea of this tribunal was born in our Assembly in the Hemicycle back in April 2022, and we have consistently promoted it at all levels, even when many governments were still sceptical about its feasibility. So, it is particularly satisfying to see how the dreams born in our Hemicycle really become political realities, and I believe that this is a sign of how relevant our work remains and how appreciated it is and must give us a serious encouragement to carry on our work as there are a number of urgent and highly pertinent issues faced by Europe and the entire world. And I think it is truly impressive that we gained that step. Moreover, it was a huge pleasure to learn that already 36 countries and the European Union already committed to join this tribunal. Most importantly, we do not only see European countries, but there are also others like Australia, Canada, and Costa Rica who have joined. This is something that is difficult to underestimate as we see how Europe responds to the call to lead the protection and the strengthening of a rules-based international order, how it becomes the legitimate guardian of the principles and values that made up our identity and guaranteed peace and prosperity, how it rapidly grows into the leader of all those countries for whom freedom, democracy, and human rights are not mere words.

Another important result of this Ministerial meeting last week was, of course, the adoption of the Chisinau Declaration, in which member States clearly reaffirmed their commitments to the European Convention on Human Rights, to the fulfilment of the obligation to secure to everyone within their jurisdiction the rights and freedoms defined in the Convention, and to the support for the independence of the European Court of Human Rights and the integrity of the Convention system. And I'm happy that, in case we decide about it, also the President of the Court will address our Assembly during our June part-session on Tuesday afternoon. Our Assembly has repeatedly stated that the Convention and the Court are the continent's ultimate guarantors of fundamental freedoms and provide a solid foundation for its democratic and peaceful future. It is therefore crucial to safeguard their integrity and legitimacy. At the same time, we recognise the complexity of migration-related challenges encountered by member States, and we also acknowledge that the Convention is not cast in stone. Indeed, the beauty of the Convention is that it can be amended and should indeed evolve to reflect the changes that occur in our societies in a wider world. A wild world as well, I would say, sometimes. At the same time, all modifications and interpretations should be made in a calm and thoughtful manner – and I also outlined that in my speech in Chisinau – and never under pressure of populism. I am pleased that the declaration adopted a week ago reflects this approach and does not seek to undermine the Convention system. We will also have a request of the Migration Committee – if it's adopted like that – in our June part-session, on the follow-up to the Chisinau declaration about the whole Convention system. The adoption of this Declaration is also an important indicator that Europe does not shy away from emerging challenges and is ready to find an effective response to them without compromising on our fundamental principles and values. This is just another signal that our continent is ready to be a leader of the democratic world, even in the current volatile context.

I would also like to welcome the Monegasque Presidency of the Council of Europe and wish them all success. The two of them on the very right of my table will be the guarantees for that, particularly focusing on young people, fostering their active and meaningful engagement in democratic processes, ensuring their adequate protection, but also creative avenues of their participation in public life, and developing mechanisms for effective communication with them. I look forward to working together with the Monegasque Presidency, and I'm confident that together we can make even more of our dreams born in the Hemicycle a reality. So, thank you very much for that.

And as we have a quite busy agenda, I would really like to welcome all our guests here today, the President of the National Assembly, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Ambassador of Monaco to Strasbourg, our Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly. She's not a guest, by the way. We have a busy agenda today with several debates. This morning, after the welcome address of His Excellency Thomas Brezzo, we will have an exchange of views with Mme Isabelle Berro-Amadeï, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, and President of the

Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. We will then debate the Legal Affairs Committee's report on the Venice Commission's Rule of Law Checklist with a statement by Ms Marta Cartabia, the President of the Venice Commission, who will participate online. And, in the afternoon, we will hold a debate under urgent procedure on "Restructuring and streamlining of the Rules of Procedure". We will also have a debate on the report of the Culture Committee on "Journalism in the context of the Israel-Gaza conflict" and a report of the Equality Committee on "Enhancing co-operation between parliaments and equality bodies". As customary, the Standing Committee meeting will be followed by a round table organised in collaboration with the delegation of Monaco to the Assembly, and I really encourage you to participate in this roundtable on "Youth and Artificial Intelligence: education, autonomy and democratic safeguards". I think a topic that is really very important.

2. Welcome address by H.E. Mr Thomas Brezzo, Speaker of the National Council of Monaco

The President:

Without further ado, I now would like to give the floor to His Excellency Mr Thomas Brezzo, President of the National Council of Monaco, for a welcome address. Dear President, dear Thomas, on behalf of the members of the Standing Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly, I should like to express our deepest thanks for hosting this meeting here in Monaco and for your warm hospitality. We all enjoyed yesterday evening at the terrace over there. You are here among your friends, since you were a member of the Parliamentary Assembly until 2024. You know quite well how we are working, what we are doing, and when you left us, you just left us because you became president, so that's the only reason, otherwise he'd still be among us. A lawyer by profession, you have put your legal experience at the service of the National Council's Legislation Committee, which you chaired for the past six years. In this capacity, you co-ordinated the review of a significant number of highly technical pieces of legislation that were adopted by the National Council, notably the various anti-money laundering laws, reforms to civil and criminal procedure, the law on the transmission of nationality through marriage, the law on children of the country, and the emergency laws during the coronavirus period. At the same time, you participated in the work of the committee responsible for updating the codes, and also chaired the special committee tasked with amending the National Council's rules of procedure as part of GRECO's fourth evaluation cycle. Without further ado, it is my pleasure to give the floor to you.

H.E. Mr Thomas Brezzo, Speaker of the National Council of Monaco:

Thank you, Petra, for those words. *Madam President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Mr Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Madam Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, and President of the Committee of Ministers, dear Isabelle Berro-Amadeï, Mr Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the Principality of Monaco to the Council of Europe, Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, fellow parliamentarians from all walks of life, members of the National Council, starting with the Head of Delegation, Béatrice Fresko-Rolfo, whom I need not introduce, ladies and gentlemen, in your respective capacities: Following the visit, a few weeks ago, of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy, it is a great honour for the Principality of Monaco and for the National Council to welcome you here today, on the occasion of this meeting of the Standing Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, just a few days after Monaco assumed the Presidency of the Committee of Ministers.*

In this regard, I would like to express to Isabelle Berro-Amadeï my deepest esteem and gratitude for the work she will carry out over the coming months, and beyond. In Monaco, we all know her; we are all familiar with her skills and qualities – skills and qualities she has put to good use in all the institutions for which she has worked. As a magistrate at the Palais de Justice, then as a judge at the European Court of Human Rights, she is thoroughly familiar with the workings of the Council of Europe; as Ambassador of the Principality of Monaco abroad, notably in Germany; and, as she is today, in her capacity as Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, and President of the Committee of Ministers; and also as Minister of State, during her interim tenure following the death of Didier Guillaume in January 2025, who sadly left us far too soon and for whom I have a fond thought today; and finally, for the past few days, as the Principality of Monaco's representative to the Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers.

So, just as a little anecdote, we had a discussion yesterday evening over dinner. I was wondering who could be better suited than Isabelle Berro-Amadeï to carry out her duties, and then when she told me a little about her career, her career as a magistrate, I realised that, ultimately, no one else could have been better equipped to fulfil her duties over the coming months. As you will have gathered, in any case, I have no doubt that she will once again fulfil the mission entrusted to her by His Serene Highness Prince Albert II, our Sovereign, with professionalism and exemplary dedication. And in my capacity as President of the National Council, and before you all, I wish to assure you, dear Isabelle, and to assure the Prince's Government, of the full and complete support of this House for the actions you will undertake as President of the Committee of Ministers on behalf of the 45 other members of the Council over the next six months.

With the holding of this meeting of the PACE Standing Committee, the moment we are experiencing today has particular institutional significance, for the Parliamentary Assembly and the Committee of Ministers are not moving along parallel paths. They move forward together; they respond to one another; they sometimes question one another, but they always complement one another. The Parliamentary Assembly is, in a sense, the permanent democratic conscience of the Council of Europe. It questions, it alerts, it stimulates public action. This scenario is not unfamiliar to us here. I can see some of you smiling. We are well acquainted with it even here in Monaco, given the particular nature of our system, given that the government is not accountable to Parliament, and given that our Constitution systematically leads us to seek consensus with the executive branch on all matters falling within our remit. Yet, and I say this sincerely, in the presence of a member of the government, we have the opportunity to demonstrate that there is not necessarily a conflict between parliamentary demands and government action on key issues, such as the protection of women's rights, the protection of children—particularly in the face of the new risks they face, such as digital risks—the participation of young people in democratic life, or the fight against organised crime and, more generally, money laundering, to name but a few.

The National Council is particularly committed to young people's participation in public life, because a democracy that no longer listens to its youth often paves the way for its own fragility. Our National Youth Council puts this conviction into practice: giving them a voice, training them in debate, introducing them to the defence of our values, and instilling democratic reflexes even before they enter civic life. Our junior National Councillors will also be present this afternoon to attend the round-table discussion on the theme of 'Youth and Artificial Intelligence'. I would like to take this opportunity to remind you all that you are all invited and that your presence honours us at this event, which we have chosen and which is central to our future and that of future generations.

On another matter, I wish to emphasise that the entire Principality is also fully committed to the fight against organised crime, and more specifically the fight against money laundering, terrorist financing, proliferation and corruption. Having worked very actively on this issue – that is, since my election in 2018 and before taking up the post I currently hold – I am fully aware of the extent to which this subject has given rise to external perceptions, perceptions that I would describe as simplistic or erroneous, and in any case unfair, regarding the situation in Monaco. But the facts speak for themselves. Our country has undertaken far-reaching, substantial and demanding reforms, involving all institutions: the government, the judiciary, the supervisory authority itself, the various administrative departments, and also the Legislative Assembly. The economic players themselves have made colossal efforts to meet international standards. They have overhauled their working methods, putting their relationship with their demanding clientele – such as can be found in Monaco – at risk. All this amidst the economic recovery following the Covid crisis. This must be emphasised and commended. We are aware that, ultimately, international credibility is never built on intentions. It is built on actions. And more precisely still, on the consistency of those actions. The Principality, more exemplary than ever, whilst continuing its efforts, awaits a favourable outcome with confidence.

In our day-to-day institutional workings, there are also issues on which the elected representatives of the Monegasque people may express views that differ from those of the government. But a strong democracy is not characterised by the absence of debate. It is characterised by its ability to conduct such debates with respect for institutions and the rule of law. A few weeks ago, in Moldova, the President of the PACE, Petra Bayr, called on States to act to protect human rights and democracy, before adding this particularly powerful statement: "The Council of Europe is the conscience of Europe." This statement is much more than a mere quote. It deserves genuine collective reflection. The Council of Europe is not just another institution. It is not merely a diplomatic forum. No, no. That much is certain. It is the space where Europe reminds itself of what it wants to be. For when we speak of Europe, we are not speaking solely of the market. We are not just talking about budgetary mechanisms, standards or quotas. For 75 years, the Council of Europe has been talking about values. And I would say essential values. We are talking about human rights, we are talking about the rule of law, we are talking about democracy. In short, we are talking about freedom. And what could be more important than freedom? This freedom is what our peoples seek. It is what allows them to choose their own destiny. It is what allows us to distinguish progress from resignation. It is what constitutes our shared democratic compass. And this compass is precisely what the Council of Europe represents.

Nevertheless, let us keep our eyes wide open. We would be wrong to take comfort behind the walls of our institutions, for history teaches us one thing. Democracies almost never collapse in one fell swoop. They erode slowly, through habit, through successive acts of resignation, through collective fatigue. The rule of law does not always vanish in the face of rumbling tanks. It can also recede in the silence of habit, in indifference, or behind decisions presented as temporary. Today, the warning signs are numerous. When the courts are challenged because their decisions are inconvenient, when the press is weakened or freedom of expression is muzzled, when elections are contested even before they have taken place, when public opinion is manipulated by foreign powers, when truth itself becomes relative. Then, what we are experiencing are no longer merely political crises. It is the very foundations of our democracies that are beginning to shake. And when the foundations shake, no country,

large or small, can believe that it will remain safe forever. In this context, interparliamentary relations are no longer a matter of diplomatic courtesy. They are a matter of democratic vigilance, for when the rule of law falters somewhere in Europe, it is never a local problem. It is always a crack in a shared edifice. And democratic cracks have a distinctive feature: they never remain confined behind borders for long.

