



AA19CR16

AS (2019) CR 16

2019 ORDINARY SESSION

(Second part)

REPORT

Sixteenth sitting

Thursday 11 April 2019 at 10 a.m.

In this report:

1. Speeches in English are reported in full.
2. Speeches in other languages are reported using the interpretation and are marked with an asterisk
3. The text of the amendments is available at the document centre and on the Assembly's website. Only oral amendments or oral sub-amendments are reproduced in the report of debates.
4. Speeches in German and Italian are reproduced in full in a separate document.
5. Corrections should be handed in at Room 1059A not later than 24 hours after the report has been circulated.

The contents page for this sitting is given at the end of the report.

(Ms Maury Pasquier, President of the Assembly, took the Chair at 10.10 a.m.)

The PRESIDENT* – The sitting is open.

1. Modification of various provisions of the Assembly's Rules of Procedure

The PRESIDENT* – The first item of business is the debate on the report entitled “Modification of various provisions of the Assembly’s Rules of Procedure”, presented by Mr Vareikis on behalf of the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs. I remind members that speaking time in this debate is limited to three minutes. The rapporteur has a total speaking time of 13 minutes, which you may divide between presentation of the report and your reply to the debate.

Mr GRAF (*Austria*)* – On a point of order, Madam President. On this morning’s agenda is a proposal to change the Rules of Procedure, particularly on the composition of political groups. This report was produced on 25 March 2019. That was the first time that members of parliament were apprised of these proposed changes, which require increased membership and a quorum in the Chamber. In recent weeks, many amendments have been tabled to the report, which we have had little time to consider. I get the impression that there is a political motivation behind some of the changes and an attempt to deprive certain parliamentarians of their rights.

The PRESIDENT* – What is your proposal? You are making a speech on what you are unhappy about, but you are not making a proposal.

Mr GRAF (*Austria*)* – For all those reasons, I move that the report be referred back to the committee.

The PRESIDENT* – That is a clear proposal. You have the right to make such a proposal, and we shall apply our Rules of Procedure. It is possible at any time for a report to be sent back to committee before the resolution is adopted, so I accept this formal proposal. As it is a procedural motion, someone can speak in favour of it – we have heard that – and someone can speak against it, and then we can hear from the rapporteur and the chairperson of the committee.

Does anyone wish to speak against Mr Graf’s proposal? I call Mr Pocij.

Mr POCIEJ (*Poland*)* – I do not agree with any of the arguments that we just heard. We have done enough work on this text, and there has been an opportunity to examine it. We should not lose time by sending the report back to the committee.

The PRESIDENT* – Thank you, Mr Pocij. What is the opinion of the committee?

Mr VAREIKIS (*Lithuania*) – The committee is opposed.

The PRESIDENT* – The Assembly will now take a decision by simple majority on this proposal to send the report back to the committee.

The vote is open.

The proposal is rejected.

I call Mr Vareikis, the rapporteur, to present the report.

Mr VAREIKIS (*Lithuania*) – I remind colleagues that for quite a number of part-sessions expectations have been high, certainly outside the Assembly, that the Rules of Procedure would be changed to make the procedure clearer in some respects. The report by the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs contains simple proposals to amend those provisions in the Rules of Procedure that need to be clarified, supplemented or reviewed in order that they better correspond to parliamentary practice.

In particular, the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs was invited to make changes to the Rules as part of the follow-up to the 2018 report on the role and mission of the Parliamentary Assembly by the ad hoc committee of the Bureau. The committee then gave the utmost attention to the proposals by national delegations and political groups in that context. However, as decided by the Bureau of the Assembly, all issues arising from the follow-up and related to the challenge of the credentials of national delegations, to the delegations’ participation and representation rights, to members’ voting rights and

to the Assembly's voting procedure, were considered in another report, which was adopted by the committee last September and referred back to the committee by the Assembly at the October 2018 part-session. So, this report is in some ways side material arising from the work of the ad hoc committee, and it mostly relates to technical Rules of Procedure.

The draft resolution presented today contains proposals regarding: the conditions for the formation and the disappearance of political groups; the conditions for the appointment of committee rapporteurs; the terms of reference for the Committee on the Election of Judges to the European Court of Human Rights and the procedure for electing judges to the European Court of Human Rights; the status of the immediate past President of the Assembly; the election of bureaux of committees; the improvement of the procedure for considering motions for resolutions and recommendations submitted by members of the Assembly or committees; and the Organisation of Debates in plenary, with particular regard to speaking times and the questioning of guest speakers.

I wish to mention two specific issues on which a number of amendments have been tabled. The first relates to the Assembly's political groups and, more specifically, the procedure for the forming and dissolving of groups. The debate around the September 2017 recognition of the sixth political group in the Assembly, the Free Democrats Group, and now around the recognition of a seventh political group, the New European Democrats/Europe of Nations and Freedom, has highlighted certain gaps in the legal and regulatory framework that governs political groups, so we need to make improvements. The Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs proposes to add a new criterion to the conditions for the formation of political groups – namely, that all members of the same political group should have a common ideological and political identity.

It is essential to have a politically representative, credible and effective Parliamentary Assembly, and it must be able to act, debate and decide on the basis of the ideas and positions expressed by the representatives of the major European political families. A new political group should table a political programme or charter to specify the group's objectives and statutes. Rule 19 includes a clear, substantial, strong moral commitment. The committee proposes that to be acknowledged by the Bureau, "political groups shall undertake, in particular in their political charter, statutes and activities, to promote and respect the values of the Council of Europe". Moreover, the political charter and the statutes shall conform to the European Convention on Human Rights.

The committee also considers it necessary to strengthen the conditions for forming a political group in respect of the minimum number of members and delegations. The draft resolution proposes that political groups shall have no fewer than "5% of the members composing the Assembly" and that those members be from at least eight national delegations. I remind the Assembly that those proposals were made by some national delegations.

The Rules of Procedure do not deal with the question of the disappearance of a political group, so the committee thinks it appropriate to supplement the conditions laid down in Rule 19 in this respect. The draft resolution also clarifies, in paragraph 7, the practical consequences of the disappearance of a political group.

The second issue relates to multiple rapporteurships held by the same parliamentarian. The question of whether Assembly members should be allowed to take on more than one rapporteurship in the committees of which they are members has been raised on several occasions in the past. It was mentioned again in the discussions of the Bureau's ad hoc committee, with several delegations wishing to encourage greater diversity of rapporteurs and the involvement of a greater number of parliamentarians in the drafting of reports.

Lastly, I wish to point out that the purpose of paragraph 2.4 of the draft resolution is to implement Resolution 2248 (2018) on the procedure for the election of judges to the European Court of Human Rights. The resolution seeks to improve the election procedure. The decision in principle was made by the Assembly last year, and the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs has merely translated it into the Rules of Procedure.

I call on the Assembly to support the draft resolution presented by the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs. I thank the staff of the secretariat, who did a great job of making the compendium of the large number of proposals made by national delegations.

The PRESIDENT* – Thank you, Mr Vareikis. You have six minutes' speaking time left for your reply at the end of the debate. In fact, we have quite a lot of time this morning, so if you need more than six minutes to respond, you can take more time.

As for other speakers, since there are so few of you I will decide, in an ad hoc manner, that speaking time can be increased to four minutes.

I call Mr Zavoli as the first of the speakers on behalf of political groups.

Mr ZAVOLI (*San Marino, Spokesperson for the Free Democrats Group*) – The Free Democrats Group agrees with the rapporteur on the Parliamentary Assembly's need to amend its rules regularly, to accommodate changes in parliamentary practice, to clarify the rules and procedures where their application or interpretation has raised difficulties, or to address specific problems.

It remains unclear, however, which difficulties and problems are resolved by the change to Rule 19.1, especially now, after last year's adoption of the strict code of conduct for members of the Parliamentary Assembly. Regrettably, the rapporteur also failed to explain and define in his report "certain gaps in the legal and regulatory framework governing political groups – in particular the criteria and conditions for establishment or dissolution of a political group".

The Free Democrats Group strongly believes in pluralistic democracy – a political system in which there is more than one centre of power. The intended change to Rule 19.1 proves that this Assembly needs to be reminded of that principle. It seems to us that this Assembly somehow fails to comply with the exact principles and values of the Council of Europe that it promotes, notably political pluralism, human rights and the rule of law.

The European Convention on Human Rights guarantees us freedom of expression, and freedom of association and assembly. Political pluralism is the guarantee of the democratic culture that we aspire to have, including a peaceful rotation of parties in power, and the right of all political parties to exist and organise at all times. The diversity of political ideologies must be respected and seen as a strength, not a weakness, if we wish to evolve into, or even consider becoming, a democratic society.

The Free Democrats Group considers that these changes increasingly diminish, obstruct and undermine the ability of parliamentarians to exercise their rights and fulfil their democratic roles. The actions undertaken by this Assembly keep undermining the capacity of political groups to take part in democratic debate and, without a doubt, they clearly represent a deterioration in the status of the rule of law, democracy and human rights within our institution.

On behalf of my group, I invite you all to show the political courage to protect our right to a pluralistic democracy by voting against the change to Rule 19.1.

Mr POCIEJ (*Poland, Spokesperson for the Group of the European People's Party*)* – In the last few months, we have all worked hard to preserve – indeed, to save – our Assembly, which is the cradle of our values: democracy; human rights; and, simply put, freedom. Many of you considered it very dangerous to vote yesterday on Tiny Kox's report, simply because you thought that rules should not be changed in the middle of the year, and yet the report was adopted. Why? It was because a majority felt that it offers solutions that will safeguard this Assembly and its work.

In the near future, many of you will probably vote to change the rules governing the presentation of credentials, so that they can be presented in the course of the year and not just in January. Is that a change of the rules in the course of the year? Yes, it is. Why are we proposing it? It is because we have considered that it is opportune to do so, and I am certain that Tiny Kox will very soon speak in favour of it. I will look very carefully, Tiny, at what you say in the future about changing rules in the course of the year.

Let us not be hypocrites. We have seen that small groups, made up of 20 members or fewer, do not manage to function properly; we have experienced that over the last eight months on a number of occasions in the Presidential Committee. Today I spoke to one of the candidates for the office of Secretary General and he told me that he had been asked to meet the Free Democrats Group. Do you know how many people there were to hear him out? One – exactly one. Is that a serious political group that can do any valid work? No, it is not. So, if we really want this Assembly to function properly, we must change the rule about group numbers, in line with what was decided in the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs yesterday. That is the proposal that we are considering today.

It is true that we had a lengthy and lively discussion on this point, and to reassure those who were afraid about how a change might work, we decided in the Committee to lower the threshold for groups – not 5%, which would have meant 34 in absolute numbers, but rather 28 in absolute numbers. That was the consensus. In defence of the 5%, that is a threshold in a number of national parliaments, including in Poland – if you do

not get 5% of the popular vote, you cannot become an MP. Why has that threshold been set in many national parliaments? It is not anti-democratic; it is to make sure that parliaments are functional. To those who say that the 5% rule is anti-democratic, I respond that it prevails in many national parliaments.

Ms ÆVARSDÓTTIR (*Iceland, Spokesperson for the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group*) – I will focus on two aspects of Rule 19 – first on a procedural note, then on a substantive note. On the procedure, the report suggests an increase in the number of members needed to form a new political group to 5% of the Assembly. We have reached a good compromise to keep the number at 28 from eight national delegations. That is a good way to prevent groups from being formed frivolously, wasting the resources of this Assembly and its staff members' time. I encourage the members of the Socialist Group to support any amendments that support the figure of 28 members, from eight national delegations, to constitute a group, since that is the compromise that we reached. That should safeguard well-established groups while setting a fair threshold for the forming of new groups.

