



Provisional edition

Monday 24 January 2022, morning

Official report of debates

Opening of the sitting No. 1

Mr Tiny KOX (Netherlands, UEL, President of the Assembly): Dear colleagues, changing the presidency does not mean changing the course that this Assembly has chosen in the recent past, not at all.

By adopting last year's resolution on the Assembly's vision on the strategic priorities for the Council of Europe we have already set our clear agenda for the next years. And I promise that I will do my utmost to realise that agenda. As the statute of the Council of Europe states in its Article 1 it is our common obligation to help and "to achieve a greater unity between its members for the purpose of safeguarding and realising the ideals and principles which are their common heritage and facilitating their economic and social progress".

Last year, dear colleagues, we at this Assembly stipulated that the Council of Europe's overall priority is to remain the pillar of democratic security, the guarantor of human rights and the rule of law, as well as a platform for effective multilateralism in Europe, and to preserve and reaffirm our own identity as an independent forum for a comprehensive and inclusive political dialogue and cooperation.

To realise our agenda we need synergy between our activities and those of the Committee of Ministers, the Secretary General and the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights.

Alone, colleagues, we tend to be rather weak. Together we could show the strength one might expect from Europe's oldest and broadest treaty-based organisation which involves citizens from Reykjavik to Vladivostok and from the North Pole to the Mediterranean Sea. I am eagerly looking forward to representing our Assembly in meetings with the representatives of all parts of the organisation. I will sincerely invest in a fruitful dialogue with our Secretary General and the Chair of the Committee of Ministers.

I also reach out to our Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities which is now presided by my countryman and good friend Leendert Verbeek.

Human rights must remain, as we decided last year, at the very core of the Council of Europe's strategic framework, with the implementation of the Convention in all member states as our top priority. To achieve this, dear colleagues, ongoing and in-depth dialogue in and with all member states and member parliaments is absolutely needed, because only then we can uphold the authority of the European Court of Human Rights by all member states and by the Council of Europe as a whole.

Accession of the European Union to the Convention has also been declared by our Assembly as a strategic priority, as well as putting a stronger emphasis on the protection of social and economic rights and promoting signing and ratification of the European Social Charter by all member states and by the European Union.

In this report:

1. Speeches in English, French, German and Italian are reported in full in English.
2. Speeches in other languages are summarised from the interpretation and indicated by an asterisk (*).
3. Speeches in German and Italian are available in full on the Assembly's website.
4. The text of the amendments is available at the document centre and on the Assembly's website. Only oral amendments or oral sub-amendments are reproduced in the report of debates.
5. Corrections should be handed in at Room 1081 not later than 24 hours after the report has been published.

I'm looking forward to working together with a newly elected president of the European Parliament Ms Roberta Metsola, who I congratulated on her election last week also here in Strasbourg. I hope to meet her soon.

And, dear colleagues, may I use this opportunity to pay my sincere condolences to the family and friends of former president David Sassoli, who passed away recently.

To champion equality and the elimination of discrimination on any grounds is one of the priorities of our Assembly, as we decided. This includes promoting the ratification and the effective implementation of the groundbreaking standards and tools of our Convention and on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Our support for including the right to a safe, healthy and sustainable environment in the legal framework of its fundamental rights guaranteed by our Convention is also at the top of our agenda.

Here we could and should be leading in setting clear standards for Europe if we join forces with the Committee of Ministers and with our national parliaments, especially young citizens of Europe are demanding that we take decisive action. Everyone's right to life can only be protected by our Convention if and as long as such a life is liveable.

The need for democratic governance of artificial intelligence will also stay one of our priorities. We all make ever more use of these often magnificent technologies, but let us ensure, dear colleagues, that in the end we, citizens, will not be used by known and unknown powers behind these technologies.

As we emphasised last year, support to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations needs priority of our Assembly on our Assembly agenda. Therefore, our Assembly needs concrete cooperation in member states and international organisations. I will reach out to them as our Mr Rik DAEMS did.

Fighting corruption, money laundering, terrorism and violent extremism, which all destabilise our societies, have also been put on our priorities, as well as fighting social inequality. Our convention-based system of the Council of Europe offers us plenty of mechanisms and tools to put these priorities into practice.

Dear colleagues, this Assembly is unique in Europe and unique in the world. Our governments have granted us parliamentarians of 47 member states real powers. The right to elect the judges to the Court of Human Rights, the right to elect the Secretary General of the Council of Europe and our Commissioner for Human Rights, the right to adopt resolutions and to give clear recommendations to the Committee of Ministers. And most recently, the right to act together with the Committee of Ministers to effectively address a blatant violation by any member state of its obligations under the statute.

Dear colleagues, besides these real powers, we are, when we act at our best, the political engine of the Council of Europe, like it was in 1949 when our first president Paul-Henri Spaak called the start of our Assembly's activities "d'une importance capitale pour l'histoire de l'Europe. Une étape décisive en direction de l'unité européenne".

Since then, dear colleagues, it was here where the main conventions are born, from the Convention on Human Rights to the Istanbul Convention to protect women from violence. It is here where inspiration starts on the essence of human rights, the need to protect and develop the rule of law, and the indispensability of democratic standards and practices in all our member states.

It is here where elected politicians from everywhere in Europe have the possibility to participate in a unique pan-european Agora, which is the ancient Greek word for assembly. Am I right, Ms Despina CHATZIVASSILIOU-TSOVILIS? Yes. In ancient times, the Agora was the meeting point where the members of democracy congregated to discuss the affairs of the state.

I am convinced, dear colleagues, that our Parliamentary Assembly should and could be today's Agora of Europe to discuss the fundamental affairs of Europe and its 47 member states aimed at the benefit of our 830 million citizens.

Dear colleagues, in the very first session of this Assembly here in Strasbourg in 1949, Winston Churchill concluded his intervention with his hope that the Parliamentary Assembly of that new Council of Europe could take "a leading and active part in the revival of the greatest of continents, which had fallen into the worst of misery". Since then, dear colleagues, Europe and the world have profoundly changed. We did overcome much of the misery, we were able to achieve many changes for the better, yet many old and new challenges are still there to be met.

Again, dear colleagues, we live in dangerous times. Tensions are on the rise and respect for the rule of law, human rights and democratic values are going down. Instead of achieving greater unity, there is a real and present danger of new dividing lines in Europe at the cost of the security of our citizens.

Especially now in dangerous times, Europe is in dire need of a meeting point, an Agora for Europe for an effective governmental and inter-parliamentary diplomacy. The Council of Europe and its Assembly offer this unique form of diplomacy, if and when we adapt ourselves to the new circumstances.

Now, dear colleagues, I invite you all to take active part in the modernisation of activities and working methods. We do not have to start from scratch, we already agreed on our main challenges for the future formulated in the resolution on the role and mission of our Assembly. I call in particular to our vice presidents, as well as the new chairpersons and vice chairs of our committees who we will elect in a moment, to take the lead in this process of adaptation and modernisation together with the Secretary General of our Assembly and her staff. There is a lot of work to be done in this respect.

Dear colleagues, I hope that there will never be a dull moment for us all in the coming period. I promise you that I will do my utmost to give you, colleagues, ample opportunity to act to the best of your abilities. My door will always be open for you and for every one of you to find solutions to whatever problem you think should be solved.