This afternoon, our discussions will focus specifically on these challenges: democratic resilience, strengthening checks and balances, and, above all, the impact of artificial intelligence on our democratic processes. No one can deny that a democracy becomes vulnerable when everyone receives different information, a different reality or a different truth. With the rapid development of artificial intelligence, and above all generative AI, the danger will certainly no longer be censorship. The danger will be the inability to distinguish truth from falsehood. And when a society no longer shares a common reality, it soon ceases to share a common destiny. Democracy is not a legacy that we receive for all time. It is a daily responsibility that falls to us and that we must shoulder without waiting for the first cracks to appear.

Ladies and gentlemen, despite these opening remarks, which are serious but, I believe, lucid, I would like to welcome each and every one of you to the Principality. Welcome to the parliamentarians, who have come from all over Europe, and welcome to your teams as well. Petra has already mentioned this, but having shared your benches in Strasbourg for just over a year as part of our Monegasque delegation, I know that it is you who bring this unique space for democratic dialogue to life every day. On that note, I cannot speak of our Monegasque delegation without saying a word about them. Everyone will have noticed that they are very active, and I can assure you that, as President of the Assembly, I am getting more and more grey hairs whenever they come into my office to tell me they have new ideas for Strasbourg. The same goes for my Secretary General, who immediately thinks of the Assembly's budget. But how can we not support them when they do such exemplary work for the PACE and fly the flag so high for Monaco and the National Council?

Dear Béatrice, dear Christine, dear Christophe, sorry Christophe, you'll have to excuse my gallantry regarding the order in which I've just mentioned you. I know you'll agree without hesitation that we cannot forget Benjamin Cellario and Thomas Manrique, who are also working tirelessly on behalf of our Assembly from Monaco and everywhere else. Without them, we certainly would not be as effective. Indeed, it is mainly thanks to the involvement of Thomas and Benjamin, in conjunction with the Council of Europe teams, that this event has been organised – and very well organised at that, from what I've heard here and there. They have been working on this for several months. Nor do I forget the others behind them: Stéphane, Nicolas, Jérémy and so many others. To all of you – Béatrice, Christine, Christophe, Benjamin and Thomas, and everyone else too – I would like to thank you for your commitment and dedication, and also to offer my warmest congratulations on all the work you are doing on behalf of our Assembly and in the public interest. Thank you once again.

That being said, ladies and gentlemen, I hope that our work will rise to the challenges facing our continent. And it is with great pleasure that I officially declare open the meeting of the Standing Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. I have just one final word to say. Long live human rights, long live the rule of law, long live democracy, long live the Council of Europe, long live Monaco too, and long live all the member States. Thank you.

The President:

Dear Thomas, thank you so much for your welcome address. And I'm very much looking forward to co-operating very closely with the Monegasque Presidency and the delegation. And I also have to say that in our standards, Monaco is a superpower in the Parliamentary Assembly with two chairs of committees from Monaco and the Presidency. I think it never happened before. So, of course, you earned it.

3. Exchange of views with Ms Isabelle Berro-Amadeï, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, and President of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe [CM/Inf (2026) 15, CM/Inf (2025) 16]

The President:

So that brings me to the next point of our agenda, which is the exchange of views with the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Monaco and the President of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, Ms Isabelle Berro-Amadeï. Madam President, dear Isabelle, thank you very much for your availability and the warm welcome we received in Monaco. We are looking forward to the six months of your Presidency, which is the very first Presidency in the history of Monaco since it joined the Council of Europe in 2004. So, it's a truly historic milestone also for you. The PACE supports the ambitious priorities set up for your Presidency, namely the effective protection of all citizens, in particular those who are the most vulnerable ones, the fight against violence against women and girls, your focus on young people and sport as a factor of inclusion - we also had an exchange with Her Highness this morning on the possibility of sports to integrate people and to overcome hurdles - and also for your commitment

on the human rights protection system. Thomas already mentioned that you have been a judge in respect of Monaco at the Court, so you indeed know the Assembly, but also of course the whole Council of Europe and the system behind it very, very clearly. You were a judge between 2006 and 2012, and you were President of Section until 2015. So, dear Madam President, it's an honour to give you the floor. Please.

Ms Isabelle Berro-Amadeï, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, and President of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe:

Thank you very much. *Ms President, Mr Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Madam President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Madam Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Mr President of the National Council, Madam President of the Monegasque delegation to the PACE, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen: First of all, thank you very much, Mr President of the National Council, for your kind words addressed to me. Rest assured that I shall endeavour to prove myself worthy of the trust placed in me. Ladies and gentlemen, it is a great honour for the Principality of Monaco to welcome you here today for this meeting of the Standing Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly. Your presence in Monaco is of particular significance, coming just as the Principality has, for the first time since its accession to the Council of Europe in 2004 – as the President has just reminded us – assumed the Presidency of the Committee of Ministers a few days ago. For our country, this period represents much more than an institutional responsibility. It comes at a particularly worrying time for Europe, which calls more than ever for us to reaffirm our commitment to the founding values of the Council of Europe and to the ideal it has upheld since 1949. For, as you know, Europe is currently at a turning point in its history.*

War has returned to our continent, geopolitical tensions are intensifying, power struggles are taking precedence over common solutions, democracies are being undermined, particularly by disinformation and foreign interference, and growing polarisation and isolationism are undermining the foundations of social cohesion, whilst economic, energy and trade crises are having a direct impact on the daily lives of our citizens. And behind these imbalances, it is always women, men and children who bear the brunt. Civilian populations pay the price for conflicts, forced displacement, precarious living conditions, violence, and also the gradual weakening of our democratic institutions. The war of aggression waged by the Russian Federation against Ukraine reminds us of this every day with particular brutality. For more than four years, Ukrainian civilians have been living under bombardment, family separations, destruction and the deepest human suffering, in the face of the most utter disregard for international humanitarian law.

Faced with this reality, our duty is clear. There can be no lasting peace without justice, nor true security without accountability. That is why the Principality of Monaco fully supports the efforts being made in favour of the Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine, as well as all the accountability mechanisms put in place by the Council of Europe. Because defending international law is not about defending an abstract idea. It is about tangibly protecting civilian populations, preserving their dignity and ensuring that the most serious violations do not go unpunished. And it is precisely in this international environment, marked by profound fragilities, that Monaco has chosen to frame its presidency around a clear ambition: 'The protection of all through an effective Organisation capable of responding to contemporary challenges'.

The protection of all is, first and foremost, a profoundly human imperative. It entails ensuring effective protection for the most vulnerable and upholding the fundamental rights that we all have a responsibility to defend. The protection of women against violence, the fight against child abuse, and addressing issues related to mental health, radicalisation and young people's exposure to digital content will therefore feature among the priorities of the Monegasque Presidency. In this regard, the Presidency will focus on implementing the commitments set out in the Istanbul Convention, developing solutions to the challenges facing young people, and promoting youth participation in democratic debate.

This ambition also relies on an effective Organisation. The Council of Europe's credibility lies in its ability to ensure that rights are genuinely effective for the populations it protects. The Organisation rests on the strength of its convention system, on the authority of the European Court of Human Rights, and on the implementation of the commitments freely undertaken by member States. The full and effective implementation of the Court's judgments is therefore an essential requirement. The overall coherence of the Council of Europe's work requires constructive dialogue between member States, as well as regular coordination between the various bodies. In this regard, the Parliamentary Assembly plays a crucial role by maintaining the direct link with the 700 million European citizens and the democratic pluralism that constitute one of our Organisation's major strengths. Your presence here bears witness to this necessary complementarity and to the importance of inter-institutional dialogue at a time when our democracies need cohesion, clarity and trust more than ever.

This collective mobilisation is indeed essential to address the contemporary challenges facing our continent. The war of aggression against Ukraine, organised crime, cybercrime and attacks on the rule of law are causing lasting

damage to our societies and call for coordinated responses at European level. To address these challenges, support for accountability mechanisms, the strengthening of democratic resilience and the preservation of citizens' trust in institutions are essential priorities for the future of our continent. The new democratic pact for Europe championed by the Secretary General is fully in line with this shared ambition to serve European democratic security.

Honourable Members of Parliament, through this Presidency, the Principality of Monaco wishes to contribute fully to the defence of the principles underpinning the Council of Europe's work: human rights, the rule of law and democracy. For, beyond the crises our continent is currently facing, it is a certain European ideal that we must preserve together. The ideal of a Europe founded on human dignity, justice, freedom and the deep conviction that lasting peace cannot exist without democracy and the rule of law. Seventy-seven years ago, the founding fathers of the Council of Europe sought to build an organisation capable of protecting this ideal in the wake of the tragedies of the 20th century. This legacy imposes a duty upon us. It obliges us to uphold the rule of law in the face of the logic of power, to keep multilateralism alive and to strengthen dialogue. Allow me to reiterate today how proud we are to welcome you to this meeting. I wish you rich and fruitful discussions and hope that our collective work will, over the coming months, contribute to further strengthening the unity and action of the Council of Europe in the service of the peoples of our continent. Thank you.

The President:

Thank you very much for outlining all these priorities and all these goals. I will now give the floor to the members of the Standing Committee. You can put questions to the Minister. And I would like to remind you that the time limit for questions is 30 seconds. I will group the questions and start with the representatives of the political groups. So, I will first give the floor to Mr Mogens Jensen on behalf of SOC.

Mr Mogens Jensen (Denmark, SOC):

Thank you very much, Ms President. Thanks also to the Monegasque delegation for a wonderful organisation and your hospitality here in Monaco. My question for you – Minister and now President of the Committee of Ministers – and also as Chair of our Culture Committee, your ambitious programme also on sports is, I think, to be noticed. And I see that you would like to focus on young people and the protection of young people in sports, which is very important. But I would also like to ask you how you see the possibilities of strengthening the work of good governance in sports and the respect of human rights, and also more transparency. So, as I know you have been working on this also earlier, I would like to hear your further ambitions on that on behalf of our group. Thank you.

The President:

Thank you. 30 seconds just as a reminder. Maria Mezentseva-Fedorenko on behalf of EPP.

Ms Maria Mezentseva-Fedorenko (Ukraine, EPP/CD):

On behalf of EPP, Madame Minister, thank you so much for putting in the heart of the Monaco Presidency that there is no peace and justice possible without democracy. And, of course, my question would be in the line of humanitarian issues. You mentioned a lot the deported children and the issues of the children. We would like to know if it's possible also to put in the priority of Monaco's Presidency the issue of the civilians who are taken hostage, who are kept in captivity unlawfully because we know that the Geneva Conventions are clearly saying civilians can't be taken hostage. Thank you for putting the work of the International Committee of the Red Cross in the heart of it and we hope that Monaco can help us release all the civilians captive and bring all illegally deported children back home to Ukraine. Merci.

The President:

Thank you very much. I again want to remind you to the 30-second limit. Zsolt Németh on behalf of ECPA.

Mr Zsolt Németh (Hungary, ECPA):

Thank you very much, Madam President. Madam Foreign Minister, I'm grateful for your words. Mr Speaker thank you very much for your address. I would like to express also my gratitude to the Monaco delegation, to Mr Brico and Ms Fresko-Rolfo for the excellent organisation and I would like to wish you a successful presidency period. My question, Madam Minister, concerns the Chisinau foreign ministerial which was a real success and one aspect of that was the proposed plan to adopt a convention against foreign interference. Foreign interference is part of our everyday political life, East and also West, and I believe that, for us, in the Council of Europe this is one of the most important challenges we are confronting in the process of creating the New Democratic Pact. What do you see as a possibility under your presidency relating to the convention against foreign interference? Thank you very much.

The President:

Thank you and now on behalf of ALDE, Rian Vogels.