On the substantive requirements, it is important to continue to develop the rules that apply to the formation and dissolution of political groups in the Parliamentary Assembly. We are not a signatory to the European Convention on Human Rights; we are an institution that bases its very foundations on its protection. Therefore, I celebrate the part of this report that suggests clarifying the substantive part of the formation of a new group, namely that "Representatives and substitutes may form political groups according to their political affinities. To be acknowledged by the Bureau, political groups will undertake the political charter, statutes and activities to promote and respect the values of the Council of Europe, notably political pluralism, human rights and the rule of law."

I celebrate the clarification that there is a substantive requirement when it comes to the formation of political groups – that is something to be evaluated. However, I would have liked that to mean the dissolution of a political group should that group no longer fulfil that requirement. That sets the bar even higher for the Bureau when it comes to the acknowledgement of new political groups, since the substantive requirement of Rule 19.1 cannot become the basis of a dissolution of group. The only point at which the substantive requirement can be evaluated and have an effect on political groups in the Assembly is when the Bureau decides to acknowledge or not to acknowledge a political group. Nevertheless, these new rules make it clear that there is a substantive requirement to fulfil, and that political groups have the responsibility to protect the promotion of the core values of the Council of Europe. That is extremely significant. I am grateful that there is a substantive requirement on top of the formal requirements. It is important that we keep that in mind when looking into the formation of new political groups.

Mr KIRAL (*Ukraine, Spokesperson for the European Conservatives Group*) – I congratulate the rapporteur and the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs on their excellent work. As a member of the committee, I remember long and heavy discussions and debate about the report. I generally support the recommendations and proposals in the report. Many of them are of a technical nature and are supposed to strengthen our Assembly and the way we work and operate. We may debate and question some of them, such as the limits set on the number of reports we may have. On the other hand, one may argue that will make our work more inclusive and will give open opportunities to as many rapporteurs as possible to express their views and opinions.

I support my colleagues from the European People's Party and the Socialist Group on the item concerning the formation of political groups. The European Conservatives Group believes that has to be better regulated, and we have tabled an amendment to that end. In particular, the substantive nature of the group formation has to be taken into account. I remind members that Rule 19.1 is about not only the number of group members, but members committing to respect the promotion of the values of the Council of Europe. The committee produced an opinion, which has been discussed and which I fully endorse, stating that political groups should not be used as instruments to drain our resources or to infiltrate the Assembly with certain purposes that are not part of its core business. They should be based on certain political platforms, with reference to the European Union political groups that are already in place, and not be artificially formed to destabilise the work of the Assembly. It is not the core business and purpose of the Assembly to preserve certain political groups that we already have. It is not for the Assembly to make sure that some groups continue to exist or do not continue to exist.

I must mention Tiny Kox's report, which was adopted yesterday. I agree with Mr Pocij that it is part of a bigger plan that ultimately will change rules, or at least propose to do so. It was mentioned yesterday that the purpose of the report was not that – its purpose is enhanced dialogue. I congratulate Mr Vareikis, who mentioned on page 19 of his report the need for better communication between the Committee of Ministers and the Assembly. This report says nothing about the need to change our rules and procedures, particularly as regards the powers of the Assembly to challenge credentials. All three points mentioned by Mr Vareikis,

which I fully endorse, are about communication, having a dialogue between the two bodies, meeting more frequently and having rapporteurs meet with the Committee of Ministers. That has not happened because of the failure of the outgoing Secretary General to ensure that it happened. That is a big disappointment. There is no need whatsoever to change the rules and procedures as far as the powers and autonomy of the Assembly are concerned.

Mr van de VEN (*Netherlands, Spokesperson for the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe*) – I congratulate Mr Vareikis on his report, because we all know that our Rules of Procedure need to be updated regularly. Developments in the Assembly necessitate our adapting the rules to reflect what we have experienced in the last year and a half. We should take care of that. Many of the amendments proposed by Mr Vareikis are therefore welcomed by the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.

Nevertheless, on two points, which have already been mentioned this morning, we think that alternatives should be sought. The first is on the proposal to set out in Rule 19.2 that a political group should meet a 5% threshold to be recognised and to take part in our deliberations. ALDE feels that political groups should not have to meet a percentage, because the ability to do so is subject to outside factors that groups cannot influence. We would feel more secure with a fixed number. I heard colleagues saying, “In our parliaments, we have a percentage,” but typically the number of members of a parliament does not vary; there is already a fixed number, so you can set a percentage. In our Parliamentary Assembly, however, the number of members varies; for example, the Russians now have no delegation in the Assembly. A political party would therefore be subject to the flow of events, and that should not be the case. I have heard of the compromise of a threshold of 28 members. ALDE welcomes bringing up the minimum number of members from 20 to 28.

The second issue on which we have questions is the fourth sentence of Rule 50.1, which says that a rapporteur cannot prepare more than five reports simultaneously. We feel – this is the subject of an amendment from the Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe – that one rapporteur is under an obligation, due to a special mandate, to prepare more than three reports. The perception of ALDE is that there are various instances where more than three reports are required, so we prefer to stick to the sentence as it stands. We are also against the proposal to not allow colleagues to be rapporteur unless they have been a member of a committee for at least a year. That is rather demotivating; you come here with high ideals and want to participate in the work, but the first thing you hear is, “Stop! For the first year, you have to look and learn.” ALDE thinks that we should not have such a trial period for any member of this parliament.

All in all, ALDE is in favour of the report of Mr Vareikis. We know that he worked very hard on this matter, and we had extensive discussions on it. Nevertheless, we feel very strongly on the two points that I raised.

Mr KOX (*Netherlands, Spokesperson for the Group of the Unified European Left*) – The Rules of Procedure are there to ensure free and fair functioning of our esteemed Assembly, so evaluating regularly whether rules still function or should be updated due to new developments is only wise; I say that to our colleague Mr Pocij. I therefore thank Rapporteur Vareikis for his report. One of its main points is about the criteria for political groups. As we all know, political groups play a very important role in all the work of the Assembly, so we have to be very careful when touching on the issue.

According to Rapporteur Vareikis, the fact that two new groups have emerged recently should lead to changes in our rules. His first proposal is that we request that any political group be clear about its political character, statutes and activities, and that it is here to promote political pluralism, human rights and the rule of law. That is quite acceptable. A political group is not a technical alliance; it is a group of members of this Assembly who more or less share the same ideas about the world and the future. That proposal of the rapporteur's is quite acceptable.

The second proposal is to increase the number of member States that have to be represented in a political group from five to eight. This, too, is quite acceptable, because you need not only a serious political structure, but a European structure. My group, for example, is present in at least 15 member States. But then we come to the third point: the report proposes introducing a threshold of 5%. That does not sound that much, but it is an increase of 50%, from 20 to at least 30 – perhaps even more, depending, as Mart van de Ven said, on the total number of delegates. That means something. That proposal is not accompanied by arguments. The number has always been 20. In the rapporteur's report, it was originally 25, but at a meeting in Paris, out of the blue, it was proposed to skip from that to a 5% threshold, without any debate. As I say, that is an increase of 50%.

Ever since I have chaired my group – and in fact since it was founded in the '90s; it is a very old group – it has been the smallest, with 30 to 40 members, but though it is small, it has always participated fully in all

the work of this Assembly; I direct that, too, to my colleague Mr Pocij. A 5% threshold would create serious problems for my group, although it has never created any problem for the Assembly and is, I think, respected for its participation in the Assembly's work. I urge the Assembly not to support the 5% threshold. Again, this is to my colleague Mr Pocij: all members have already passed a threshold by being elected at home. Then they passed the threshold of being elected to the national delegation. Then they passed the threshold here of a party having 20 members. No one can just enter this Assembly. I urge the Assembly to take into account the possible effects of the 5% threshold on a small but respected group that contributes to the work of the Assembly. We could talk about another number; in an amendment, I have proposed 25, and other colleagues have proposed 28, but I will, of course, respect the result of the vote. Please do not, in order to solve a problem, kill a group that has not created any problem.

The PRESIDENT – Mr Vareikis, do you wish to respond at this stage?

Mr VAREIKIS (*Lithuania*) – No, I will speak later.

The PRESIDENT* – In that case we will continue with the speaker's list. Mr Kandelaki is not here, so I give the floor to Mr Melkumyan.

Mr MELKUMYAN (*Armenia*)* – Our colleagues are right: we should not use the rules to resolve political problems. We should try to find a proper solution together, and to apply the proper rules. I would not have spoken in this debate on the modification of the Assembly's Rules of Procedure if two members of Azerbaijan's delegation had not given wrong information. They have their own truth and they repeated it like parrots for many years, but there are historical truths which cannot be denied. We have talked about the genocide in 1989 and 1993—

The PRESIDENT* – Mr Melkumyan, I have to interrupt you. That has nothing to do with the matter under discussion today. There is no point in shouting. Your microphone is no longer on. Mr Melkumyan, please respect this body and this Chamber. You have raised an issue that is not under discussion this morning, and for that reason we have interrupted you. Your microphone has been cut. Please respect the Rules of Procedure of this Chamber. I now give the floor to Mr Xuclà.

Mr XUCLÀ (*Spain*)* – Thank you, President. We should pursue our debate on this report, which is on modifying the Rules of Procedure and not on what was said just now. I would like to make a few comments, one of which is theoretical and the other is on the report itself.

As a parliamentarian, I was sitting in the committees that considered these constitutional issues and the reform of the laws and rules of the Chamber. In both cases, we applied the following principle: we should work on consensus. Reforms have to be consistent and some time should be taken on them. For example, the rules of our Parliament in Spain go back to 1982 and a reform is required. We need to have agreement on both sides. There are basic instruments which govern our institutions. An electoral law determines how our citizens are represented in Parliament, so it reduces pluralism and the right of association of our elected representatives. It seems to me that reforms made during a transitional period, which take very little time, are not appropriate because we are going to touch upon rules that are extremely important. We are not talking about electoral laws here, because those govern our elections and determine the composition of our delegation. We can simply check whether the composition of our delegations complies with the rules.

Foreseeability is extremely important if we have an ad hoc reform – I am thinking in terms of the agreement of one group against another. People leave but principles stay. The principles of political pluralism, and of liberty and the freedom of association of some persons, are very important to democracy and to parliaments. We need to talk about consistency but it is very difficult to have an institution which would determine what the political groups should be, because those groups are very different from one another. There are great differences between the EPP, the liberals and the conservatives, and we have our own political agendas in our respective countries.

To conclude, I would like to move to my second point. I have agreed with Mr Kox and I agree with him again: the 5% figure will fluctuate. It will change depending on the composition of the Chamber, so we need to have a fixed figure for the number of members. We talked about having 20 to 25, and then we talked about 5%. I think we should have a fixed number, perhaps of either six or seven different nationalities, rather than 5%. At the moment, even if we do not have two national delegations there is one given result. But in a few months, the number will be completely different. That is why I suggest that we support the amendments mentioned by Mr Kox.

Sir Edward LEIGH (*United Kingdom*) – This is a good opportunity to consider a report on the role and mission of the Council of Europe, because we are entering a new phase with the new budgetary constraints. Personally, I think this is not so much a threat as an opportunity to go back to our core principles in the Council of Europe, which are to defend human rights, freedom and democracy. I am opposed to changing rules just to accommodate a situation. For instance, if you are short of money you should not change the rules to make it easier to let a certain country back into our Assembly. I also do not believe that you should change the rules because you do not like the views that a new group may have; you should stick to what is right. I repeat: this is an opportunity for us to concentrate not so much on projects around Europe but to focus laser-like, with perhaps fewer reports and tighter staff, on what our core mission is.

With regard to the debate about how many members you should have to form a group, while I do not often agree with Tiny Kox I believe that his group makes a notable contribution to our affairs, even if I do not agree with anything that they say. I made this point in the Rules Committee yesterday, but I repeat that I am conscious of what Voltaire said: “I disapprove of what you say but I will defend to the death your right to say it”. I am not too fussed about what limit we set on the new grouping but we should be very conscious that if we make these rules, we will not be doing so because we disapprove of the views of certain people. Perhaps we may feel that they are a small minority in our Assembly, but just because you are in a small minority of members it does not mean that you do not have the right to defend those views, however unpalatable.

Given what has been said earlier, I am conscious that some people also believe that our rules should be used to restrict the creation of a new group whose views we may not approve of. Perhaps they are right-wing populist views that we do not like very much. But what are the core values of our Assembly? I follow Tiny Kox again in saying that they are simply a belief in the rule of law, freedom and democracy. As long as people subscribe to those core values, I do not think it is for us to make a value judgment on their views beyond that. They will have been elected, first, by the people of Europe; then they are elected by their national Parliaments to come and join us here. They have a right for their views to be heard, however much we may disagree with those views and however unpalatable they may be.

In conclusion, I urge colleagues, when they look at this report and at any changes to our rules, to do so on the basis of what is right, not just what is convenient from their own point of view.

Mr BECHT (*France*)* – I also congratulate the rapporteur on the report. Indeed, it is normal for an institution to tidy up its rules and regulations as required and as time goes by. However, I share a number of the concerns that have been voiced, particularly about the threshold required to establish a group. I think that having a figure would be better than having a percentage, and that 25 should be that threshold figure; that is a reasonable number to ensure a coherent grouping.

There is no specific amendment about this, but I should like to draw attention to this point about coherence. We should look carefully at how paragraph 2.4.1 is drafted. It refers to the election of judges to the European Court of Human Rights. It states: “Members of the committee from the country whose list is under consideration shall not have the right to vote, either on the possible rejection of their country’s list or on the expression of preferences among candidates.”

I see the purpose: the idea is to ensure that if someone being considered for appointment as a judge to the European Court of Human Rights is of the same nationality as a committee member, there might be a conflict of interest. However, the wording refers to members not having the right to vote; that does not mean that they would not have the right to speak in the committee about their preference.

For many years, I worked as a magistrate. I understand that someone who might have a conflict of interest should not participate in the discussion, but leave the room. But under paragraph 2.4.1, that is not the case – such a person could speak in favour of their preference but simply not be able to vote. That is not logical or coherent, and that presents problems for not only the committee but the Assembly. We are removing the right to vote in committee, but in the Assembly, where we officially endorse the candidacy of judges, that person would have the right to vote. We need an amendment to the paragraph specifying exactly how we will avoid conflicts of interest. I support the remainder of the text.

(Mr Nick, Vice-President of the Assembly, took the Chair in place of Ms Maury Pasquier.)

Mr GRAF (*Austria*) – Many of the amendments to this report should be welcomed, but in the past couple of weeks a new change has come in to do with the composition of the political groups that may be formed in the Chamber; I am talking about article 19.

There may be an attempt to bring about these changes as quickly as possible. Please do not misunderstand me: of course all parliaments are sovereign and entitled to tidy up their rules. I very much hope that that is the case here. Any such changes, of course, would apply only in future and would not be retrospective. In that case, I wonder what the motivation is.

National parliaments have differing minimum thresholds and different rules on attendance and voting and on quorums. In my country, for example, 50% of those entitled to vote must be present to change the rules and they must secure a two-thirds majority. All too often that is not the case here: we often have slim majorities with very few people actually voting. That is how we have changed our rules in the past, but it is not a good way of working. I don't see any compromise on the table for article 19.

On 25 March, the report came into the public domain for the first time. It was the first time there had been any public discussion or attempt to achieve consensus. That is not on. Member States have rules of procedure that often need to be corrected, but sometimes there are ideological reasons for doing that, and I would resist any changes with such a motivation. Of course we must consider the rights of minorities, as well as majorities.

If I have counted correctly, this Parliamentary Assembly has about 90 non-registered or non-attached members. If we applied the rules to them, the number of those who did not belong to a political group might well rise to more than 100. Surely having a majority of members not sitting in a political group cannot be in the interests of a Parliament Assembly – would that make life easier for everyone else? Let us say it like it is: some members with more extreme views might end up joining other political groups whose views they do not subscribe to. In my country, alongside the Pirate party there is a left-wing extremist party. In this parliament, they would be forced back into the Socialist Group, for example. Is that our intention? That would be riding roughshod over pluralism for ideological reasons. The current rules on political group formation are sufficient and should continue to apply in future. I invite you to deal with this matter sensitively.

Mr VESCOVI (*Italy*)* – What we are saying in our country is the truth. Through bureaucratic Europe, we want to increase bureaucracy, but we should hark back to 70 years ago when we talked about democracy in the Council of Europe. We had a vision. We talked about protecting minorities and about the peoples. Today it is surreal that we should be talking about changing rules of procedure rather than providing a vision to our Assembly, which is so important.

I shall give some concrete examples of what might happen if the changes were introduced. The other day we were talking about hate speech and intolerance. Many took the floor and gave their opinion. They all attacked populist parties. We registered but at the last minute were not given the floor. We were not able to say anything or even defend our leader, Matteo Salvini, who was attacked in the report. If we had a political group, we would be able to speak up and say what we have to say.

Today there are majorities, but majorities change and perhaps in the future they will become minorities. This Assembly should have the courage to change the rules to help minorities. Do we want to change the rules so that colleagues are unable to create one group or two groups? We need to reflect on things. Do you want to muzzle minorities through bureaucracy? Bureaucracy often is done away with by the people through their vote. To give a voice to a group of 20 people, which is a sizeable group, we should give them the possibility to create a group; they might say different things, but we will be able to hear from all and sundry.

We should vote in accordance with our own consciences. We should vote on whether we want to give a voice to minorities, or whether want through certain bureaucratic mechanisms to maintain the status quo.

Mr BERNHARD (*Germany*)* – This document will supposedly make the workings of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe better, but one has to wonder whether the proposed changes to Rule 19 will improve things. I think the opposite is true, because if a member is to be able to fully exercise his or her rights and to play a full part in the life of the Assembly, membership of a political group is a prerequisite. We have just heard that over 90 members are not registered with a political group. That is why, if we really want to improve the way the Assembly works, we would make it possible for the largest number of members to adhere to a political group. That is precisely the opposite of what this document does; it will make it even more difficult for members to muster the necessary number of colleagues. It will mean every time a political group tries to form it will have to overcome insurmountable obstacles, which will impede democracy. One has to suspect that that is precisely the purpose of the proposal.

In 2017 the Free Democrats was set up, and proposed to set up our new group. We did that in January this year. Then, all of a sudden, without any prior discussion – one might even be tempted to say it was a panic reaction – attempts are being made to change the rules in the space of a few days. Until two weeks ago, on

25 March, the question of group membership was not even an issue, so why is there this sudden attempt to keep unwelcome competition at bay?

We should uphold the democratic values and principles of the Council of Europe, particularly in safeguarding minority groups, in order to afford all members the same democratic rights. Diversity of opinion, as well as equality of opportunity for all political formations large or small, must be preserved. What are you so afraid of? Why are you so worried that more members in future will become involved in parliamentary work? Why are you so worried about more members being involved in the work, which would only serve to enhance the democratic legitimacy of this body? If the Council of Europe is all about democracy, that is what we should be doing, but you are seeking to curtail the rights of those who think differently and trying to ward off any unwelcome competition. You want a two-tier Organisation. Those of us who do not belong to political groups are second-class citizens, and this reform would only serve to exacerbate that.

The Council of Europe should stand for diversity and variety of political opinion. We should not destroy that principle; that is unbecoming of this Organisation. That is why I invite colleagues to reject the amendment of Rule 19 and thereby strengthen democracy in Europe.

Mr KLEINWAECHTER (*Germany*)* – This is a comprehensive report that proposes all kinds of changes all over the place and I welcome many of them. I commend the changes on the rapporteurship, for example: we have a lot of people doing many reports and others who struggle to have their voices heard. However, other aspects of the report are perhaps not to be welcomed.

Paragraph 2.1 would make our support for this report impossible, for example, hence my heartfelt plea to you, distinguished members, to reject the report in its entirety. We here in the Council of Europe stand for the rule of law, democracy and human rights, and democracy is all about being able to express our opinions freely and being able to vote, as well as showing enough tolerance to listen to other views and to weigh them up.

The EPP spokesperson said that small groups do not work very well; that was the spokesperson of a large political group issuing a judgment on small groups. Democracy costs money but is not a waste of money, because every penny we spend on freedom of expression, diversity of opinion and allowing members to fully exercise their rights and join different political formations – thereby enjoying the privileges afforded to political groups – is a sound investment. It is by no means a waste of money. As a democrat, I want to reiterate that.

Let us look at the details of the proposed changes under Rule 19.1. The amendment says that members would “form political groups according to their political affinities”, but the word “political” is already in there because we are seeking to achieve something politically. Why therefore are you seeking to re-emphasise “political”? After all, the word is already in there. Also, the language has been tightened up under Rule 19.3: “All members of the group shall declare in writing in an appendix to the statement that they share the same political and ideological affinities.” As we are an Assembly of 47 member States, one has to question whether we really have so many political affinities with members from other countries. Will that always be the case and who is to decide what a political affinity is and whether such an affinity is sufficient? You are throwing the door wide open to a situation where a political affinity requirement would be an unclear criterion for forming a political group.

I come back to what the representative of the UEL said. He said parliaments have sent people here to represent them. These members therefore emerge from national parliaments and they have to overcome thresholds there. In the Assembly, they will have to sign a declaration that they share the same political and ideological views as the others in the group. We had a debate about the Russian Federation and the Council of Europe’s future, and that was no bad thing. Political groups must be able to thrash out such controversial issues, and there will be differences of opinion within the groups, so why are we trying to commit them to some sort of immutable political view?

I have recently visited constituencies in Brandenburg where political groups must have at least three people. In my own constituency in Spreewald, the number happens to be four. That is because in the most recent election, a particular party wanted to get into parliament, but the threshold was raised on the basis of the arguments that are being made today. The threshold is being increased to try to prevent political parties from joining the fray, and we should reject this motion.

The PRESIDENT – The other speakers on the list have withdrawn their applications, so that concludes the list of speakers. Before I call the rapporteur, does anyone who has not yet spoken wish to make a spontaneous contribution?

Mr POCIEJ (*Poland*) – In addition to what I said earlier, I would like to stress that the Group of the European People's Party supports the proposal of 28 members to a group. I was probably not crystal clear about that. We propose a compromise of 28 members per group.

The PRESIDENT – Mr Pocij, that was my mistake. You had already spoken in the debate, so you did not necessarily qualify to speak now. I apologise for the mistake. The next speaker is Mr Seyidov.

Mr SEYIDOV (*Azerbaijan*) – Thank you for this great opportunity to express my views on this subject. I will be very brief, in view of the time. It is important to understand that we have all come from our national parliaments to be fair and honourable in this house of democracy. In the parliament of my country, we have representatives of the ruling party, opposition members and independent members of parliament. Independent members belong neither to the opposition nor to the ruling party, but they have the right to be present in committees, to be rapporteurs and to be vice-president of the parliament.