Ms Rian Vogels (Netherlands, ALDE):

Thank you, Madam President. Minister, during Monaco's Council of Europe presidency, momentum has clearly grown for the establishment of the Special Tribunal for the crime of Aggression against Ukraine with 36 countries and the European Union now having committed to the initiative. This reflects a widening recognition that accountability for the crime of aggression is essential for upholding the international legal order as you express in your speech. My question is, could you outline how Monaco intends to actively use its presidency to accelerate the political and legal steps needed to establish this tribunal and in particular how will Monaco help bridge remaining differences among States on its legal foundation, jurisdiction and enforcement mechanisms? Thank you for the hospitality on behalf of the ALDE group and, on a personal level, it's a pleasure to visit your country, your beautiful country for the first time. Thank you.

The President:

Thank you very much. And, if I understood correctly, UEL does not want to raise a question. That's great. Then please, Isabelle, over to you.

Ms Isabelle Berro-Amadeï, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, and President of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe:

Thank you very much, Madam President. The first question concerns sport. I would first like to mention – and those of you who were able to attend breakfast with Her Serene Highness Princess Charlene will no doubt have noticed – the great importance Monaco attaches to sport here in the Principality. Sport is a factor for inclusion and cohesion, not only for young people, but for everyone living here in Monaco. That is why we wished to make sport a priority for the Principality's actions during its Presidency of the Committee of Ministers. We look forward to hosting the 19th Conference of Ministers Responsible for Sport in Monaco this November. This conference will be chaired by the Minister of the Interior and will focus on the theme 'Safer and healthier sport for all children'. This also allows us to coordinate both the priority of sport and the Principality's focus on children's issues. At this conference, we will address two themes that we consider important. The first will be the prevention, detection and response to violence and abuse against children, and the second theme to be examined will be the promotion of children's physical and mental health, as well as their well-being. We are aware in Monaco that, whilst sport is a wonderful tool for the development of children and young people, its full potential can only be realised within an inclusive, participatory and safe environment. Therefore, the APES also regularly addresses issues of integrity in sport. I believe these issues will also be raised during this conference, and I would also refer to the Macolin Convention, which is equally important in this field. This conference is, for us, one of the highlights of this presidency, and I therefore hope for a strong turnout.

The second point concerns the issue of civilians taken hostage. With regard to prisoners of war, we naturally reiterate the need to respect international law, in particular the Geneva Conventions and the UN Convention against Torture. I would like to make a specific point, in particular, on the issue of children deported from Ukraine. As you know, this issue – that is, the protection of all children, including those in Ukraine – is also a priority for the Monegasque Presidency. This situation is the subject of decisions and in-depth discussions within the Committee of Ministers, where, meeting after meeting, we deplore the targeted attacks carried out by the Russian Federation against civilian infrastructure where, unfortunately, there is often a significant presence of children: homes, hospitals, maternity wards, schools, nurseries, and also leisure facilities. We are also gravely concerned about the killings, injuries and sexual abuse being committed against children, and of course, as you mentioned, Madam, the illegal transfers of Ukrainian children by Russian forces and their deportation, whether to the Russian Federation, to Belarus, or to areas temporarily occupied or controlled by the Russian Federation, as well as their forced placement or adoption by foster families and, more generally, all serious violations of their dignity. We therefore consider that all crimes committed against these children must be the subject of an independent investigation and, above all, must not go unpunished, in accordance with the general principles of international law and international humanitarian law. At the Reykjavik summit, we adopted a declaration on the situation of children in Ukraine. As you know, a Council of Europe advisory group on children in Ukraine has been set up to serve as a multilateral platform for the exchange of information; I believe it is working quite well. Thematic dialogue groups have also been set up on this issue to provide psychological support and care, not least to address the immeasurable trauma these children and their families must be enduring, because I believe we must also think of their families. I would therefore also like to commend the ongoing commitment of the Secretary General's Special Envoy on the situation of children in Ukraine, who is working actively to coordinate all actions aimed at safeguarding the rights of Ukrainian children; and finally, on this subject, the Committee of Ministers also welcomes the ongoing cooperation between the Council of Europe and the International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children. And I must say, on a more national level, that the Principality has recently joined this coalition, and I welcome this.

So, the third question concerned, I believe, FIMI. I can't quite remember where the gentleman who asked me the question about FIMI was sitting. There you go, thank you. You are right, sir; the phenomena of foreign interference and information manipulation truly constitute one of the most insidious, hybrid and evolving challenges facing our

democracies. It was a question which, as you mentioned, was addressed at the Chisinau summit. I believe our response must be clear-sighted, comprehensive and forward-looking. We must act first and foremost at an early stage with young people; we believe this is fundamental. In any case, in Monaco, this is something we do regularly. Young people today are growing up in a digital environment characterised by the speed and overabundance of information. This often prevents them from assessing the veracity of this information, and above all its reliability; consequently, young people are a prime target for manipulation strategies. I therefore believe that, within our member States, we must genuinely strengthen media literacy and information literacy, foster critical thinking among our young people, and support responsible digital ecosystems. A second aspect is this: it seems to me that we need to adopt a somewhat more comprehensive approach and pay closer attention to the funding channels that underpin these phenomena. Organised crime, through money laundering, and crypto-assets – which are also emerging phenomena – can heighten the risks of disinformation, foreign interference and the manipulation of information. So I believe we need to improve the traceability of illicit financial flows and, in particular, strengthen operational cooperation between member States. That is why, as part of our Presidency, we will be organising a conference of Justice Ministers in June on the fight against money laundering, which I believe will also help to address these issues. Another objective, another area I believe it is important to focus on, is the prevention of radicalisation, particularly among young people, which must also be integrated into this comprehensive and holistic approach. Here too, the Principality will host an event on the radicalisation of young people, which will be chaired by our Minister of Justice. So all this to say that I believe that all these issues call for collective responses commensurate with the transnational and evolving nature of these threats and therefore, as I have told you, we will be organising various events and several conferences dedicated to these challenges.

With regard to the possible framework convention, which is currently under consideration and was discussed at the Chisinau summit; we have taken note of the feasibility study by the committee of experts appointed by the Committee of Ministers, which leaves the door open to the drafting of a framework convention; I therefore believe that the Presidency's objective over the next six months will be to continue the dialogue with member States to explore the various options on the table. Perhaps first of all to arrive at a definition of the challenges involved, since for the moment we do not have a precise definition, or at least one on which there is consensus amongst member States, and then to see what avenues will allow for regulation on the subject.

The Special Tribunal, to return to the situation in Ukraine and the Special Tribunal. Madam President mentioned this earlier; I believe that the moment we experienced in Chisinau – I can't recall who asked me the question so that I answer it – but that moment we experienced in Chisinau was a historic one; personally, I did not expect to see so many States expressing their support for the establishment of the Special Tribunal at this summit. The President has reminded us: 36 States therefore expressed this support, along with other States that are not members of the Council of Europe, and I believe we should truly welcome this. First of all, I believe we must, as we would say in English, 'pay tribute' to the Ukrainian people for their resilience and admirable courage. The tireless efforts of President Zelensky and the Ukrainian authorities must truly be highlighted – these efforts to defend their nation and to protect their people. Monaco has always reaffirmed its commitment to the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine, and I mentioned, in my speech in Chisinau, and I believe this is essential, that the events currently unfolding in the Middle East, which naturally also occupy and concern us, must not cause us to forget the suffering of the Ukrainian people and the urgent need to find a swift resolution to this conflict.

As regards the Special Tribunal, the resolution establishing an enlarged partial agreement to support the operation of the Special Tribunal was adopted at the Chisinau conference. Its effective entry into force is subject to two conditions: the first is sufficient participation by States, including the main contributors, so we will have to wait for each State to ratify it in accordance with its internal procedures, of course, and also confirmation of financial viability based on consolidated budgetary figures. You can therefore count on the Monegasque Presidency to monitor the work involved in setting up this Special Tribunal. I also welcome the Netherlands' commitment to host this institution in The Hague. We will work with them to ensure that the implementation and operation of the Special Tribunal proceed as swiftly as possible. I believe there can be no peace without justice; it is also a matter of dignity for the suffering populations. You can therefore count on the Monegasque Presidency's commitment to this issue.

The President:

Thank you very much, I will now give the floor to other members of the Standing Committee and Georgios Stamatis was the first I could see. Who else wants to take the floor? Please indicate, thank you.

Mr Georgios Stamatis (Greece, SOC):

Thank you, Madam President. Of course, I can understand the priorities of Monaco Presidency but allow me to mention something about the hidden population that we have in our member States, and my question is about the cost of energy, the cost of living, the demographic challenges, and what are your thoughts about the homeless and the Roma population? When we talk about justice for the kids, we have in our countries early marriages in Roma populations and most of this population don't have any access not only to the justice but to the health systems. And

for me it's very crucial for your priorities about the sports. In this time, we talk to involve in sports as a social inclusion, for the kids it's very expensive, because we have poor families, they don't have the facilities and opportunity for their children to include not only through sports, but also through culture. For the question is: what do you think about this hidden population about the social inclusion of them, in the time that we have demographic challenges, we have a big cost of living and, of course, the other things as access to water and very expensive energy? Thank you.

The President:

Thank you. I will group always three questions, and the next one is Marianne Binder-Keller from Switzerland.

Ms Marianne Binder-Keller (Switzerland, EPP/CD):

Dear Minister, thank you very much for your words. My concern: the arising movements of people, mainly migrants, who violently demand other rights in our democracies and constitutional States. Parallel rights like for example the Sharia, people on our streets shouting again "Jews in the gas". We know those demonstrations. And my question is, meanwhile, human and women rights are fading away in other States, like Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, other countries. What are we doing here in Europe against these people who are demanding parallel rights destroying our constitutional State?

The President:

Thank you and the third in this round is Marko Pavić from Croatia.

Mr Marko Pavić (Croatia, EPP/CD):

Thank you very much, dear Minister. My question is about the Mediterranean. Croatia is also a Mediterranean country. How can we collaborate better? Croatia is currently presiding over MED9 which is EU format, but we have a parliamentary Union for the Mediterranean and other formats; and I would like also to thank you for the ocean sciences, and climate change and how we can deal with climate change? I'm an ocean scientist. I've been visiting your museum and institute much before I was in politics and I would like to thank Grimaldi family and Monaco for this great opportunity to come and study here in your nice institution. Thank you.

The President:

Thank you very much, dear Madam Minister, over to you and your answers if you are ready.

Ms Isabelle Berro-Amadeï, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, and President of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe:

Thank you very much, Madam President. So, the first question concerns particularly vulnerable people: the homeless, children, culture and access to sport. I believe that human rights are human rights for all. We must therefore strengthen our democracies and promote social inclusion. I understand social inclusion in relation to all our populations. Sport is a wonderful vehicle for social inclusion. You don't always need special facilities to take part in sport. I saw this when I visited partner countries in Africa, where, in a village setting, all it took was one coach or one sports enthusiast to bring the children together, and those children would rally around this sporting culture regardless of the cost of special facilities. So the Principality is truly convinced that sport can be a vehicle for social cohesion and inclusion.

With regard to the erosion of human rights in our societies, you mentioned Sharia law, Madam. I believe that we do indeed need to strengthen our democracies – which have been weakened – whilst preserving European unity. The Council of Europe truly plays a central role as the guardian of our shared values. Our common values are human rights, democracy and the rule of law. And real security rests on what the Secretary General calls democratic security, and I believe that it is by referring to our values – the values that unite us and form the foundation of this Europe – that we will be able to strengthen our democracies.

The third question, the other question, the Mediterranean, yes. Thank you for mentioning the Oceanographic Museum here in Monaco. I think you realise this. Monaco is a territory which, by virtue of its geography and its identity, is naturally open to the sea. The Mediterranean Sea is our shared space. We have established several regional organisations here in Monaco, including the Union for the Mediterranean. We host here in Monaco the secretariat of the Agreement on the Conservation of Cetaceans in the Black Sea, the Mediterranean and the Adjacent Atlantic Area, known by the acronym ACCOBAMS. We also host the secretariat of the Pelagos Sanctuary, which is a marine protected area for the protection of marine mammals, and we also host an association called MedFund, which works towards the creation of marine protected areas in the Mediterranean; notably, Monaco currently holds the presidency of this association, so the Mediterranean is a key issue. The Principality is deeply committed to environmental conservation, and particularly to the conservation of the oceans; this is a vital issue for our planet. Prince Albert II continues to speak out in international forums to raise awareness of the situation facing

the seas and oceans; so, for us, I would say that in Monaco, beyond being a national priority, it is an essential priority and an international priority.