Today we are talking about some strange developments in the Assembly, because those who do not belong to political parties will not have rights. How can that be possible? They have come from elected parliaments to this house of democracy. They fight for human rights, democracy and the rule of law, but they do not have any rights to be representatives. Thank God that we find two very special paragraphs about that in the report, but they are not enough. We should do much more to ensure that this is fair, and to ensure that all members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe can be rapporteurs and hold other important positions.

Mr CILEVIČS (*Latvia*) – I want to make two points. First, I express my sincere gratitude to Mr Vareikis for his thorough account of the resolution on further improvements to the procedure for the election of judges to the European Court of Human Rights. The resolution was adopted by the Standing Committee of our Assembly last year. Several measures suggested by us and supported by the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs will further improve the procedure, which is probably the most important mission of our Assembly.

My second point is about the controversy over the number of members in a political group, which has been highlighted in several speeches in this debate. In my view, a political group in our Assembly is not just a company of bodies who want to have a secretariat and the various other privileges to which political groups are entitled. Political groups should be affiliated with European political families. It is strange when people from very different political groups suddenly decide to come together, with a very unclear political programme and agenda, and they are treated the same as groups from well-established European political families. Therefore, I support the report, and I believe that we should all do so. Some amendments are necessary, although I do not agree with the committee about all the amendments. Generally, Mr Vareikis has once again done a very good job.

Sir Roger GALE (*United Kingdom*) – Having heard what has been said this morning, I think that perhaps, as the person who made the 5% suggestion at the Rules Committee in Paris, I need to clarify the position. This is not an attempt to gag members of parliament or prevent them from forming groups; indeed, it is not possible to prevent members from doing so if they choose to. It is a question of recognition. If we take this to its ludicrous extreme, the number of members of the Assembly mean that it would be possible to have 30 separate political groups. I say ludicrous extreme, because that situation would be completely impossible to finance or staff. The object of the rule changes proposed by Mr Vareikis was quite simply to inject some sense of order and reality into the situation, to ensure that people could form proper groups with proper policies and a proper sense of direction, in accordance with new rules of the Assembly.

I suggested the 5% rule because it seemed to me that 5% was a reasonable reflection of the membership demands made by many national parliaments. Yesterday in the Rules Committee, Aleksander Pocij and I accepted that perhaps that was not a sensible way forward, in view of the potential fluctuations in the number of members, so we agreed with the proposal for 28 members that was put forward as a compromise. That seemed to us to be a reasonable solution. I think I am right in saying that when that was finally put to the Assembly, at least two members of the Group of the Unified European Left – I do not think that Tiny was present – supported it, as did the leader of the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group. There is, therefore, reasonable cross-party support for the measure.

We then looked at the number of countries that ought to be represented. As Mr Vareikis proposed, eight countries out of 47 seemed to be a not unreasonable spread to achieve a proper balance of representation of groups from across this Chamber. Those were the intentions behind the proposal, and I believe that they were both honourable and sound. I urge the Assembly, on reflection, to support the report and the amendments, and to give Mr Vareikis the backing that I believe the report deserves.

Mr VARVITSIOTIS (*Greece*) – I congratulate Mr Vareikis on his report. Several proposals, particularly those regarding the election of judges, represent a step in the right direction, and I fully support them.

When a new group is created, it should definitely consist of representatives from different countries. We cannot import into the Council of Europe the divisions that exist in our national parliaments. Recently, members of the Council of Europe have allowed their national identities and party identities to take precedence over other things, but in Europe it is important for us to make bigger coalitions and work in bigger groups. I fully support the idea that any new group should consist of members from a minimum of eight countries.

I understand the concern raised by several non-registered members that they want the opportunity to form their own groups, so although in the committee I supported increasing the threshold to 28 members, I will now vote against it. However, I will still vote to increase the minimum number of countries represented in any group, which I consider the most important thing.

The PRESIDENT – Thank you, Mr Varvitsiotis. I have two more speakers registered. I now close the list of additional speakers.

Mr GRIMOLDI (*Italy*)* – I thank all members, because I have been in the Assembly for some time and have been able to learn and better understand what we do here. However, I have a comment to make. If I understand correctly, we want to modify the rules to make it more difficult to create political groups, yet the Assembly now has some 20 Vice-Presidents. Is that not somewhat excessive? Perhaps it would be better to have more political groups so that we can democratically express different opinions.

Whenever I go home and talk about the Council of Europe outside this Assembly, the average person asks me what it is – they confuse it with the European Union or the European Parliament. That is quite human; it is understandable that someone who is not accustomed to our work does not know what is what. I always explain that the Council of Europe is a very old Organisation that encompasses many European countries. At a time when the people we represent do not have much faith in supranational organisations, we need to protect such institutions. In a place where we speak about democracy and the rule of law, we must not lessen democracy out of a desire not to create more political groups, which could allow us to hear different views expressed.

Earlier today, a member quoted Voltaire: “I may not agree with what you say but I will defend to the death your right to say it”. I agree. If we give the impression that the Council of Europe is not truly democratic or pluralistic, it will seem superfluous, because we already have the European Union, the European Parliament and the European Commission. If we do not allow the possibility of creating more political groups on the basis of the existing rules, our institution will be regarded as useless. It should be the place of democracy and rights, but it is becoming exactly the opposite. Let us make our institution less boring. Let us not give the people we represent the impression that it is useless or superfluous.

Mr MASIULIS (*Lithuania*)* – I, too, thank my colleague Mr Vareikis for his work. The traditional political spectrum in Europe is narrowing and many new political parties are entering the fray but being marginalised. We have to decide whether that is a good or a bad thing. To my mind, the situation has worsened, because it is becoming increasingly difficult to form coalitions in parliaments, which means that politicians are becoming more marginalised. It is therefore right that we should make certain adjustments or corrections to allow us to govern according to our principles, so I support the report and the modifications proposed therein.

(Ms Maury Pasquier, President of the Assembly, took the Chair in place of Mr Nick.)

The PRESIDENT* – Thank you, Mr Masiulis; that concludes the list of speakers. I call Mr Vareikis to reply.

Mr VAREIKIS (*Lithuania*) – I thank all the speakers for their proposals and ideas. I emphasise that the report was not written at the wish of any political group or organisation, or of the Bureau. It was a decision of the Assembly to establish an ad hoc committee and ask you, as representatives of your countries, to propose changes to the rules. The report is not a conspiracy; it is a compendium of your proposals.

I, personally, have nothing against bigger or smaller numbers of members; I put in the report the numbers that you yourselves proposed. You had the opportunity to table amendments until 10.30 a.m. yesterday – the compromise of specifying 28 members was proposed only yesterday – and even now you have the possibility to propose sub-amendments. However, I believe that we are not looking for solutions in the right place, because the main thing is not numbers, but ideology. We are a community not only of

Europeans, but of values and ideologies, so the report proposes amending Rule 19.3 so that members who wanted to organise a new group would have to submit a statement to set out the group's ideology and what it intends to do. Importantly, such a statement would have to conform to the European Convention on Human Rights.

There is nothing wrong with forming a new group – small is beautiful. However, although we have to respect the visions of bigger groups, the small groups have to understand that they are a minority. Yesterday, I criticised Mr Kox's report, but when we voted on it, I was in the minority, so I had to recognise that we accepted the report.

We can change the numbers and vote on whether to specify 5% of the Assembly or 20, 25 or 28 members – it is your decision. I am not a party member in my country, but in the Assembly I am part of a group because I support its ideology. You have the chance to do the same, and I am happy to hear your proposals. My wish is not to promote any particular number, but to promote the good functioning of our Organisation.

Mr Becht spoke about judges, but unfortunately no amendment has been tabled. Perhaps next time he will do so, because we need to adopt something formally.

In terms of rapporteurship, the report proposes reducing the number of simultaneous reports or opinions from five to three. An amendment has been tabled that would revert the number to five. It is up to the Assembly. I hope that member States will look carefully at the amendments before voting. The rules are agreed among us. Are you playing political football or a political game?

The PRESIDENT* – Thank you, Mr Vareikis. I give the floor to the chairperson of the committee.

Ms De SUTTER (*Belgium*) – This institution faces important challenges and should increase its resilience to continue defending its core values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, which are all under threat from both outside and inside our member States and the Parliamentary Assembly. That is why the Assembly and the ad hoc committee last year gathered proposals from all political groups and national delegations and mandated our committee to think about how to improve the Rules of Procedure in order to strengthen the functioning of this Assembly.

Mr Vareikis has presented a comprehensive compendium of suggestions to strengthen our rules. Our committee had a lot of important discussions, and we have produced a good report. We have at all times tried to separate the purely regulatory from the political discussions in our committee, and it was not always easy. We believe that several amendments can still improve the report and reflect the large consensus that was present in the committee. Let us also reach such consensus in the Assembly.

The PRESIDENT* – The debate is closed.

The Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs has presented a draft resolution to which eight amendments have been tabled. The committee unanimously agreed Amendment 2. However, I must call it individually, as it could be affected by another amendment in the Compendium. The amendments will be taken in the order in which they appear in the Compendium. I remind members that speeches on amendments are limited to 30 seconds.

I call Mr Kox to support Amendment 1.

Mr KOX (*Netherlands*) – As the rapporteur said, it is now up to the Assembly to decide on the minimum number of members for a political group. This amendment, which is supported by many esteemed members of different political groups, offers the best protection for smaller groups. I propose that the amendment is supported, because this was the position of the rapporteur in his original report.

The PRESIDENT* – Does anyone wish to speak against the amendment? That is not the case.

What is the opinion of the committee?

Ms De SUTTER (*Belgium*) – The committee was against by eight to six.

The PRESIDENT* – If Amendment 1 is adopted, Amendments 6 and 7 will fall.

The vote is open.

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Amendment 1 is rejected.

We move to Amendment 6. If this amendment is adopted, Amendments 7 and 8 will fall. Mr Vescovi is not in the Chamber, so I call Mr Maniero to support the amendment.

Mr MANIERO (*Italy*)* – Every day we say that we defend pluralism and protect those who hold different opinions from ours, but now we want to change the rules so that we will not hear those other voices. I do not understand this. We are doing good work, and we should continue with it.

The PRESIDENT* – Does anyone wish to speak against the amendment?

Mr POCIEJ (*Poland*)* – For the reasons that I gave in my speech, I oppose the amendment.

The PRESIDENT* – What is the opinion of the committee?

Ms De SUTTER (*Belgium*) – The committee is against, by a large majority.

The PRESIDENT* – The vote is open.

Amendment 6 is rejected.

We come to Amendment 7, to which a sub-amendment has been tabled by the committee. I call Mr Maniero to support Amendment 7.

Mr MANIERO (*Italy*)* – We are here to do away with privilege and to favour pluralism. Like other colleagues, I do not entirely agree with the traditional political groups, and I do not understand why I should be discriminated against because of that. We tabled the amendment to protect the right for all different opinions to be expressed here.

The PRESIDENT* – We come to Sub-amendment 1 to Amendment 7. I call Mr Vareikis to support the sub-amendment on behalf of the committee.

Mr VAREIKIS (*Lithuania*) – This sub-amendment would replace the figure of 5% with the number 28. It is a compromise.

The PRESIDENT* – Does anyone wish to speak against the amendment? That is not the case.

What is the opinion of the mover of the amendment?

Mr MANIERO (*Italy*)* – Against.

The PRESIDENT* – What is the opinion of the committee?

Ms De SUTTER (*Belgium*) – In favour.

The PRESIDENT* – I shall now put the sub-amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The sub-amendment is adopted.

Does anyone wish to speak against the amendment, as amended? That is not the case.

What is the opinion of the committee?

Ms de SUTTER (*Belgium*) – In favour.

The PRESIDENT* – The vote is open.

Amendment 7, as amended, is adopted.

We come to Amendment 8, which has a sub-amendment. I call Mr Maniero to support the amendment.

Mr MANIERO (*Italy*)* – A few weeks ago, I asked a colleague why he supported changes to rules that made it difficult to express different voices. He said, candidly, “We have so many large political groups. Why do we need new ones?” We might think that we are already doing everything right, but we need to be modest and humble and to protect the values of the Council of Europe.

The PRESIDENT* – We now come to the sub-amendment, tabled by Mr Kiliç. He is not in the Chamber, so I call Mr Altunyaliz to support the sub-amendment.

Mr ALTUNYALIZ (*Turkey*) – As with Sub-amendment 1 to Amendment 7, we propose a compromise, of seven national delegations instead of eight. That would be enough to have a pluralistic approach. I would like you all to support our sub-amendment.

The PRESIDENT* – Does anyone wish to speak against the sub-amendment?

Mr POCIEJ (*Poland*) – The increase by only two, from six to eight national delegations, is very small. It was the subject of long debate, and we reached that consensus, so there is no room for compromise because eight is already a very small increase.

The PRESIDENT* – What is the opinion of the mover of the amendment?

Mr MANIERO (*Italy*)* – Against.

The PRESIDENT* – What is the opinion of the committee?

Ms De SUTTER (*Belgium*) – Against.

The PRESIDENT* – I shall now put the sub-amendment to the vote.

The vote is open.

The sub-amendment is rejected.

Does anyone wish to speak against the amendment? That is not the case.

What is the opinion of the committee?

Ms De SUTTER (*Belgium*) – The committee is against, by a large majority.

The PRESIDENT* – The vote is open.

Amendment 8 is rejected.

We come to Amendment 4. If it is adopted, Amendments 5, 3 and 2 will fall. I call Mr van de Ven to support the amendment.

Mr VAN DE VEN (*Netherlands*) – By deleting the text as proposed in the amendment, we would take care of two issues, which are that the maximum number of reports for a member should be five, as always, not three, and that a person who becomes a member of this Assembly should be allowed to write reports as of their first day.

The PRESIDENT* – Does anyone wish to speak against the amendment? That is not the case.

What is the opinion of the committee?

Ms De SUTTER (*Belgium*) – In favour, by a small majority.

The PRESIDENT* – The vote is open.

Amendment 4 is adopted.

Amendments 5, 3 and 2 have fallen, so we will now proceed to vote on the draft resolution contained in Document 14849, as amended.

The vote is open.

The draft resolution in Document 14849, as amended, is adopted, with 100 votes for, 33 against and 2 abstentions.

2. Address by Mr Nikol Pashinyan, Prime Minister of Armenia

The PRESIDENT* – Prime Minister, it is certainly an honour for us all to welcome you to our Chamber. It is a particular pleasure for me to welcome you to Strasbourg once again, because I had an opportunity to meet you in Yerevan just a few weeks ago when I paid an official visit to Armenia. During our meeting in Yerevan, you told me that democracy is firmly anchored in the minds of the citizens of your country. Indeed, we must congratulate the Armenian people on the fact that they are so much attached to democracy and to the other values of the Council of Europe. Over the past 20 years Armenia has, as a member of our Organisation, undergone a significant democratic transformation. It has reformed its judiciary and put in place the mechanisms necessary to protect human rights. The road to democracy has not always been easy – there have been problems along the way, but also many successes. Your country's democracy has shown itself to be stable, solid and mature, as shown by the recent events in the peaceful revolution and its positive outcome.

I thank Armenia for its devotion to the European vision that our Organisation has been working on for 70 years. We are confronted with institutional and political challenges that are very serious indeed. We must overcome them so that we can preserve our standard-setting system, which now covers 47 member States. In this difficult context, we will be pleased to hear your ideas, Prime Minister, about the future of our Organisation in particular and the future of the European architecture in general.

Just before I give you the floor, Prime Minister, I draw the attention of all and sundry to the magnificent gift that your country gave our Assembly in 2013: the magnificent stained-glass decorations that we can admire in the Chamber. They open us up to the outside world, from which we can find new inspiration.

Mr Nikol PASHINYAN (*Prime Minister of Armenia*) – Thank you, Madam President. I shall deliver my speech in Armenian, so please adjust your headphones, colleagues.

(The speaker continued in Armenian.)

Honourable Madam President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, honourable Mr Secretary General of the Council of Europe, and honourable members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, high-ranking guests who speak from this rostrum commonly start their statements with the following sentence: "It is a great honour for me to speak from the rostrum of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe." It is indeed a great honour, but allow me to say that speaking from this rostrum has particular meaning and significance for me. I will now try to explain the reasons why.

In the summer of 1999, as editor-in-chief of the *Oragir* daily newspaper, I was awaiting the judgment in a criminal case instigated against me. The case had been triggered by an article published in *Oragir*, as I was its editor. The prosecutor demanded that I be convicted and sentenced to three years' imprisonment. Back in those days, it was virtually impossible for a court to depart from what a prosecutor claimed, but then something like a miracle happened. Although I was convicted and sentenced to one year in prison, the court imposed the sentence in such a way as to postpone my actual imprisonment.

It later emerged that there was only one reason for that. As Armenia was preparing to become a member of the Council of Europe and as the President of the Parliamentary Assembly, Lord Russell-Johnston, was about to visit Armenia to discuss matters related to accession, the authorities had come to appreciate that jailing an editor would not set a very positive background for the visit of such an eminent person. During his visit, Lord Russell-Johnston did indeed discuss my situation and the authorities apparently promised not to put me behind bars. In fact, after Lord Russell-Johnston's visit my conviction became conditional, and because Armenia proceeded to accede to the Council of Europe in the rest of 1999 and 2000, I managed to stay out of prison during that time.

In subsequent years, criminal proceedings were launched against me on several occasions, but my actual imprisonment was always postponed. It eventually happened after the well-known events of 1 March 2008, when the unlawful actions of the authorities led to the deaths of 10 Armenian citizens, including eight peaceful demonstrators. At that time, thousands of opposition supporters were taken to police stations just for participating in a demonstration. Moreover, about a hundred political leaders and activists ended up behind bars as political prisoners. Citizens who had been deprived of the right to assemble, politicians who had been jailed and their relatives, and the relatives of the victims of 1 March 2008, invested all their hope and faith in

the Council of Europe and this Parliamentary Assembly, because after 1 March 2008 the constitution had been essentially repealed in the Republic of Armenia and people had neither any hope nor access to any effective legal remedy.

The five resolutions adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in connection with those events brought a breath of fresh air into Armenia. They gave the people hope and a belief that not everything was lost. I had been held in pre-trial detention since 2009, and I was convicted and sentenced to seven years' imprisonment in 2010. However, I spent only two years in prison before I was again freed, owing to the support of the citizens of the Republic of Armenia but also the support of the Council of Europe.

In winter 2011, I was visited in prison by the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, Thomas Hammarberg. That visit was essential in drawing international attention to the general plight of political prisoners in Armenia and to my plight in particular. Not long afterwards, the European Court of Human Rights declared my case an urgent one and two months after that the authorities in Armenia released me under an act of pardon, knowing all too well that otherwise the Council of Europe's next step would have been officially to declare me a political prisoner.

The next stage of my engagement with the Council of Europe and the Parliamentary Assembly was in December 2018. At that time, I was already the Prime Minister of Armenia, a position that I had achieved as a result of the non-violent, Velvet people's revolution that took place in April and May of 2018. In December 2018, it was time for the next milestone in the revolution – the snap parliamentary election in my country. In that election, our political party received over 70% of the vote, but more importantly the observation mission of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe concluded that the election was democratic. It said, "Owing to the Velvet revolution and the political will demonstrated by the authorities, it has been possible to conduct democratic elections in Armenia." The other international observation missions also recognised December's snap parliamentary election as a free, fair, democratic and competitive election, an assessment that had never been made of any previous election in Armenia. It was the first time that the official outcome of a parliamentary election in my country was not challenged in the constitutional court. It was also the first parliamentary election in Armenia to produce a result that was unreservedly accepted by all the political forces and the general public.

Now, standing here as Prime Minister after being elected by the people of the Republic of Armenia, I wish to extend my gratitude to the Council of Europe and its Parliamentary Assembly for their support of human rights and the development of democracy in Armenia. Democracy has now prevailed in Armenia. It has happened because of the non-violent, Velvet people's revolution that took place in Armenia about a year ago. I want to underline clearly that the revolution was conceived in the soul and heart of the Armenian people. No foreign power was involved in any way whatsoever in our revolution. It had no geopolitical content nor any geopolitical undercurrents.

So how did this revolution take place and how did it succeed? In 2015, near the end of his second presidential term, Armenia's then de facto leader, Serzh Sargsyan, implemented constitutional amendments that would transition Armenia from a semi-presidential form of government to a parliamentary system by April 2018. When Serzh Sargsyan was initiating those constitutional amendments, he publicly promised never again to aspire to the position of Armenia's leader, which was also the position of Prime Minister. In 2018, however, it became clear that he was the ruling party's candidate for the position of Prime Minister.

When we learned about that, my friends and I started a march on 31 March 2018 from Gyumri, Armenia's second largest city, to the capital city, Yerevan. En route, we urged Armenian citizens to prevent Serzh Sargsyan from carrying out his political swindle. We walked for 13 days and over 200 kilometres, with the whole process being covered live on social media. In Yerevan, countless school children – boys and girls – were the first in the city to join our movement. They were followed by their elder siblings – their brothers and sisters – and then by their mothers and fathers, and finally by their grandfathers and grandmothers.

On 17 April 2018, Serzh Sargsyan was elected by the Parliament as Prime Minister, and on 22 April 2018 I once again found myself in prison. However, the very next day Serzh Sargsyan was forced by popular pressure to release my friends and me, and to resign as Prime Minister. Fifteen days later, on 8 May 2018, that same parliament elected me as Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, because that was what the Armenian public demanded. That is how our revolution took place, which we came to call the revolution of love and solidarity because from the outset it was based on the logic of a non-violent struggle. Open palms and open hands raised in the air were the symbol of our revolution. They signified our repeated pledge that even if the police and the incumbent were to use violence against us, we would not under any circumstances respond to violence with violence. Love and the belief in non-violent struggle truly prevailed in Armenia over

the oligarchic and corrupt system that had ruled the country for years. They prevailed with no violence and without a single victim. They prevailed without any weapons, just open hands raised in the air.

Vast political changes are happening in Armenia. We have managed to root out systemic corruption, eliminate the monopolistic structure of the economy and create real prerequisites for everyone's equality before the law. Every day we are further reducing the grey economy. Over the last 10 months, more than 50 000 jobs have been brought out of the shadow economy or created in Armenia. That is the equivalent of 10% of the total jobs in the labour market. Our fiscal revenue has significantly exceeded targets. In 2019 we plan to collect at least €70 million more in fiscal revenue – the equivalent of 2.6% of total fiscal revenue. Those additional funds will be used to build roads, invest in education and healthcare, develop regions evenly and increase wages. Our government's activities are transparent and accountable, and our power stems from the expression of our people's free will.