The President:

Indeed, it is also for landlock countries like mine. Colleagues, I do not see any other request for the floor which brings us to the end of this exchange. I would like to thank you very much Minister for your answers and for the fruitful exchange with our colleagues. And we will also now take the opportunity that you and the Speaker are here for a family photo that will take place in the terrasse right outside. It will be followed by a coffee break. We will take a break for 15 minutes that means that we gather here again at 11:35. Please be on time and gather first for the family picture. Thank you very much, Madame Minister and Mr Speaker, for your presence.

4. Examination of new credentials

[Doc. 16406]

The President:

So, colleagues, may I invite you again to take your seats please? Before we continue with the next item of the agenda, let me briefly remind you that the speaking time for the debates is as follows: the rapporteurs are allowed to have a total of 10 minutes, usually seven minutes before and 3 minutes after the debate, and the time for any question of procedure is limited to 30 seconds. Any other interventions are limited to 3 minutes. During the votes, to facilitate the vote counting, may I please ask you to keep your hands or nameplates up, until everything is counted? And, if need be, I may call a vote by standing up, but that's usually not necessary.

So, we now come to the examination of new credentials. We have received a number of new ones. We have received a new delegation from Finland, one new delegate, which is contained in document 16406. Are there any objections to the change in the composition of this delegation? If so, please show me, but it doesn't seem to be like that, so we can accept the credentials of Finland.

5. Modifications in the composition of committees

[Commissions (2026) 06, Commissions (2026) 06 Add., Commissions (2026)07]

The President:

We also have some modifications in the composition of committees which is the next business of our agenda. There are changes in the membership of the committees communicated by the national delegations of Albania, Austria, Finland and the United Kingdom. In addition, the Group of the European People's Party has nominated a member to the Monitoring Committee. The changes are set out in documents Commissions 2026 (06), Commissions 2026 (06) Add and Commissions 2026 (07). Can we accept all these changes? We obviously can.

6. Request for a debate under urgent procedure (under Rule 53 of the Rules of Procedure)

The President:

Before we adopt the draft agenda, we need to consider the request for a debate under urgent procedure. The Committee on Rules, Ethics and Immunities made a request for a debate under urgent procedure on "Restructuring and streamlining of the Rules of Procedure". The Bureau, at its meeting held on 24 April, agreed to recommend holding this debate. Are there any objections to the Bureau recommendation? I don't see any. So, we will include that to the agenda.

7. Agenda

[AS/Per (2026) OJ 01 rev2]

The President:

Which makes me now come to the adoption of the agenda. Are there any objections to the new agenda, including the urgent debate? That's not the case.

8. Third part-session of the Parliamentary Assembly (22-26 June 2026)

[AS/Bur (2026) 29]

The President:

Then we come to the third part-session of the Parliamentary Assembly. At its meeting yesterday, the Bureau drew up the draft agenda for the forthcoming Assembly part session which will be held from 22 to 26 June 2026. Rule 27.4 of the Assembly's Rules of Procedure stipulates that the draft agenda shall be submitted, where possible, to the Standing Committee. The Standing Committee is invited to take note of this agenda. And I know that Elvira Kovács wants to make a statement. Please, Elvira.

Ms Elvira Kovács (Serbia, EPP/CD):

Thank you. Dear Petra, dear colleagues, since we just adopted an agenda and, during the next June part-session, we will have a report about elections in Hungary, I would just like to make a short statement since actually an error happened and a mistake and I want to apologise, because I applied to be a part of the mission for the observing elections in Hungary but since, despite the fact that I'm a member of the Serbian delegation and, parallel with my Serbian nationality, I also have a Hungarian one, there was a mistake but, as soon as we figured out, I actually did not observe elections in Hungary, but to apologise and to highlight that this rule should be clearer and of course implemented to other colleagues too. Thank you.

The President:

Thank you and, as far as I know, you also corrected your declaration of interest.

Ms Elvira Kovács (Serbia, EPP/CD):

I edited it of course.

The President:

Thank you very much, Elvira, for making this clear.

9. Legal Affairs and Human Rights

Updating the Venice Commission's Rule of Law Checklist: a contribution by the Assembly

[Doc. 16402]

The President:

We will continue our meeting with the consideration of the report on "Updating the Venice Commission's Rule of Law Checklist: a contribution by the Assembly". The rapporteur of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights is Ms Arusyak Julhakyan from Armenia, EPP/CD. She is here to present her report. It's also a true pleasure to welcome online Ms Marta Cartabia, the President of the Venice Commission. Ms Julhakyan, you have 10 minutes in total, which you could divide for the presentation of your report now and for the debate later. So, with that, I give you the floor.

Ms Arusyak Julhakyan (Armenia, EPP/CD):

Thank you, Madam President. Dear colleagues, I am pleased to present my report and to propose that the Assembly endorse the updated Rule of Law Checklist – the latest achievement of the Venice Commission. Since its creation thirty-five years ago, the Venice Commission has served as a guardian of the rule of law, offering guidance on constitutional reforms, electoral laws, and judicial independence to both new and established democracies. Let me also add that the Assembly is proud to be among the Venice Commission's closest and most active partners. This is not by chance; it reflects our shared conviction that the rule of law is fundamental to democracy. To fully appreciate the significance of this updated Checklist, we should look back at how this instrument came into being. The journey began in 2007, when the Assembly invited the Venice Commission to reflect in depth on the concepts of the rule of law and the pre-eminence of law. This led to a comprehensive rule of law report adopted by the Venice Commission in 2011. A central objective of that report was to clear up the differences between the true rule of law and mere rule by law, demonstrating that the rule of law is a specific legal concept with concrete standards and safeguards, not just a vague political slogan. Building upon this, and working closely with the Assembly, the Venice Commission adopted the original Rule of Law Checklist in March 2016. The Assembly endorsed this tool, recognising a broad consensus on its core elements: legality, legal certainty, the prohibition of arbitrariness, access to justice, respect for human rights, non-discrimination, and equality before the law. The Checklist was designed to be regularly updated. Indeed, the concept of the rule of law is not a rigid or static formula; it must adapt to face new challenges without losing sight of its core principles.

The Assembly is proud to have been an active partner in this process, not merely a passive user. Our Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights engaged early, holding a hearing in September 2024 with the Honorary President of the Venice Commission and the Chair of the Sub-Commission on the Rule of Law. In March 2025, my predecessor as rapporteur, Ms Klotilda Bushka, presented an introductory memorandum that was submitted to the Venice Commission as the Assembly's preliminary contribution to the update. I am pleased to see that many of the key proposals submitted by the Assembly are fully reflected in the final text of the updated Checklist. The update addresses contemporary challenges that did not exist with the same intensity a decade ago. A major achievement of this revision is the practical integration of the impact of new technologies and artificial intelligence across all benchmarks. We have insisted that digital transformation, including the deployment of algorithmic systems in public administration, law enforcement, and the justice sector, must remain transparent, governed by clear legal bases, non-discriminatory, explainable, and accountable. Under legal certainty, AI systems must satisfy strict standards of reliability, cybersecurity, and auditability. For the prevention of abuse of power, there must be clear explainability and a distinct allocation of responsibility between public and private actors, so that citizens can effectively challenge

algorithmic decisions. Furthermore, the update explicitly extends rule of law guarantees to private actors who perform public tasks or hold dominant positions that heavily impact citizens.

Another critical dimension proposed by the Assembly and adopted by the Venice Commission concerns the restoration of the rule of law after a period of regression, or backsliding. Recent experience has shown that democratic backsliding is often a methodical process, where autocrats intentionally dismantle checks and balances, frequently targeting the independence of the judiciary, oversight institutions and public broadcasters. In response, the updated Checklist frames the restoration of the rule of law as a holistic endeavour that must itself strictly adhere to rule of law standards. It seeks to balance the pressing need to re-establish independent adjudication with respect for core principles, including legal certainty, *res iudicata*, and the irremovability of judges. It warns that radical steps require careful scrutiny to avoid undermining the very objectives they pursue. To build long-term societal resilience against backsliding, the Checklist underlines the vital importance of legal and civic education, academic freedom, and professional training for public officials.

These updates were directly inspired by real-life episodes of rule of law backsliding and regression observed within several member States since 2016. We have witnessed increasing attacks on judicial independence, non-compliance with the rulings of constitutional and international courts, and the gradual weakening of oversight mechanisms and civic space. A deeply worrying trend is the rhetoric where representatives of governments use the concept of the "will of the people" as an unacceptable excuse to refuse compliance with binding court decisions. This domestic disregard for legal obligations frequently mirrors a contempt for the international rule of law. It is precisely these systemic weaknesses that justify the Venice Commission's decision to raise checks and balances and constitutional review to the rank of self-standing, independent benchmarks within the updated framework. The checks and balances benchmark now explicitly demands the constitutional separation of powers, loyal co-operation, protection of parliamentary minorities, and robust legal protections for civil society, independent media, whistle-blowers, and independent institutions, such as ombudspersons. Similarly, the self-standing constitutional review benchmark affirms the absolute binding force of constitutional court decisions, emphasising their role in a democratic society governed by the rule of law.

The draft resolution before you, expresses the Assembly's appreciation for the continuous, high-quality contributions of the Venice Commission and for the excellent co-operation we have shared for over three decades. The updated Rule of Law Checklist arrives at a time when the rules-based international order faces unprecedented geopolitical challenges, yet we also see powerful momentum as citizens across Europe are demonstrating their deep attachment to democratic foundations. The draft resolution proposes that the Assembly formally endorse this updated Checklist as a crucial, uniform, and practicable benchmark. We undertake to apply it systematically in our own country-specific monitoring procedures, election observation follow-ups, and thematic reports. Furthermore, we call upon member and observer States to integrate it into their domestic legislative processes, to carry out periodic self-assessments, and to facilitate its translation, so that these principles become more accessible. By promoting these universal standards, we can ensure that technology, private power, and institutional reforms remain fully subject to the law, thereby reinforcing democratic security and rebuilding our citizens' trust in democratic institutions. This is a political commitment that defines the kind of Europe and democracies we want to live in.

The President:

Thank you very much for the work you invested in this report, also for taking over. Now it's my pleasure to turn to our online guest the President of the Venice Commission. Dear President, dear Marta, I hope you can hear and see us, here you are, wonderful. Marta is a professor of constitutional law by profession. You also served as Minister of Justice, before being the first woman to hold the office of the President of the Italian Constitutional Court, having been also a judge to the Constitutional Court for 9 years. I had the privilege to be present at your election as President of the Venice Commission last December. At the Parliamentary Assembly, as the rapporteur already mentioned, we truly appreciate the close co-operation with the Venice Commission and its continuous high-quality contribution to the Assembly's work, through its opinions and reports. For 36 years now, the Venice Commission has been an indispensable guardian of the rule of law in Europe and far beyond, up to Japan and other countries. It has provided guidance on constitutional reforms, electoral laws and judicial independence to both new and established democracies, helping to define the principles essential to a democratic system governed by the rule of law. It is my great pleasure to give you the floor in the framework of the debate on the update of the Venice Commission's Rule of Law Checklist. Marta, the floor is yours.

Ms Marta Cartabia, President of the Venice Commission:

Thank you so much. Dear Madam President, dear Petra, dear Mr Secretary General, Deputy Secretary General, Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly: I regret very much not being with you today, but it is a great occasion for me to share some thought about "Updating the Venice Commission's Checklist". In her speech, Ms Julhayan already spoke of the excellent co-operation we have shared over the three decades now. I see our debate here today as yet another milestone in this strong co-operation. The synergies that our two bodies have built are significant and promise a bright future ahead. Before delving a little bit more into the details of the Updated

Rule of Law Checklist, please allow me to say a few words about this co-operation. The Assembly is the Council of Europe's most active body in requesting legal opinions from the Venice Commission. For three opinions requested by the States, one opinion is requested by the Assembly. In 2025 alone, the Venice Commission adopted 10 opinions and one report at the request of the Assembly, involving countries such as France, Georgia, Hungary, Romania, Slovak Republic. They all raise key questions for democracy, the rule of law and human rights.