Today, Armenia is unequivocally a democratic country with absolute freedom of expression and of assembly. The chapter of election rigging and systemic corruption in our country has been closed definitively. Our government continues to take steps to enhance respect for human rights. However, our democracy needs to be reinforced with economic and institutional safeguards. The development of democratic institutions, the existence of an independent judiciary and the creation and strengthening of anti-corruption institutions are all key areas in which we need the support of the Council of Europe. All that is important not only to consolidate the outcomes of our political revolution, but to succeed in our recently launched economic revolution, which primarily is aimed at encouraging our citizens' economic activity, creating real opportunities for them, and making Armenia even more attractive for investments and tourism and a true pioneer in technology. We are convinced that we will succeed in this difficult mission because our people have regained faith in our own strength and future.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains a serious challenge for our whole region. Like any democratic government, the Armenian Government is committed to the principle of a peaceful settlement of the issue. However, the democratic changes that have taken place in our country have added some new shades to our understanding of how the issue can be settled. It is crucial that we have managed to launch a rather constructive and positive dialogue with Ilham Aliyev, the President of Azerbaijan, but I am convinced that mere dialogue between leaders is not enough to settle the issue. It is important to launch a dialogue between societies, so that we prepare our respective societies for peace, not war. In my recent press conference in Yerevan, I stated that social media could serve as an important platform for such dialogue, although Armenians and Azerbaijanis unfortunately continue to use it to interact using the language of obscenity and hate.

Over the 30 years of conflict, we could have exhausted the vocabulary of hate and obscenity, helped one another to understand our respective positions and at least attempted to find the reasons that keep us from understanding one another. I initiated that discourse by stating in the Armenian Parliament several times that any solution to the Karabakh issue must be acceptable to the people of Armenia, of Nagorno-Karabakh and of Azerbaijan. That statement was unprecedented and outlined the formula that could pave the way to a peaceful settlement of the Karabakh issue. Unfortunately, we still have not heard similar statements from Azerbaijan. I hope that this message, conveyed from this rostrum of peace, will earn an adequate response in Azerbaijani society.

There is a reason I just called this Assembly's rostrum a rostrum of peace. I believe this is the place where obscenity ought to be replaced with dialogue, and provocations with constructive engagement. Unfortunately, the rostrum of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe is, at times, used to instigate wars. I must note that the discussion on Nagorno-Karabakh that took place here in January 2016 became a prelude to the four-day war unleashed in April of the same year. It created a fertile ground for Azerbaijan's armed forces to launch an attack. I could not confidently assert that they were doing so consciously, but still, the authors of those discussions and documents triggered a war that cost Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan several hundred lives. To this day, on other international platforms as well as this one, unfortunately there are attempts to drag such organisations into geopolitical games and conflicts, attempting to turn them into parties to conflicts. That behaviour is absolutely contrary to the mission and essence of these organisations.

Needless to say, each conflict must be examined in terms of its merits and essence. Passing judgment on any conflict without understanding its origin, causes, nature and peculiarities would be tantamount to playing with human lives and destinies. That is why we continue to believe that the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs should be the only ones to deal with the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, together with the three parties to conflict. That is the only format in which the participants have information on not only the status quo but the whole history and subtleties of the negotiations from day one. The OSCE Minsk Group was established as a platform for dialogue between all the parties to the conflict – Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan and Armenia.

We are taking measures to reinstate dialogue between Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan through the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs.

That does not in any way mean that there is no role for the Council of Europe to play in the Karabakh conflict zone. This Organisation, which promotes human rights and democratic institutions in Europe, has paid no attention whatever to supporting non-governmental organisations operating in Nagorno-Karabakh. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has taken no steps whatever to promote the consolidation of democratic institutions and the development of civil society in Nagorno-Karabakh. The explanation given has been that there are ambiguities and discrepancies regarding its status, and it is not internationally recognised as a state, but the engagement of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has nothing to do with sovereign status. Nagorno-Karabakh is still not recognised internationally as a sovereign state, but is there international debate on whether the people living there are human beings? For the Council of Europe, a global pioneer in the protection of human rights, should documents prevail over real people?

From this high rostrum, I appeal to the Council of Europe – and all organisations in Europe working for the promotion of human rights, protection of the freedom of expression, and the strengthening of democratic institutions – to help the people of Nagorno-Karabakh to improve their laws and institutions, and to promote human rights, the rule of law and independence of the judiciary. Human beings will benefit from that. Humans are worth much more than any documents, or any political or group's interests. I am convinced that the Council of Europe and this Parliamentary Assembly will be guided by their values.

Honourable President, Secretary General and members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, it has been very important and a true honour for me to address this Assembly on the first anniversary of the Armenian revolution of love and solidarity. Declaring Armenia country of the year in 2018, *The Economist* posed the following question: will Armenia be able to advance the success achieved in 2018? I am honoured to declare from this high rostrum that democracy in Armenia is irreversible, for the simple reason that its victory in our country was secured not by political leaders or parties, but by the people, the citizens, the youth. They know now that they are the driving force of all progress. They will certainly not miss this exceptional opportunity to turn Armenia into a beacon of democracy, rule of law, transparency and tolerance. Armenia can and will remain a source of good news for all those who believe in democracy. Thank you.

The PRESIDENT* – Thank you for that wonderful appeal launched from this rostrum of peace, as you have called it, Prime Minister. You have described your country's situation, and spoke about the Council of Europe's past role with regard to Armenia. That reminds us of how weighty our responsibilities are. We must continue to defend the values of this Organisation.

I give the floor to members who wish to put questions to you. I remind members that they have only 30 seconds to put a question, and should not make a speech. I call Mr Vareikis.

Mr VAREIKIS (*Lithuania, Spokesperson for the Group of the European People's Party*) – Prime Minister, you have said a few sentences about your relations with Azerbaijan, but you have other neighbours, with whom relations are probably also problematic. Are you happy with your relations with neighbouring countries? If not, what improvements can you make to them?

Mr PASHINYAN* – Thank you for the question. We do indeed have neighbours with whom our relationship is not so good. We also have neighbours with whom our relations are very good – Georgia and Iran, with whom relations are at a high level, and with whom we have high-level engagement and dialogue. We are trying to develop those relationships further. As for our relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey, unfortunately, essentially we do not have diplomatic relations with them at all, and that says it all. The situation with Azerbaijan is I think evident to all of us, but with Turkey, things are somewhat different, because Turkey links the establishment of relations with Armenia to Armenia's relationship with Azerbaijan. Armenia has not changed its position; we have said that we stand ready to establish relations with Turkey without preconditions.

As to our relationship with Azerbaijan, I provided a general outline of how we see it moving forward. I underline that our relationship with Azerbaijan and our other neighbours is seen by us as part of an agenda of peace. I am happy that, through our actions, our government has been able to put on the table an agenda of peace.

Mr SCHÄFER (*Germany, Spokesperson for the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group*)* – Prime Minister, you described very impressively your country's move to democracy in recent years. I congratulate you on that. Will any politicians there go on trial, and will there be a fully independent judiciary?

Mr PASHINYAN* – Thank you for the question. The question of the judiciary is one of the most urgent and important ones for our government. There has been a revolution in Armenia’s political system, but a revolution has not taken place in our judiciary. I can assure you of one thing, without any sentiment: it is vital to us to have a 100% unconditionally independent judiciary whose decisions and judgments are trusted by Armenian society and the international community.

Recently, a delegation of the European Union came to Armenia, and we discussed our position on having an independent judiciary. The delegates posed a very direct question to me: “How far are you willing to go to make the judiciary independent?” I gave a very direct answer. I said that en route to an independent judiciary, we are ready to go to the very end. We understand that without a truly and unobjectionably independent judiciary we cannot guarantee or safeguard, irreversibly and ultimately, the continuous strengthening and consolidation of our democracy and institutions.

Do we have such a judiciary today? Unfortunately, I cannot give you a 100% assurance on that, but I do give you a 100% assurance that our government has eliminated the alleged practice of the judiciary being steered by government. We have completely given up on this practice. This may sound a bit strange, but I do not have 100% confidence that the other levers of influence over the judiciary are all gone. I am not fully confident that there is no corruption in our judiciary because about 10 days ago, a judge was arrested in Armenia as he was taking a bribe. It is clear that we are fully committed to the agenda of having an independent judiciary. Please rest assured on that.

Mr HOWELL (*United Kingdom, Spokesperson for the European Conservatives Group*) – Prime Minister, I would like to push you some more on the question of your relationship with Iran. Iran has a very chequered relationship with Europe. How do you see that relationship developing? How do you see it playing out in the context of Europe?

Mr PASHINYAN* – I can tell you that in all my exchanges with senior European officials, I have noted that our European counterparts understand the importance of the Armenian-Iranian relationship; and they agree that we should pursue our vision of maintaining and developing positive, good relations with Iran. As to the international situation we have over Iran, that is rather challenging. In this political controversy, we have our friends on this side of the line and our friends on that side of the line. Of course, our hope – our appeal and wish – is that political disagreements with others, including this one, are resolved through dialogue. Dialogue is the only way in which we can pursue the solution to these problems in the 21st century and at our current level of civilisation, and we should do so. To be frank, in the exchanges with all our European counterparts I have seen an understanding and appreciation of the situation. I have not yet spoken with everyone personally but when I speak with our European Union partners and the other countries of Europe, I see that we have an appreciation and understanding of this vision.

Mr van de VEN (*Netherlands, Spokesperson for the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe*) – In April 2018, this Assembly adopted my report on fighting organised crime by facilitating the confiscation of illegal assets. I know that fighting crime, including high-level crime, is one of the priorities of your government. Can you say how your country will co-operate with international partners on the better use of the positive international experience and legal mechanism in this field?

Mr PASHINYAN* – Thank you for that question. It is very important that such a question is asked here at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, because we are currently discussing in Armenia whether it can be acceptable for our country to have the non-conviction-based confiscation of assets. There are some serious concerns in Armenia with respect to this, which come from different corners including some from the previous government. It is important for me to note that this practice is unacceptable internationally. Since 2015 it has been one of the international commitments of Armenia, which include a commitment to the Council of Europe. I recall that this mechanism was mentioned in the money-laundering proceeds investigation and the Council of Europe project on combating terrorism financing, as well as the United Nations Convention against Corruption. Armenia undertook some commitments regarding this mechanism in 2015, within the framework of the Council of Europe’s Moneyval.

To be frank, I believe that this mechanism really could and should be implemented in Armenia but, as I said, ours is a democratic country and its decisions are not taken by one person. We need to have broad public consultation on this institution and that will result in any decision to be taken. It will be very useful for us to engage further in this area with the Council of Europe because we want to ensure that no one tries to interpret or present it as a tool for persecution. As I said, this chapter is irreversibly closed in our country.

Mr HUNKO (*Germany, Spokesperson for the Group of the Unified European Left*) – Last week in the German Bundestag, we had a very good debate on a new agreement between the European Union and

Armenia. Nobody spoke against it; indeed, speakers in that debate emphasised how positive it was that Armenia has positive relations with the Russian Federation, as well as the European Union. They welcomed that because it is unlike other agreements, where all too often countries have to decide between the Russian Federation and the European Union. Can you explain how it has been possible for you to maintain good relations with both sides? Perhaps Armenia could serve as a model in these times of confrontation.

Mr PASHINYAN* – As you perhaps noticed, I emphasised in my speech that no foreign power was involved in the revolution that took place in Armenia. Sometimes the public have a very strange debate on this. During my visits or press conferences, they try to allege that I – or we – have had in Armenia a colour revolution. Every time, I find it necessary to emphasise that we have had not a colour revolution but a revolution of love and solidarity. These words are not really about the colour; they are just about love or solidarity, and the political context. The point of the matter is that in our revolution, there was really and truly no engagement of any foreign power – none whatever. It is impossible for anyone to show any external involvement in our domestic processes.

I have always said that for us, this is a matter of national dignity. To me, it is a matter of personal dignity as well. It is very important to note that democracy stems from the mindset of our people. That is the exact reason why today we have the situation that you describe. I must be frank with you: what I have just said has been questioned by colleagues. To this day in the international media there are publications and allegations about this and that. There are allegations of a potential geopolitical and foreign policy context. But I believe that, with every passing day, people realise that everything happened exactly as I just described.

The revolution in Armenia has not been against any country or organisation. The people of Armenia carried out a revolution for a free and happy future. We are determined to develop our relations with all our international partners. Armenia is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union; we currently have the presidency of that organisation and will do whatever we can to make the EEU more effective. We have a strategic relationship with the Russian Federation and we will do whatever it takes to develop it. We are a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization and we will do our best to make our participation in the organisation and the organisation itself more effective. We currently have an excellent relationship with the European Union, and there is a specific reason for that. The Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement that we have signed with the European Union overlaps squarely with my government's reform agenda, which we have intended to pursue all along.

Mr ŠEŠELJ (*Serbia, Spokesperson for the Free Democrats Group*) – Thank you for addressing the Assembly today and taking the time to share your views, Prime Minister. As I recall, the main goals of the Armenian chairmanship in 2013 included promoting European values through inter-cultural dialogue; strengthening European standards on human rights and the rule of law; fostering democratic societies; and reinforcing the role of the Council of Europe in the European architecture. Do you feel that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has moved towards accomplishing those goals since then?

Mr PASHINYAN* – When I am asked this question, I always underline – I hope I will be perceived correctly here – that whenever we speak about democracy, human rights and freedom of expression, we first say that those are European values. Naturally, I agree with that. But allow me to say that in our perception they are no less and equally Armenian values. We do not see democracy as something we have imported; it is a value system that rhymes with how our people think – it is in line with the mindset, aspirations and wishes of our people. If we agree on that fact, we can conclude that today our engagement with the Council of Europe is based on a shared understanding of what democracy is and what its pursuit means.

As I said in my speech, no foreign or external power was involved in our revolution, but Armenia's 18-year-long membership of the Council of Europe and the work we have both carried out in that time has significantly contributed to the consolidation of democratic institutions in Armenia. From that point of view, the Council of Europe's engagement with Armenia has been productive. As I said, there is a personal element to this. Once I managed to stay out of prison thanks to the Council of Europe and once I was freed from prison thanks to the Council of Europe and others. So I consider our co-operation to be very productive and successful.

The PRESIDENT* – Thank you, Prime Minister. As we move on, I suggest that we take three questions and then give you the floor to reply.

Ms DALLOZ (*France*)* – Prime Minister, large sections of public opinion are convinced that the leaders and families of some former republics of the Soviet Union become very rich very quickly. Your government has started a plan to fight corruption, and it would appear that a former president has been imprisoned because

of corruption. What concrete measures have you adopted to fight corruption? Is your country already feeling the effect of the fight?

Ms AGHAYEVA (*Azerbaijan*) – On its accession as a Council of Europe member in 2001, Armenia expressed its devotion to a peaceful settlement of the conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, the ongoing occupation of which is an open violation of international law and fundamental human rights by Armenia, as well as a major threat to regional security. You are speaking today from the podium of this very Assembly. Could you please tell us how and when you intend to practically undertake this commitment and implement the obligations arising from numerous resolutions and other relevant documents of international organisations?

Ms TOMIĆ (*Slovenia*) – Prime Minister, in November last year, a conference of LGBTI Christians, which was to have been held in Yerevan, was cancelled because of death threats and incitements to hatred, including from public figures and opinion makers, who were unconcerned about the safety of the participants. That illustrates the wider problem faced by LGBTI people in Armenia in exercising even the basic rights of freedom of assembly and expression. What measures is your government taking to address that serious failure of human rights?

Mr PASHINYAN* – Thank you very much for those questions. Personally, the greatest thing I can do against corruption is for me personally to remain outside corruption. The most reliable tool for me to fight corruption is to show my commitment to that fight. It is important that people see that and believe it.

There is no Prime Minister in any government who says, “I intend to gradually become corrupt.” Everyone says that they are not going to be corrupt but fight corruption. It is important for the government and those in power to speak credibly and practise what we preach. That is why I always underline that my status as leader of the country makes sense for as long as I enjoy the trust of my people. Trust is the most important prerequisite for fighting corruption. We all understand that corruption, which prevailed for many years in Armenia, and has leverage and financial resources, can react if we tackle it in an environment where there is no trust between the government and the public. You are right.

The very first thing is that I, my family and my relatives must be scrutinised even more closely than others, and it is very important to me that transparency should be a key aim in Armenia. I will not say that it is 100% successful, but it is leaping forward with giant steps. About 10 days ago a criminal case was initiated against one of my close relatives. I do not want to jeopardise their right to the presumption of innocence, but the fact is that the case is going to be investigated entirely lawfully and impartially. This further testifies to our commitment to stay on this path.

As for the Karabakh issue and our commitment to a peaceful settlement, I just reiterated our commitment to that from this rostrum. I said more generally that I believe in the recent past the peace agenda and peace resolution proposals we have tabled in discussions with our Azeri counterparts and the public have been a key objective, and I am happy we have managed with Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev to have a direct, candid and constructive dialogue. Unfortunately, we still do not have a common understanding of the details and mechanisms for resolving the Karabakh issue, but we have been able to create a candid atmosphere for a constructive dialogue.

We believe a number of essential issues need to be addressed today to institutionalise the peace agenda, and one of them is to have the OSCE Minsk Group format work as effectively as it can, which implies the participation of the representatives of Nagorno-Karabakh in the peace process. It is hard to imagine how we can resolve the conflict without the main party to the conflict being involved in the peace talks and without talking to them.

As I said in my statement, we will continue to try to reinstate the dialogue within the OSCE Minsk Group between Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh. Many of you might not know this, but there was a direct meeting between a leader of Nagorno-Karabakh and a leader of Azerbaijan in the past, so there is precedent. Elected representatives from Nagorno-Karabakh were almost always involved in the negotiations. It is said that that was the case was up to 1998, but I can tell you that up until 2018 Karabakh’s representatives were present in the peace talks. Let us not forget that Robert Kocharyan before he became President of Armenia was elected president of the republic of Nagorno-Karabakh. Thereafter Serzh Sargsyan represented Armenia but he was also one of the leaders of Karabakh. So Nagorno-Karabakh was represented at the negotiating table throughout the negotiations, and it is our objective today to create the conditions for this dialogue between Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan not to be interrupted. This is an important undertaking.

As to the LGBT community, I mentioned that Armenia is committed to the rule of law and all citizens have the same rights and obligations in the Republic of Armenia. I heard about the case mentioned, but to be frank I cannot tell you the reasons why that event was cancelled, or why it was planned, when it was planned and what event it was. I honestly only know about the problem from a couple of posts on social media. I am afraid I do not know enough to give a more detailed answer.

The PRESIDENT* – Thank you, Prime Minister. The next three questions are from Mr Aydin, Mr Ariev and Mr Masiulis.

Mr AYDIN (*Turkey*) – Mr Prime Minister, your election raised expectations for a peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, but I am concerned that your recent statements asking for a change in the negotiating format could be perceived as a step backwards. Can we count on you to use your popularity to forge a peace front in Armenia and lead your country to peace despite the unsubstantiated arguments and pressure from the diaspora outside the country and oligarchs within the country?

Mr ARIEV (*Ukraine*) – Armenia permanently votes against United Nations resolutions condemning the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. Would you like to change Armenia's position on this issue and, to ask a very concrete question, who does Crimea belong to?

Mr MASIULIS (*Lithuania*)* – I congratulate you most warmly, Prime Minister, on the changes in your country. Will your country in future be more pro-European and less pro-Russian, and how do you assess the Russian military presence in your region?

Mr PASHINYAN* – Thank you for your questions.

The first question was about the negotiating format and it was said that I was wanting to change it, but I have already explained that we are absolutely not expecting or demanding to change the format. That is not our wish or our logic. The format within which the Nagorno-Karabakh peace talks are taking place is the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs' format. Let us look at the history and background of the creation of that format: it was meant to have Karabakh representatives present in the negotiations, and not only was that the intention, but it is what happened as I have just explained. I do not have the precise dates, but there was a meeting between Azerbaijan President Heydar Aliyev with Nagorno-Karabakh president Robert Kocharyan, I assume at some point between 1994 and 1996. It was a meeting in Moscow and we have documents at hand showing that communication, within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group trilaterally, and these documents were sent not only to the three co-chairs, but there was participation from representatives of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh. So we are absolutely not raising the issue of changing the format of the negotiations; we are suggesting we use the same format to continue the discussions.

The problem is straightforward, and to us it is not a precondition or just our wish. Some people try to present it as a non-constructive position but it is the opposite of that. Do we want to resolve the issue or not? If we want to do so, how do we see it happening? How do we see the Nagorno-Karabakh issue being resolved without the involvement of Nagorno-Karabakh?

The word "occupation" is used quite frequently, but the people who live in Nagorno-Karabakh were born there. They live there, as did their parents, grandparents, great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents – I could go on. How can someone occupy the land where they, their children and their ancestors were born, and where their ancestors are buried? That is why I said in my statement that every conflict and situation should be examined, because there are many nuances. Our proposal is to come together around the table with all the parties to the conflict and discuss all the subtleties, and to agree to talk in order to resolve the conflict. We have an agenda of settlement, not mutual destruction. That is how people in the 21st century – and member States of the Council of Europe – should do things.

I recently did something that might seem strange. In a press conference, I publicly asked a rhetorical question: do Azerbaijan's President and leadership have nothing to say to the people of Nagorno-Karabakh and the people of Armenia? I would like the opportunity to speak to the people of Azerbaijan. I can do that today, but I do not want it to be one-sided and I want to ensure that it is not perceived as an act of provocation. I want to initiate such discourse with government, people and young people. Our agenda is one of peace, and we do not propose to change the format.

Along the same lines, I would like to answer the questions about Crimea. I assumed the leadership of my country only recently, and I was a member of parliament before that. I find it strange that people use platforms that were created for peace to incite hostility, instigate wars, escalate tension and intensify conflicts. I believe that we must remain within the framework of dialogue, no matter what; I do not think that violence is

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the solution to any conflict. International platforms and forums must be used for their intended purpose, and we are doing our best. I am not certain that we always succeed, because we often find that our friends are on different sides of a conflict, and it is hard for us to choose between two friends. We are sometimes forced to make a choice, but globally our choice is pro-peace, pro-dialogue, pro-stability and pro-development.

Are we pro-Europe or pro-Russian Federation? When I was a member of the opposition, I declared that I did not accept that Armenia or any other country ought to be pro-Russian Federation, pro-Europe, pro-America or whatever. I consider myself to be a pro-Armenia politician. I think that French politicians are pro-France, Ukrainian politicians are pro-Ukraine and Russian politicians are pro-Russian Federation. What does it mean to be pro-Armenia, in the international arena? It means that we must build a constructive relationship with all our international partners and try to resolve the issues that arise.

The PRESIDENT* – We must now conclude the list of questions to Mr Pashinyan. I thank him most warmly for his answers.