The request comes from the Assembly's President, committee chairs - including your committee of course - or through the Assembly's regular monitoring procedures, showcasing the breadth of our co-operation. This year, we have endorsed an urgent opinion on Poland at the request of the Monitoring Committee of the Assembly, as well as reports on freedom of expression during electoral campaigns and on the case law of constitutional and supreme courts and international tribunals on violent pornography. In June, we will examine again, at the request of the President of the Assembly, a new report on the legal framework for prosecuting members of governments.

I cannot overstate the importance of these requests and let me highlight a few points: first, the Assembly's requests introduce countries, especially those that are less inclined to address the Venice Commission, to our methods often prompting their authorities to eventually seek our advice directly. Second, the Assembly requests enable the Commission to provide opinions on laws even when local authorities have not asked our advice, providing crucial independent input for debates at the national level. Third, the Assembly's requests always intercept new and upcoming challenges relevant in multiple member States. For example, a recent report clarified under what conditions constitutional courts may annul election results – a subject increasingly relevant given worries about foreign interference especially during the electoral campaigns. Another relevant case, another example: opinions on Poland's restoration on the rule of law have similarly offered guidance with wider application across Europe. Fourth, the Assembly requests help identify problematic legislation at an early stage, warning other nations against the similar pitfalls – our work on foreign agents' legislation is one such example.

But what happens when advises are sought and recommendation are made? How can we ensure that this work has an impact at the level of our member States? Indeed, the Venice Commission's opinions are not legally binding. The Venice Commission's impact cannot and should not be measured in terms of immediate results only. Its influence extends beyond legislative changes and is evident in the evolution of national debates, media, academia and case law. The Roman Senate did not have formal powers, but great persuasive force based on expertise, independence, dialogue. Among other things, our recommendations are not binding and ultimately it is national authorities' responsibility to implement them but, over the years, we have learned that strong, independent and persuasive opinions can help reshaping the political ecosystem. To maximise impact, the Venice Commission has increased its follow-up activities, often at the Assembly's request. One of the hearings we participated in, is the one organised by your committee on the regulation of spyware with respect to human rights. The Assembly's follow-up on our recommendations demonstrates our partnership's strategic importance. Moreover, our strength is amplified when the Assembly like other institutions refer to our work. Today 15 documents of the Assembly refer to 24 specific Venice Commission opinions and two general reports.

Ladies and gentlemen, today, our shared values are being challenged and questioned in ways that we could never have expected. In order to remain an anchor of democracy through law amid the rapid changes and unfavourable geopolitical circumstances, we must strengthen our co-operation, and we must continue to revisit adapt and update our guiding texts, such as the Rule of Law checklist. This will enable us to address emerging complex topics and offer reliable advice based on sound principles. For this reason, an updated version of the Rule of Law Checklist was adopted last December and was endorsed by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in Chisinau last week. I was very happy to know that the proposal of the Assembly is to formally endorse the updated Rule of Law Checklist. The Assembly's contribution has been particularly important to this process, and I would like to thank your committee and Ms Julhakyan for your work on this. As already highlighted, many of your insights have been incorporated in the updated Rule of Law Checklist. It is quite fitting that Resolution 1594 of the Assembly on "The principle of the Rule of Law", adopted back in 2007, formed the background of the Venice Commission's first Report on the Rule of Law in 2011, on the basis of which the report of the Rule of Law Checklist was first adopted. The first edition of the checklist in 2016, over the years, has guided the commission's work, being cited in judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, and influenced on reports and resolution of your Assembly, as well as the EU's rule of law monitoring. As Mme Julhakyan also indicated clearly, the rule of law is much more than a slogan it has precise and practical implications. From the start, the checklist was envisioned as a living instrument, to be updated as standards and challenges evolve. This accelerated following the Reykjavik summit in May 2023. After extensive consultations, seminars, and plenary debates, we adopted the updated Rule of Law Checklist in December 2025.

Ms Julhakyan already highlighted several key changes of the updated Rule of Law Checklist, in particular those related to contemporary challenges, such as the impact of new technologies and the growing influence of private actors which, since 2016, have transformed the rule of law landscape. And, of course, the special section on

restoration of the rule of law, which highlights the careful approach needed to rebuild the public trust without undermining the legal order. I cannot but concur with her words in this respect.

I would like just to say a few more words about the two additional benchmarks that have been included in the new checklist: checks and balances and constitutional review. As Ms Julhakyán rightly said, they are inspired by the rule of law backsliding we have seen in several members after 2016. I would like to emphasise that they are not new as such: they were already mentioned in the previous version of the checklist, but they are now raised to the level of independent benchmarks, as they have proven to be of crucial importance in defending the rule of law. The benchmark checks and balances not only addresses institutional separation of powers but also underscores the need for strong institutions independent of majority rule, such as constitutional courts and ombudsmen, and for a vibrant civic space. Constitutional review is also presented as a stand-alone benchmark, since in most countries it is an essential guardrail to counter majority's reviews. The updated checklist does not suggest a specific model of constitutional review indeed, but it clearly supports constitutional supremacy as a foundation of democracy and protection of rights. As a final point, let me draw your attention on the fact that the updated Rule of Law Checklist underlines the vital role of civic education on the rule of law. This is something close to my heart: in a world that seems to be increasingly ruled by force, defending the force of rules is something that concerns us all. The updated checklist underlines that, if the rule of law is to thrive and resist backsliding, formal norms must be complemented by a supportive legal and political culture. To help the principles of the Rule of Law Checklist be brought to life beyond the legal circles, the Venice Commission has launched "The rule of law: A User Guide" campaign, which translates complex ideas into accessible visuals and texts. We will now update this campaign to align with the updated checklist and make this available in all languages of the Council of Europe and beyond. I very much hope that this is also of use to each of you in your constituencies.

Madam President, distinguished members of the Assembly, our close co-operation draws strength from our complementary roles: your political mandate and our technical expertise combine in service of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Thank you all for what you have done together and so far for our partnership, and I look forward to continuing and strengthening our partnership, be it in the context of the rule of law or other matters of shared concern. Thank you so much for your attention.

The President:

Thank you very much, Marta, for your contribution and indeed we value the checklist as a very hands-on tool, also for our constituencies and for our national work to really check whether the rule of law is in order and what we can concretely do. And let me also mention that one of the opinions of the Venice Commission we asked for recently was the one on violent pornography and it will be included in a report both in the resolution but also in the explanatory memorandum of Laura Castel, which we have on the agenda in our June part-session. So, with that, I want to ask you, dear colleagues, whether there is anybody who would like to take the floor on this report. Obviously, everything is very clear. Antonio, please.

Mr Antonio Gutiérrez-Limones (Spain, SOC):

Thank you, Madam President. I have had the honour of attending the Venice Commission plenary session for the last two years and I just want to thank Marta and Simona and the rest of the team for the great work they do. I had the opportunity to learn about the close ties between the Venice Commission and our Assembly. Your reports, resolutions and recommendations are very professional, but overall I learned that the main goal of the Venice Commission is to help to expand the standards of democracy, rule of law and human rights, even if sometimes you know the government don't like so much but that's the way it is and I think you do very well in this case. And finally as I know Marta that your Spanish is so good, muchas felicidades y muchas gracias.

The President:

Are there any others who would like to take the floor please?

Ms Martine Modert (Luxembourg, EPP/CD):

Yes, thank you very much. *Thank you, Madam Rapporteur, for your thoroughly researched report. It is indeed important and right that the Venice Commission's criteria should be adaptable; there is no doubt about that. Unfortunately, we would not have thought that they would need to take into account situations of regression. We certainly could not have imagined this just a few years ago, particularly in democratic regimes that were, on the face of it, fairly well established. It is also right to take national circumstances and traditions into account, and it is clear that each branch of government requires a counter and oversight that is, of course, democratically and constitutionally anchored; but it is a pity that, given the circumstances and current events we are currently experiencing, we must take new realities into account and remain vigilant. Fortunately, the Council of Europe provides the tools for this, and it is very good to constantly adapt the criteria and take account of new developments, whether technical, methodological or political. Thank you again for this report, and thank you to the Rapporteur.*

The President:

Thank you very much, Ms Modert. Are there any others who would like to take the floor. Then before I hand over to the rapporteur, I want to ask Marta: would you like to reply to anything what was said now? Or is everything fine?

Ms Marta Cartabia, President of the Venice Commission:

No everything is fine. I just wanted to say another thing and my thanks to your work, to our co-operation and also to the kind words that have been mentioned. Indeed, it's much better to prevent the rule of law backsliding then to address the recovery of the rule of law. So, I very much encourage all of you and all of us to do all what is in our possibility to resist before backsliding because it is not an easy task and we are looking at that in Poland and possibly in Hungary how to restore what has been damaged. Thank you so much.

The President:

Thank you, that concludes the speakers' list, and I call the rapporteur, Ms Julhakyan, to reply. You have maximum three minutes.

Ms Arusyak Julhakyan (Armenia, EPP/CD):

Thank you, Madam President, dear colleagues, thank you for this discussion and I also want to thank the President of the Venice Commission for her intervention and for presenting the details of our co-operation. Summing up the discussion, I once again want to express my hope that you will vote for the resolution and recommendation and that you will integrate the Rule of Law Checklist in your domestic legislative framework and processes. The rule of law is the foundation of our Organisation, and of democracy in general, and each of us has a share of responsibility in preserving the foundations of our Organisation and thereby strengthening the democracy. Thank you again for your attention and discussion.

The President:

Thank you very much. The debate is closed, so we come to the vote now. The Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights presented a draft resolution to which no amendments have been tabled. We will now proceed to vote on the draft resolution contained in document 16402. To be adopted a simple majority is required. So may I ask all those who are in favour of this resolution to show me your hands or name plates and keep it up for a while because it needs to be counted. Thank you very much and, now those who are against it, I don't see anybody. Anybody who wants to abstain? That's also not the case, so the resolution is unanimously adopted. My congratulations to the rapporteur and to the committee and thank you very much Marta for being with us, greetings to Italy and hope to see you soon, all the best for you.

And now I will interrupt the meeting for the lunch break. I invite you to enjoy the lunch which will be served at Restaurant Muse by the beach. We have now one and a half hours for lunch break. We are half an hour early. That means that we already meet at two o'clock again instead of 14:30. So please enjoy your lunch and see you back at two o'clock here in the room. The meeting is adjourned.

10. Debate under urgent procedure on "Restructuring and streamlining of the Assembly's Rules of Procedure"

[Doc. 16409]

The President:

May I ask you to take your seats? We decided to hold a debate under urgent procedure on "Restructuring and streamlining of the Rules of Procedure". I first give the floor to the rapporteur of the Committee on Rules, Ethics and Immunities, Mr Constantinou Efstathiou, to present his report but, before I do so, let me mention a few words about Costis, as we call him. At today's Standing Committee, Costis is marking one of his last occasions of being with us. Constantinou has been such a figure in the work of the Assembly, that it is only proper for me to say a few words. Constantinou has been a member of the Parliamentary Assembly for a decade, since 2016. Moreover, he has been an exceptionally active and committed member in the work of the Assembly. Constantinou has fulfilled great many roles within the Assembly, with particular energy and commitment to the field of human rights, cultural co-operation, the rule of law and the work of the European Court of Human Rights. He had three Chairmanships of committees and sub-committees and was Chairperson of the Committee on Rules, Ethics and Immunities from 2025 to January 2026; Chairperson of the Sub-Committee on the implementation of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights in 2025; Chairperson of the Sub-Committee on Culture, Diversity and Heritage from 2021 to 2023; five Vice-Chairmanships of committees and sub-committees; and, above all, many many very significant reports of the Assembly. I won't name them all. For example, these include: implementation of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights; allegations of systemic torture and inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment in places of detention in Europe; transnational repression; the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on education and culture; the role of education in the digital era; as well as, of course, two reports on our agenda today: restructuring and streamlining of the Rules of Procedure of the Assembly; journalism in the context of the

Israeli-Gaza conflict. In all his work, Costis has not only been a champion for the values of the Council of Europe, of democracy, rule of law and human rights. He has also been an exemplar of parliamentary dialogue, which is at the heart of our work here in the Parliamentary Assembly. Many people here consider Costis as a friend and, Costis, you really will be missed here. Thank you very much for all your work and for the commitment that you have shown. Indeed, we will miss you but, nevertheless, the floor is yours now.