3. Next public business

The PRESIDENT* – The Assembly will hold its next public sitting this afternoon at 3.30 p.m. with the agenda that was approved on Monday.

The sitting is closed.

(The sitting was closed at 1.05 p.m.)

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1. Modification of various provisions of the Assembly's rules of procedure

Presentation by Mr Vareikis of the report of the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs, Document 14849

Speakers: Mr Zavoli, Mr Pocij, Ms Ævarsdóttir, Mr Kiral, Mr van de Ven, Mr Kox, Mr Melkumyan, Mr Xuclà, Sir Edward Leigh, Mr Becht, Mr Graf, Mr Vescovi, Mr Bernhard, Mr Kleinwaechter, Mr Seyidov, Mr Cilevičs, Sir Roger Gale, Mr Varvitsiotis, Mr Grimoldi, Mr Masiulis

Draft resolution in Document 14849, as amended, adopted

2. Address by Mr Nikol Pashinyan, Prime Minister of Armenia

Questions: Mr Vareikis, Mr Schäfer, Mr Howell, Mr Van De Ven, Mr Hunko, Mr Šešelj, Ms Dalloz, Ms Aghayeva, Ms Tomić, Mr Aydın, Mr Arieu, Mr Masiulis

3. Next public business

Appendix / Annexe

Representatives or Substitutes who signed the register of attendance in accordance with Rule 12.2 of the Rules of Procedure. The names of members substituted follow (in brackets) the names of participating members.

Liste des représentants ou suppléants ayant signé le registre de présence, conformément à l'article 12.2 du Règlement. Le nom des personnes remplacées suit celui des Membres remplaçant, entre parenthèses.

ÅBERG, Boriana [Ms]
 ÆVARSDÓTTIR, Thorhildur Sunna [Ms]
 AGHAYEVA, Ulviyye [Ms]
 ALTUNYALDIZ, Ziya [Mr]
 ANDERSON, Donald [Lord] (McCARATHY, Kerry [Ms])
 ARIEV, Volodymyr [Mr]
 AYDIN, Kamil [Mr]
 BADIA, José [M.]
 BALFE, Richard [Lord] (DUNDEE, Alexander [Lord])
 BAYR, Petra [Ms] (AMON, Werner [Mr])
 BECHT, Olivier [M.]
 BEBEZA, Boryslav [Mr] (GONCHARENKO, Oleksii [Mr])
 BERGAMINI, Deborah [Ms]
 BERNACKI, Włodzimierz [Mr]
 BERNHARD, Marc [Mr]
 BILDARRATZ, Jokin [Mr]
 BOCCONE-PAGES, Brigitte [Mme] (FRESKO-ROLFO, Béatrice [Mme])
 BUCCARELLA, Maurizio [Mr]
 BÜCHEL, Roland Rino [Mr] (MAURY PASQUIER, Liliane [Mme])
 BURES, Doris [Ms]
 BUTKEVIČIUS, Algirdas [Mr]
 ČATOVIĆ, Marija Maja [Ms]
 CEPEDA, José [Mr]
 ÇEVİKÖZ, Ahmet Ünal [Mr]
 CHRISTIANSSON, Alexander [Mr] (WIECHEL, Markus [Mr])
 CHRISTODOULOPOULOU, Anastasia [Ms]
 CHRISTOFFERSEN, Lise [Ms]
 CILEVIČS, Boriss [Mr]
 CORLĂȚEAN, Titus [Mr]
 COURSON, Yolaine de [Mme] (DE TEMMERMAN, Jennifer [Mme])
 CSENGER-ZALÁN, Zsolt [Mr]
 DALLOZ, Marie-Christine [Mme]
 D'AMBROSIO, Vanessa [Ms]
 DE CARLO, Sabrina [Ms]
 DIBRANI, Adnan [Mr] (JALLOW, Momodou Malcolm [Mr])
 ECCLES, Diana [Lady]
 EMRE, Yunus [Mr]
 ESSL, Franz Leonhard [Mr]
 ESTRELA, Edite [Mme]
 FATALIYEVA, Sevinj [Ms] (HAJIYEV, Sabir [Mr])
 FILIPOVSKI, Dubravka [Ms] (OBRADOVIĆ, Marija [Ms])
 FOULKES, George [Lord] (PRESCOTT, John [Mr])
 FOURNIER, Bernard [M.]
 GAFAROVA, Sahiba [Ms]
 GALE, Roger [Sir]
 GATTI, Marco [M.]
 GAVAN, Paul [Mr]
 GERMANN, Hannes [Mr] (FRIDEZ, Pierre-Alain [M.])
 GHILETCHI, Valeriu [Mr]
 GOGUADZE, Nino [Ms] (KATSARAVA, Sofio [Ms])
 GONÇALVES, Carlos Alberto [M.]
 GRAAS, Gusty [M.]
 GRAF, Martin [Mr]
 GRIMOLDI, Paolo [Mr]
 HADRI, Shpresa [Ms]
 HAIDER, Roman [Mr]
 HAJDUKOVIĆ, Domagoj [Mr]
 HEINRICH, Frank [Mr] (MOTSCHMANN, Elisabeth [Ms])
 HEINRICH, Gabriela [Ms]
 HERKEL, Andres [Mr] (TERIK, Tiit [Mr])
 HOLEČEK, Petr [Mr] (HAMOUSOVÁ, Zdeňka [Ms])
 HOWELL, John [Mr]
 HUNKO, Andrej [Mr]
 HUSEYNOV, Rafael [Mr]
 IGITYAN, Hovhannes [Mr]
 IONOVA, Mariia [Ms] (GERASHCHENKO, Iryna [Mme])
 KANDELAKI, Giorgi [Mr] (BAKRADZE, David [Mr])
 KAVVADIA, Ioanneta [Ms]
 KERN, Claude [M.]
 KILIÇ, Akif Çağatay [Mr]
 KIRAL, Serhii [Mr] (LABAZIUK, Serhiy [Mr])
 KLEINWAECHTER, Norbert [Mr]
 KOBZA, Jiří [Mr] (BENEŠIK, Ondřej [Mr])
 KOÇ, Haluk [M.]
 KOPŘIVA, František [Mr]
 KOVÁCS, Elvira [Ms]
 KOX, Tiny [Mr]
 KYRIAKIDES, Stella [Ms]
 KYRITSIS, Georgios [Mr]
 LACROIX, Christophe [M.]
 LEGUILLE BALLOY, Martine [Mme] (BOUYX, Bertrand [M.])
 LEIGH, Edward [Sir]
 LEITE RAMOS, Luís [M.]
 LORSCHÉ, Josée [Mme] (MUTSCH, Lydia [Mme])
 LOUCAIDES, George [Mr]
 LOUHELAINEN, Anne [Ms] (PACKALÉN, Tom [Mr])
 LOUIS, Alexandra [Mme]
 MAELEN, Dirk Van der [Mr] (DESTREBECQ, Olivier [M.])
 MANIERO, Alvise [Mr]
 MARSCHALL, Matern von [Mr]
 MARUKYAN, Edmon [Mr]
 MASIULIS, Kęstutis [Mr] (TAMAŠUNIENĖ, Rita [Ms])
 MASŁOWSKI, Maciej [Mr]
 MELKUMYAN, Mikayel [M.] (ZOHRABYAN, Naira [Mme])
 MOLLAZADE, Asim [Mr] (PASHAYEVA, Ganira [Ms])
 MONTILLA, José [Mr] (GUTIÉRREZ, Antonio [Mr])
 MÜLLER, Thomas [Mr]
 MUNYAMA, Killion [Mr] (MIESZKOWSKI, Krzysztof [Mr])
 NĚMCOVÁ, Miroslava [Ms]
 NENUTIL, Miroslav [Mr]
 NICK, Andreas [Mr]
 OBRADOVIĆ, Žarko [Mr]
 OHLSSON, Carina [Ms]
 OOMEN-RUIJTEN, Ria [Ms]
 O'REILLY, Joseph [Mr]
 PERILLI, Gianluca [Mr]
 PIROVANO, Daisy [Mme]
 PISCO, Paulo [M.]

POCIEJ, Aleksander [M.] (*HALICKI, Andrzej [Mr]*)
 POLIAČIK, Martin [Mr] (*KAŠČÁKOVÁ, Renáta [Ms]*)
 PREDA, Cezar Florin [M.]
 PRINGLE, Thomas [Mr] (*HOPKINS, Maura [Ms]*)
 PSYCHOGIOS, Georgios [Mr] (*KASIMATI, Nina [Ms]*)
 RAMPI, Roberto [Mr]
 RIZZOTTI, Maria [Ms] (*FLORIS, Emilio [Mr]*)
 SANDBÆK, Ulla [Ms]
 SAYEK BÖKE, Selin [Ms]
 SCHÄFER, Axel [Mr]
 SCHNEIDER-SCHNEITER, Elisabeth [Mme] (*LOMBARDI, Filippo [M.]*)
 SCHOU, Ingjerd [Ms]
 SCHWABE, Frank [Mr]
 SEGER, Daniel [Mr] (*EBERLE-STRUB, Susanne [Ms]*)
 SEKULIĆ, Predrag [Mr]
 ŠEŠELJ, Aleksandar [Mr]
 SEYIDOV, Samad [Mr]
 ŠIRCELJ, Andrej [Mr]
 SKOUFA, Elissavet [Ms] (*MEIMARAKIS, Evangelos [Mr]*)
 SOCOTAR, Gheorghe-Dinu [M.] (*PLEȘOIANU, Liviu Ioan Adrian [Mr]*)
 SOTNYK, Olena [Ms]
 STANĚK, Pavel [Mr]
 SUTTER, Petra De [Ms] (*DUMERY, Daphné [Ms]*)
 TOMIĆ, Aleksandra [Ms]
 TOMIĆ, Violeta [Ms]
 TRISSE, Nicole [Mme]
 VAREIKIS, Egidijus [Mr]
 VARVITSIOTIS, Miltiadis [Mr] (*BAKOYANNIS, Theodora [Ms]*)
 VEN, Mart van de [Mr]
 VERDIER-JOUCLAS, Marie-Christine [Mme] (*MAIRE, Jacques [M.]*)
 VESCOVI, Manuel [Mr]
 VOGEL, Volkmar [Mr]
 VOGT, Ute [Ms] (*BARNETT, Doris [Ms]*)
 WARBORN, Jürgen [Mr]

WENAWESER, Christoph [Mr]
 XUCLÀ, Jordi [Mr] (*BARREIRO, José Manuel [Mr]*)
 YEMETS, Leonid [Mr]
 YENEROĞLU, Mustafa [Mr]
 ZINGERIS, Emanuelis [Mr]

Also signed the register / Ont également signé le registre

**Representatives or Substitutes not authorised to vote /
Représentants ou suppléants non autorisés à voter**

ÅSEBOL, Ann-Britt [Ms]
 AVETISYAN, Sos [Mr]
 BURIAN, Jiří [Mr]
 VARDANYAN, Vladimir [Mr]
 ZAVOLI, Roger [Mr]
 ZOHRABYAN, Naira [Mme]

Observers / Observateurs

Partners for democracy / Partenaires pour la démocratie

AMRAOUI, Allal [M.]
 SABELLA, Bernard [Mr]

**Representatives of the Turkish Cypriot Community (In
accordance to Resolution 1376 (2004) of
the Parliamentary Assembly)/ Représentants de la
communauté chypriote turque
(Conformément à la Résolution 1376 (2004) de l'Assemblée
parlementaire)**

CANDAN Armağan
 SANER Hamza Ersan