Mr Constantinou Efstathiou (Cyprus, SOC):

Well thank you for the very best words I ever heard about me. You're very kind of exaggerating what I have done, but it was an honour, and it was a privilege for me to deal with the Parliamentary Assembly and having all these fantastic colleagues next to me. Thank you very much.

The President:

You have seven minutes now.

Mr Constantinou Efstathiou (Cyprus, SOC):

Okay, thank you, and I go to the main topic we have. It is now 27 years, since 1999, that the Assembly last undertook a general revision of its Rules of Procedure to ensure the structure and drafting style is coherent and easy to use. This project is thus long overdue and has been called for in a number of recent resolutions of the Assembly, including the reports prepared by Ms Schou and Mr Schwabe. When the Bureau and the Rules Committee defined the scope of this project, it was agreed that material changes to the procedural rules were outside the scope of this work. Instead, the mandate for this report is to revisit the structure and drafting of the rules to ensure that they are clear and coherent. To undertake this work, multiple consultations have been taken to seek ideas for improving the clarity, accessibility and readability of Assembly's rules. The revised rules are structured in four parts: first part is the basic principles of the Assembly which group together the essential principles and competencies of the Assembly, which are currently found across multiple other documents such as the Statute or the General Agreement on Privileges and Immunities; the second part is rules and functioning of the Assembly which cover their main rules of procedure relevant to assembly business, but would omit technical modalities and details which would be for the complementary texts; the third part deals with the Rules on the functioning of committees which would cover the Rules of Procedure relevant to committees, so they are contained together in one coherent set of rules; and, finally, the fourth one deals with the Code of Conduct which would be a revised version of the code of conduct, fully integrated as a part of the rules, as required following the Schwabe report.

The drafting style has also been made more user-friendly; notably by headers and sub-headers, which are included to make the rules easier to use; secondly some terms are defined to make the text easier to read; the language has been updated in line with the Council of Europe official style guide; and where possible, footnotes and cross references have been removed to make the text easier to read and relevant information incorporated to the text or through a hyperlink. The revised rules, contained in an Appendix to the draft resolution, follow this the structure and drafting style, and are the result of all the exchanges and consultations set out above. They do not substantively change the procedural rules.

I thank all those who have been involved in consultations and discussions on drafting approaches as part of this work. As for previous similar revisions of the rules, such as that in 1999, substantive procedural changes are out of scope, and the entire revised package contained in the Appendix to the Resolution needs to be adopted as a whole. In order to assist members to understand where provisions of rules have moved to, the Rules Committee has agreed and declassified an information note that sets out the committee's approach on this project and contains two appendices containing transposition tables. The first shows the source for all the revised rules. The second appendix shows where the former rules can be found within the revised rules. In this way, it is possible to track the location of the rules in the revised rulebook and this has been declassified to promote transparency.

Part of this project has involved shortening the rules to remove matters relating more to modalities or administrative matters - and these matters will be contained in complementary texts. Work will therefore need to continue for a second phase as part of the project, by restructuring and streamlining the complementary texts to make them more accessible, transparent and coherent. This will ensure a coherent and consistent approach for all the Assembly's rules. Finally, before I finish, I would like to stress out the extremely good work and elaborated work of Ms Chatzivassiliou, Ms Hourigan, and all the fantastic team behind them, which made this task easy to understand and to work. Thank you very much.

The President:

Thank you very much, Costis. So, I just want to make two remarks. First of all everybody who once worked on the Rules of Procedure knows about the fight against the footnotes. I remember very well, when we introduced the gender quota we have now, I had sleepless nights how to get rid of the footnotes that were unnecessary and, second, Despina estimates that our Rules of Procedure will shrink about one centimetre, so it will be much more

accessible and much easier to read and to understand. So, with that I now open the debate and first I will give the floor to the representatives of the political groups. You have three minutes each, and Mogens Jensen is the first one on behalf of the SOC group.

Mr Mogens Jensen (Denmark, SOC):

Thank you very much, Madam President. And also from me and us thanks Costis for the very hard work you put with the team behind this report into restructuring and streamlining our Rules of Procedure. And, I think, and that's not only in this Organisation, but all organisations, when you begin talking about rules and procedures, it sounds very – and it is very – technical, and maybe also for some very boring work. But we have to remember that this is the core rules or the core mechanisms on how we work and if we didn't have these Rules of Procedures, I think our work would be very hard. It is fundamental for our ability to work effectively and as it has been said these Rules are 27 years old and a lot have been added and I'm very relieved that we will now have one centimetre less in thickness to carry around, if we don't have it electronically. So, this work was needed and I also think, when you go through the text really, it has become much more simple and also much more user friendly and of course it has been a great advantage with a rapporteur who have a long-standing history in this Organisation. I know you since you entered the Parliament, Costis, also in the Culture Committee, where you've been doing a great job, but we'll come to that later, so thank you very much also for this very fine and needed report. We are looking forward to using it now as a new tool in our basic toolbox, so we of course support it with great pleasure.

The President:

Thank you very much and Sergiy Vlasenko on behalf of EPP.

Mr Sergiy Vlasenko (Ukraine, EPP/CD):

Thank you, Madam President. Despite the fact that Costis belongs to the Socialist Group, I would like to congratulate him on behalf of EPP and, yes, we will miss you really, Costis. You are a good friend, you are a brilliant politician and we will really miss you here in the Assembly. I also would like to thank Ellie Hourigan and other members of the secretariat of the Rules Committee and a special thanks to Despina Chatzivassiliou who was the leader of that and the ideologist of the changes to the rules. And, by the way, Madam President, yesterday, during the Rules Committee, I never saw so many members and, in the scope of your report, how to improve the participation of the members in the committee meetings, it seems I know the answer. We should organise just the May committees in Monaco or in Spain or somewhere on Greek islands and at Christmas I mean the December committee is in Vienna or in Norway and you will see how participation will grow. Yes. It was already mentioned that we didn't touch, and we didn't amend the rules, we just made it more structural and more helpful for the members to use. I see the only negative in that we should forget the old numbers of the paragraphs, and we should learn a new number of their paragraphs just talking about the rules in the Assembly, but I would also like to say that, as the EPP group, we are supporting that and we will vote in favour. Thank you very much, Costis. Hope to see you in Cyprus sometime and thank you.

The President:

Thank you and indeed we should consider a new idea behind how to rotate among the countries, good point. Next, Martin Graf for the ECPA.

Mr Martin Graf (Austria, ECPA):

Thank you, Madam Chair, I will speak in German. *I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the rapporteur for his work, but not only him, but everyone who contributed to it. It has been a lengthy process that has now led to a result. Rules of procedure are always good when they are supported by the overwhelming majority or even unanimously, and ultimately they also depend on how they are applied in the end. Given all the potential areas of conflict that may arise time and again, it will then depend on the interpretation of those who will actually apply these Rules of Procedure. We believe this is a step in the right direction. I would also like to thank everyone who has contributed, and we will support this draft or this report. Thank you.*

The President:

Thank you very much for this announcement of your support. And next on the speakers' list is Ms Bernadette Coma on behalf of ALDE.

Ms Bernadette Coma (Andorra, ALDE):

Madam President, ladies and gentlemen, I would first like to thank the rapporteur, Mr Constantinos Efstathiou, for the quality of the report he has presented today on the restructuring and simplification of our Assembly's Rules of Procedure. The ALDE Group fully supports this report, as it addresses a real and concrete need to modernise the way we conduct our parliamentary business. The Assembly's Rules of Procedure are a fundamental text; they organise our work, provide a framework for our procedures and ensure respect for the democratic principles of this institution. However, to be fully effective, they must be clear, consistent and user-friendly. Yet, since the last revision

in 1999, numerous amendments and supplementary texts have been added. Over time, our procedural framework has become more complex, more cumbersome and, at times, difficult to consult. The approach proposed today is therefore useful, pragmatic and necessary. The main objective of this report is not to make sweeping changes to our rules, but to restructure and simplify them, so as to make the Rules of Procedure more readable, more coherent and better suited to the current functioning of our Assembly. I would also like to welcome the proposed new structure, organised into four main parts: firstly, the fundamental principles of the Assembly; secondly, the rules of procedure; thirdly, the rules applicable to the committees; and finally, the Code of Conduct for members. This new structure will provide greater clarity and facilitate the work of parliamentarians, the secretariats and new members of our Assembly. This simplification is also a genuine democratic challenge. Clearer rules enhance the transparency of our operations, ensure greater equality among members and improve the consistency and legal certainty of our procedures. At a time when parliamentary institutions are sometimes called into question, we have a responsibility to make our operations more transparent and easier to understand. Modernising our Rules of Procedure does not mean weakening our rules; on the contrary, it will help to strengthen the effectiveness of our procedures, the credibility of our Assembly and confidence in our democratic institutions. Thank you very much for your attention.

The President:

Thank you very much. I was informed that on behalf of UEL nobody would like to speak. Before I give the floor to every member of the Standing Committee, I also want to mention that Ms Tanja Kleinsorge also worked a lot on the rules last year or the last years before she moved to the Migration Committee as Head of the Secretariat there. So, is there a request for the floor of somebody else? This is obviously not the case, so the list of speakers is closed. Costis, would you like to make some conclusions?

Mr Constantinos Efstathiou (Chypre, SOC):

Thank you for the nice words again for my colleagues and, yes, I think that the rules may give the possibility to the Parliamentary Assembly to proceed with complementary text on technical issues, something which will be done in the future having this experience as a guide. And I think today we go a step forward towards more transparency and more easy, accessible rules for everyone. Thank you.

The President:

Thank you very much, and I see that also Mr Brico, the Chair of the Rules Committee, wants to take the floor. Please Christophe.

Mr Christophe Brico:

Thank you, Madam Chair. First of all, I would like to extend my thanks to the rapporteur, which happens to be a former Chair of the Rules Committee and a very fair one, I would add. Dear Costis, I will miss your friendly, cheerful and nice personality personally. Thank you for your work and, of course, thank you for the work of the team that did this colossal work full of tiny details, because no one, I think, apprehend the fact that when you do this work you have to make sure that everything connects with everything, and it is huge, so thank you all for your work. This report has been adopted unanimously within the committee, but I'm happy to hear that it's also unanimous within the Standing Committee. So, everybody agrees. To use a word for the young people, I would say it creates rules which are more user friendly, more dedicated towards the users, and less towards the one who thought them. So, thank you again for the work, thank you for all the members of the committee for supporting this report and thank you again, Costis, for all your work.

The President:

And, as we are all users, we are all happy with that. So, the debate is closed. We come to the vote on the draft resolution contained in document 16409. A simple majority is required. The Committee on Rules, Ethics and Immunities presented a draft resolution to which no amendments have been tabled. We will now proceed to the vote on the draft resolution contained in document 16409. I already mentioned that the simple majority is required. Those in favour, please show your hands or your name tags and keep them up. So, thank you very much. Who is against? Who abstains? Then the resolution is unanimously adopted. I congratulate both the rapporteur and the committee, and we have good rules now. So, thank you very much for this.

11. Culture, Science, Education and Media
Journalism in the context of the Israel-Gaza conflict
 [Doc. 16401 and amendments, Doc. 16408]

The President:

Now we come to the consideration of the report on "Journalism in the context of the Israel-Gaza conflict". The rapporteur of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media, Mr Costis Efstathiou from Cyprus, will present his report, and then we will give the floor to the rapporteur for opinion of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy, Ms Lise Selnes, from Norway. Costis, you have seven minutes and the floor is yours.

Mr Constantinos Efstathiou (Cyprus, SOC):

Thank you. As you already know, at least 220 journalists have been killed by the Israeli army in Gaza since the launch of their military campaign. This would include at least three journalists killed in January 2026, after the October 2025 ceasefire. At least 68 of these journalists would have been targeted or killed in the course of carrying out their work, according to RSF information. Also, since 7 October 2023, Israeli airstrikes have destroyed most telecommunications and media infrastructure, and the humanitarian and economic situation has greatly deteriorated, which impacts directly on the work of local journalists. Let me give only the latest examples of local journalists targeted and killed by the Israeli army. Mohammed Washah, an Al Jazeera journalist, and Amal El Shamali, a freelance journalist, were both killed in drone attacks on 8 April 2026 and 9 March 2026 respectively. Before that, on 21 January 2026, three journalists identified as Anas Ghneim, Mohammed Salah Qashta and Abdoul Raouf Shaath were killed in an airstrike on their vehicle whilst they were filming, in Al-Zhara, a camp set up by the Egyptians for displaced people. According to the Israeli army, it had struck three “suspects” operating a drone in the area. Remember, these are cases of journalists killed after the ceasefire.

The IDF denies accusations of deliberately targeting and killing journalists. It states that it “directs its strikes only towards military targets and military operatives, and does not target civilian objects and civilians, including media organisations and journalists as such”. In that regard, IDF has released documents which purport to reveal “the involvement of Al Jazeera journalists as terrorist operatives” and indicate “close co-operation between Hamas and the network”. Al Jazeera refutes these claims, and international press associations do not consider them to be substantiated. We should also not forget also that press freedom violations by Hamas have been rampant and vastly underreported, mostly for fear of reprisals, as Hamas is known for violently targeting and killing its critics. This is, in a nutshell, the dramatic situation of local journalists in the Gaza strip together with the people of Gaza. And I say local journalists because these are the only ones available, and this is because Israel does not allow international journalists to enter Gaza for reporting purposes. There is therefore a vicious circle. Being locals, the journalists are easily considered terrorists, and no one is allowed to enter Gaza. This prohibition has not changed even after a ceasefire was agreed between Israel and Hamas as part of Donald Trump’s peace plan. Indeed, on 28 January 2026, the Israeli Supreme Court postponed yet again a ruling on a petition of the Foreign Press Association (FPA) for free, independent press access to Gaza. The final deadline, initially set for 31 March, has been postponed again to 24 May. We hope that no further postponement will be given. In that regard, the FPA, together with the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the Union of Journalists in Israel (UJI) and Reporters without Borders (RSF), have filed on 13 April an emergency motion to the Israeli Supreme Court asking the justices to expedite a decision on allowing the international media to enter Gaza. According to these organisations, the reasons given for these delays are no longer relevant.

There are no more hostages in Gaza. Unfortunately, most of them were assassinated. There is a long-standing although fragile and unstable ceasefire in place. There are no substantiated or specific threats against journalists, and journalists pose no threat to Israeli troops. And the most recent excuse – the war in Iran – was never relevant. In order to help solve all these problems, I have made a number of proposals in my report. Israel must immediately: refrain from targeting journalists and their families in addition to civilians; it must carry out full and independent investigations into all killings of journalists in Gaza, make public the conclusions, and take any steps necessary to punish those responsible and provide redress; it must allow access to the Gaza Strip to local and foreign journalists, as well as international organisations responsible for providing information or carrying out investigations and facilitate their work in safe conditions. In this regard, the International Criminal Court must investigate the alleged war crimes committed by the Israeli army against journalists in Gaza and the crimes committed by Hamas against Israeli journalists on the attacks of 7 October 2023.

For their part, member States must support the request by international press associations for the immediate granting of free and safe access of international media to Gaza so that the situation on the ground can be observed and reported; maintain pressure on Israel to ensure a thorough and impartial investigation into all violations against journalists during the Israel-Gaza conflict; plead for and facilitate the evacuation of Palestinian journalists and their families from Gaza where it is needed for their immediate protection and provide them with psychological and material support. I hope that this text will meet your approval, and I thank you for your attention and support. Thank you very much.

The President:

Thank you very much, Costis. Mr Selnes, you have three minutes to present the opinion.

Ms Lise Selnes (Norway, SOC):

Thank you. Dear colleagues, last week Nakba day was commemorated, marking events surrounding the 1948 Arab Israeli war. The discourse that surrounded this in print media and online once again demonstrated how deeply contested historical narratives remain in the Middle East. Competing interpretation of both past and present events

continues to shape political identities, public opinion and prospect for dialogue across the region. Against this backdrop, the current conflict in Gaza underlines the crucial importance of independent journalism and access to reliable information. The ability of journalists to report freely and independently shapes how events will later be understood, interpreted and remembered. In the Assembly, we have frequently noted that the struggle for credible information has become more important than ever. Access to reliable information, transparency and accountability are essential conditions for meaningful dialogue, for rebuilding trust between communities and ultimately for the prospects of a just and lasting peace. I therefore want to thank the rapporteur, Costis, for his report and for the focus he has rightly given to the targeting and killing of journalists in Gaza and to the restriction on media access. The opinion presented by the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy seeks to bring the perspective of this committee's work on the Middle East, including in our Sub-Committee on the Middle East and the Arab World. The committee proposes three political principal contributions: first, re-emphasising that freedom of expression and independent journalism are essential democratic principles; second, underlining that restrictions on media access risk creating an information vacuum in which disinformation and polarisation flourish; third, connecting the resolution with the Assembly's broader work on media freedom, democratic safeguards and sustainable peace in the Middle East. To this end, the committee recalls the Assembly's long-standing commitment to the protection and safety of journalists and draws attention to its commemoration, Victory for Victoria. Finally, the committee reaffirms the Assembly's support for a peaceful, just and sustainable future for Israelis and Palestinians, based on the two-State solution in full respect of international law. Colleagues, impunity for attacks against journalists undermines prospects for a future peace, for reconciliation, for stability. Transparency and accountability are indispensable for both justice and for strengthening the conditions for peace. Upholding these principles remains essential if trust and dialogue are to prevail over division and conflict.

The President:

Thank you very much. Does anybody wish to have the floor? We don't have speakers on behalf of the groups in this setting. Now Saskia.

Ms Saskia Kluit (Netherlands, SOC):

Yes, thank you. I want to thank the rapporteur. This was a motion I moved last year, after an event we organised with both Palestinian and Israeli journalists. And it's very important that we consider that the push against journalist is not only within Gaza, it's in the broader region, but it's especially also going on against Israeli journalists within the State of Israel. The freedom of speech is grounded and founded on the freedom of press and it's not only important for the democratic strength of our nations, but it is also of greatest importance for finding out war crimes, genocide or possible ethnic cleansing. And the attack of journalists cannot be seen apart from this, especially in times of conflict. Costis already mentioned the enormous numbers of journalists who have died, the dozens of attacks directly to journalists, and also the double attacks where journalists come to a certain action and then are attacked. This gave rise to a whole new line of journalism, the social media journalism, who brought direct images of the suffering of Palestinian people and the fight of Israeli people against the ongoing violence within Gaza very clearly to households in the whole of Europe. We had Bisan Owda, she spoke at our side event last year, she's one of the social media journalists who illustrates the life under the conflict in Gaza. The intimidation of journalists within Israel constitutes not only financial threatening legislation, but also the threat of jail sentences when facts that are published in articles are used by the ICC and ICJ. So, this has clearly a very chilling effect on the journalists within Israel and they also expressed that at the event. They are also subjected to violent and intimidating speech from politicians from the Knesset, so I'm very happy with the clear stand that the report takes for the journalists. Because for the people who work, both the new social media journalists and old-fashioned local journalists and international journalists who try to get a clear image of what's going on, it's very difficult to work. And I want to ask the organisation we are doing it here at the Standing Committee, but maybe we can use our communication instruments to let known what we have decided today or will decide hopefully today here. So, we will support all those people who do this very difficult job in very difficult circumstances, because I think, as Costis clearly said, accountability is of the utmost importance to protect everybody who is working there and we should fully support press freedom in the Middle East.

The President:

Thank you. Usually there is a report also on the decisions we have taken as a Standing Committee, as at the plenary. The next on my list, also with three minutes, is Mr Antonio Gutiérrez-Limones.

Mr Antonio Gutiérrez-Limones (Spain, SOC):

Thank you, Madam President, I really appreciate the job of both rapporteurs. Last Tuesday, I attended the North-South Center Award Ceremony on behalf of our President Petra Bayr and with the President of the Republic of Portugal. One of the awards went to a Palestinian journalist who has remained in the ruins of Gaza with his wife and two children to report on the war, on their suffering and ensure they are not forgotten. Rami Abou Jamous, who despite immense risks and aimed to destroy media facility, as well as severe humanitarian crisis, decided to stay there. His testimonies were terrible. We always thought that these crimes only happen under the dictatorship or

autocratic government, but we never imagined that this could happen in a democracy like Israel. More than 200 journalists, and more than 20 000 children were killed. So, we must continue to condemn this situation. It is a genocide of the Palestine people and the journalists. Because I think the credibility and integrity of our institution are really at sever risk. So, I'm going to support this draft resolution and one more thanks to the rapporteur.

The President:

Thank you. Does anybody else wish to take the floor? Yes, please, Baroness.

Baroness Shami Chakrabarti (United Kingdom, SOC):

Thank you, Madam President. I recall that your predecessor addressed the Assembly in his last Assembly as President and reminded us that he was himself, in earlier life, a journalist, which is just one way of demonstrating how journalists are just as important to human rights and the rule of law as lawyers, judges and politicians. With this second report of the day, Costis of course demonstrates yet again how indispensable he has been to the Assembly and what a gap he is going to leave. But given that this report follows the one on the death penalty that also raised concern about a mature democracy that is Israel and its approach to the death penalty, I agree with Saskia Kluit that it's particularly important that this report, hopefully passed unanimously, will be publicised, because the people who will perhaps thank us the most for that are civil society within Israel who lament developments like this and I'm sure [inaudible] our committees and us individually to stand with them in defence of the democracy that we heard described earlier.

The President:

Thank you very much. Anybody else who would like to take the floor? I do not see anybody, so that means that the speakers' list is closed. I call Costis but, if you want to make a final remark on three minutes, you can do that of course.

Mr Constantinos Efstathiou (Cyprus, SOC):

Yes. I welcome all the comments of my colleagues and of course the opinion. Indeed, there is no discount on basic freedoms, including of course freedom of expression. We have not turned a blind eye to the humanitarian crisis. Accountability is something which has to be a lighthouse of our route as Parliamentary Assembly. And, of course, we have no right to be neutral on situations like situations in Gaza where both genocidal, humanitarian and very political issues are at stake. I cannot stress enough the importance and urgency of this matter, and this unacceptable situation initially essentially deprives us of access to information, thereby giving Israel a free reign to commit aggression, atrocities and violations of international law and human rights without facing any counterparty. At the same time there are Israelis, especially in diaspora, who really worry about this situation. Israel must immediately stop the targeting and killing of journalists and must allow international journalists to enter Gaza for reporting purposes and we must do whatever is in our power to make this happen and we have to be very firm on our values and, of course, seek for transparency and accountability. Thank you.

The President:

Thank you very much, Costis. Does the Chairperson of the committee want to take the floor? Mogens, the floor is yours.

Mr Mogens Jensen (Denmark, SOC):

Thank you very much, Madam President. I will underline that, once again, we have to add our voices in the Assembly to all those calling for the full respect by Israel and Hamas of its obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law. I think it's very important that we keep in mind that journalists are the society's eyes and ears and those are the ones that bear witness to the situation on the ground during political and military operations, and most importantly in the face of humanitarian catastrophes and crisis. And very often we all know they risk their lives in the service of truth. I would also like to underline that journalists working in areas of armed conflict are civilians and they are protected as such under international humanitarian law. Targeting and killing journalists and their families is a war crime, which cannot meet with impunity. And, finally, I believe it's imperative that Israel's Supreme Court takes a decision and grants international journalists the necessary access to Gaza for the purposes of reporting. So, our committee, of course, welcomes this report very much and we consider that the proposed measures are as necessary as they are urgent. So, for these reasons I, on behalf of the committee, also invite the Assembly to support the report.

The President:

Thank you very much. That closes the debate, and we proceed to the vote. The Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media presented a draft resolution to which three amendments have been tabled. We will take the amendments in the order they appear in the compendium of amendments. During the votes, to facilitate the vote counting, I please once again ask you to keep your hands or name plates up as long as the count is underway. If need be, in accordance with the Rules of Procedure, the old ones still, I may call a vote by standing up instead of

vote by showing hands. We will start with Amendment 1 and I give the floor to Ms Selnes to present the amendment in 30 seconds. Lise, please.

Ms Lise Selnes (Norway, SOC):

Amendment 1 from the Political Committee is as follows: "Attacks against journalists, restrictions on media access and the spread of disinformation in the context of the Gaza conflict reflect a broader and deeply worrying deterioration of conditions for freedom of expression and press freedom in situations of conflict. Impunity for violations committed against journalists risks normalising attacks on independent media, undermining access to reliable information and weakening democratic safeguards far beyond the region. In the case of Gaza and the broader region, attacks on the free press cannot be separated from human rights violations, war crimes that are committed against both Palestinian people and Israeli civilians". So, this is broadening out what was in the original report. Thank you.

The President:

Thank you very much. Does somebody like to speak against this amendment? That is not the case. As the Committee on Culture has not taken a position on the amendment, I give the floor to the rapporteur to express his opinion. Costis.

Mr Constantinos Efstathiou (Cyprus, SOC):

Yes, I fully support this amendment, because it's fully aligned with the spirit of the report that no impunity must be tolerated in this situation. Thank you.

The President:

Thank you. The rapporteur supports the amendment, and, with that, I put the amendment to vote. Who is in favour of Amendment 1? Please show that with your name plates or hands and keep your nameplates and hands up until the count is finished. Thank you very much. Those who are against amendment 1? Who wants to abstain? One abstention. So, Amendment 1 is adopted. We come to Amendment 2 and, again, I give the floor to Ms Selnes to present Amendment 2.

Ms Lise Selnes (Norway, SOC):

Yes, thank you. Amendment 2 is broadening out and showing us what we have done before in the Assembly on this issue, so this is what's in this amendment. I'm not going deeper in. Thank you.

The President:

Thank you. Does anybody wish to speak against this amendment? That is not the case. The Committee on Culture could not take position on the amendment; therefore, again, I ask the rapporteur about his opinion on the amendment.

Mr Constantinos Efstathiou (Cyprus, SOC):

For the same reasons, I fully support this amendment.

The President:

The rapporteur supports Amendment 2. I put it to vote. Those who are in favour of Amendment 2, please show this with your hands or your name plates. Thank you very much. Who is against Amendment 2? Nobody. Is anybody abstaining to Amendment 2? With one abstention, adopted. Then I give now the floor again to Ms Selnes to present Amendment 3.

Ms Lise Selnes (Norway, SOC):

Thank you. Amendment 3 is about the freedom of press in every war situation, also this one. So, it's lifting up this conflict in special but in all war conflicts freedom of press is always important. Thank you.

The President:

Does anybody wish to speak against this amendment? This is not the case. And, again, the Committee on Culture did not have a chance to take a position. I ask the rapporteur about his position.

Mr Constantinos Efstathiou (Cyprus, SOC):

The amendment deals with actually one of the pillars of the freedom of expression and I fully support it.

The President:

So, also Amendment 3 is supported by the rapporteur. I will put Amendment 3 to vote now. Who is in favour of Amendment 3? Thank you very much. Who is against? Nobody. Any abstentions on Amendment 3? That is not the case. So, it's unanimously carried. With that, I now proceed to vote on the draft resolution contained in document

16401 as amended. To be adopted, a simple majority is required. All those who are in favour, please show that with your hands or name plates. Thank you very much. Who is against this resolution? Who wants to abstain? With one abstention, adopted. It's unanimously adopted. So, congratulations to the rapporteur, to the rapporteur for opinion and to both committees. And, before we come to the next item of the agenda, I ask Miapetra to step in, because I have a short bilateral meeting and will be back soon.

12. Equality and Non-Discrimination

Enhancing co-operation between parliaments and equality bodies

[Doc. 16400]

Ms Miapetra Kumpula-Natri (Finland, SOC):

So, thank you, Petra, and have a good meeting. We will continue with agenda point number 12 "Equality and Non-Discrimination". We will consider a report on "Enhancing co-operation between parliaments and equality bodies". The rapporteur of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, Ms Tuula Haatainen, is here with us to present her report. Ms Haatainen, you will have 10 minutes in total to be divided between the presentation of seven minutes and then a reply after the debate for three minutes, so now the floor is yours.

Ms Tuula Haatainen (Finland, SOC):

Thank you, Madam President. Dear colleagues, I'm happy to present to you the final outcome of almost two years of work, which was adopted by the Committee of Equality and Non-Discrimination last month in Strasbourg. To prepare this report I made use of virtually all the instruments that the Assembly working methods offer. First of all, a questionnaire was circulated through the ECPRD system, so it's the European Center for Parliamentary Research and Documentation system. I mention this because I find it important that interparliamentary co-operation in Europe gives us a possibility to learn about and to compare legislation and policies across the continent. And I mention it because this survey provided a large amount of valuable contributions. A large part of the report is devoted to this. Then, of course, there were hearings with guest experts held by the committee and bilateral meetings. It was also an opportunity to continue and strengthen the co-operation with ECRI, the Council of Europe's Commission against Racism and Intolerance. ECRI is a crucial partner for the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, and of course for the Assembly in general. Their General Policy Recommendations are consistently a source of inspiration for our work. ECRI organises an annual seminar with equality bodies, and I had the opportunity to attend these seminars two years in a row, in person or remotely. And there was also the fact-finding visit to Hungary, which I conducted last October, and I believe it is worth sharing a few details. The visit proved to be very timely. As I met with civil society representatives, journalists and fellow politicians, I learned more about the challenges that equality and non-discrimination policies, legislation and institutions were facing there. The system of equality bodies there had undergone a reform that experts considered to be a negative development. Protection from discrimination looked weaker than it was before. Moreover, the reforms had been carried out hastily, under the state of emergency created by Covid, without adequate consultation. On the other hand, general elections were approaching, and I could feel that hope for radical change was growing. In discussions it sounded like they didn't want to be too optimistic or they feared that they would be disappointed by the hope but anyway they hoped the country would turn the page soon. I will come back later to the Hungary situation but let me first tell you a little more about the draft resolution that we are debating today.

The text brings together the main findings of the entire preparation process I have mentioned, and it translates them into concrete proposals for action. It calls for closer and stronger co-operation between parliaments and equality bodies. It recognises the role that these bodies may play, and very often actually play, in fostering equality and inclusion. At the same time, it highlights the need to co-operate with civil society organisations, which are often those in the most direct contact with the reality of discrimination cases and with the people affected. Some of the elements of the report, and of this draft resolution stemming from it, may sound like technicalities, or merely legal. Yes, we are talking about procedures, consultations, opinions, hearings. But the text is not only about that. The way in which equality bodies function, and the political support they receive, reflect the importance that public authorities attach to equality and non-discrimination. Therefore, these questions are not merely necessarily procedural: they go to the heart of our democratic commitments.

Today, we are witnessing a worrying phase of backsliding in human rights, democracy and rule of law. Values that we uphold within the Council of Europe and in our national contexts are coming under increasing challenges. Anti-discrimination policies and equality legislation, in particular, are the target of populist and extremist actors, for short-term political gain as a part of their broader, divisive agendas. Ultimately, the aim of the text I am presenting is to indicate measures to ensure that equality bodies may function independently and effectively and that they contribute to countering the backsliding I mentioned. I would also like to mention a specific recommendation, as it is innovative and, I believe, adds real value to this text. It is based on conversations I had with experts in Finland, and within annual seminars with equality bodies, in which I participated two years in a row. It is the idea that Council of Europe member States should endeavour to create a Europe-wide early warning mechanism on equality and non-

discrimination, in order to identify and respond to risks of backsliding in a timely manner. This mechanism should rely on measurable indicators. National and international statistical organisations and international bodies with expertise in equality, non-discrimination and data collection should contribute to developing them. We can think of the European Institute for Gender Equality, for instance, and of the Fundamental Rights Agency. It is important to identify and respond to signs of backsliding at an early stage. In this respect, setbacks in women's rights are often a good indicator. The same applies to the rights of LGBTI persons.

When such warning signs appear, it is essential that they are recognised and brought to the attention of all relevant actors, and that timely and appropriate action should be taken. Does the international community put enough pressure on countries that are in breach of their human rights obligations? This is a question that we should ask ourselves. The Council of Europe endeavours to play its role. But we should try to use all possible channels. This brings us back to Hungary. A new political phase began there following the recent elections. The hope of the people I met with in Budapest last October has become reality. We should now support the new government in its efforts to strengthen democratic institutions. And we should remain aware regarding future developments there and in all other European countries. Dear colleagues, I trust that you will support this text today. And let us not forget that adopting a Parliamentary Assembly text is one important step, but it is not the last one. We will need to disseminate it and implement it back home. Thank you.

Ms Miapetra Kumpula-Natri (Finland, SOC):

Thank you. Now I open the floor for the debate. Any comments, questions, opinions? I don't see any, so I now ask Madam Chair Ms Fresko-Rolfo, from the Committee on Equality.

Ms Fresko-Rolfo (Monaco, ALDE):

Thank you, Madam President, ladies and gentlemen. It is a pleasure for me to support this text, prepared by our rapporteur, Tuula Haatainen, for the committee which I have the honour of chairing. And it is also a particular pleasure to attend this debate 'at home', here in Monaco. I would like to warmly congratulate Ms Haatainen on the thorough and high-quality work she has carried out, as she has just explained to us. Her report provides us with a rich, comparative and extremely useful analysis. I would also like to return to a key point she highlighted: the subject of this report and the draft resolution we are to vote on today is not merely technical; it is also, and above all, deeply political. Of course, we can ask the legal experts and legislative services that assist our parliaments to identify the most appropriate mechanisms for organising cooperation between parliaments and equality bodies. Of course, we must familiarise ourselves with the various practices in place within the Council of Europe member States and beyond. And, in this regard, Ms Haatainen's report provides us with a wealth of valuable information. But what we must do above all, as parliamentarians – and as parliamentarians committed to human rights, democracy and equality – is to ensure strong political support for the independent bodies that combat discrimination. We must ensure they have adequate human and financial resources, defend their autonomy, consult them systematically when drafting legislation, and, as far as possible, take full account of their recommendations. Unfortunately, in recent years, in more than one member state, these bodies have been threatened by budget cuts or other forms of attack. It is precisely this kind of risk that we must avoid. Colleagues, once again, we have a text that provides tools to strengthen and improve the human rights situation in the member States of the Council of Europe and beyond. I urge you to vote for this text with conviction. Thank you.

Ms Miapetra Kumpula-Natri (Finland, SOC):

Thank you so much, dear Ms Fresko-Rolfo. Rapporteur, do you still want to have the floor to close up?

Ms Tuula Haatainen (Finland, SOC):

Thank you. I don't have anything to add, but I thank Madam Chair of the committee for the good co-operation with this issue and your words. Thank you.

Ms Miapetra Kumpula-Natri (Finland, SOC):

Thank you, so the debate is closed. Then we go for the vote. The Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination presented this draft resolution and no amendments have been tabled. So, we will proceed to the vote on the draft resolution contained in document 16400. To be adopted a simple majority is required. All those in favour, please show your nameplates. Thank you. Those voting against. And then abstentions. So, the vote is closed and it is unanimously agreed. Congratulations to the rapporteur and the committee. So, number 12 on the agenda is closed.

13. Other business

Ms Miapetra Kumpula-Natri (Finland, SOC):

There is only one piece of information. This morning the Standing Committee took note of the agenda of the upcoming June part-session. We have been informed that there will be some minor changes to this agenda, which will be published on Tuesday next week. So be aware of that one.

14. Next meeting

Ms Miapetra Kumpula-Natri (Finland, SOC):

So, I'm happy to inform you that the next meeting will be held in Montenegro, as the alphabetical order tells us, on 27 November 2026. Before I close the meeting, I would like to thank all the participants and especially our dear colleagues from the National Council of Monaco for the excellent organisation of our meetings, technicians, interpreters, everyone involved, and I want to do with the applause, everyone is enjoying your beautiful country. Sincere thanks to all of you. I remind you that after a 15-minute break there will be a round table on the very interesting topic of "Youth and IA: education, autonomy and democratic safeguards". So I encourage you to participate in that future-oriented debate. The meeting is closed.