



Monday 29<sup>th</sup> January 2024

## Focus points of the PACE Winter Session 2024

*Photos: Parlamentsdienste / Sophie Golay*

The first part of the 2024 session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) took place in Strasbourg from 22 to 26 January 2024. It was the first session of the new legislature and with a new composition of the delegation.

The Assembly elected a new President, a new Commissioner for Human Rights and judges from Bulgaria, Lithuania and Luxembourg to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). It also held an urgent debate on the situation of children in Ukraine.

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Preparatory meeting 9-10 January 2024 in Neuchâtel

## 1. Focus points of the session

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At the opening of the session, the Assembly elected a new President, **Theodoros Rousopoulos** (Greece, EPP). He is the 35th PACE President and the first Greek national to hold this office. The term of office of the President is one year with the possibility of re-election for a further year.

### Non-ratification of Azerbaijan's credentials

At the beginning of a part session, the credentials of the national delegations must be submitted to the Assembly for approval. The ratification of credentials determines whether a delegation can participate fully in the work of the Assembly. These credentials may be contested by other members of the Assembly on procedural or substantive grounds. Following intensive discussions in the preliminary deliberations of the Monitoring Committee, the Assembly decided not to ratify the credentials of the Azerbaijani delegation. The Assembly expressed serious concerns about the country's ability to hold free and fair elections, the separation of powers, the weakness of the legislative branch compared to the executive branch, the independence of the judiciary and respect for human rights. Following this decision, Azerbaijan remains a member of the Council of Europe, but the rights of the delegation in the parliamentary assembly are suspended for the time being. The Azerbaijani delegation may resume its activities in the Assembly once the conditions laid down in the Rules of Procedure are met.

### Latest developments in the Middle East

In an emotional debate, PACE 'unequivocally and in the strongest terms' condemned the barbaric attack by Hamas and other militias against Israel on 7 October 2023, which could not be justified on any grounds whatsoever. Israel has the right to defend itself in this situation. At the same time, however, the assembly also expressed its dismay at the rising number of civilian casualties in the Gaza Strip. In a resolution based on a report by **Piero Fassino** (Italy, SOC), it called for a permanent ceasefire and the resumption of efforts to find a political solution, provided, however, that the remaining Israeli hostages are immediately and unconditionally released.

Statements by **Pierre-Alain Fridez** (SP, JU)  
and **Damien Cottier** (FPD, NE)



Alfred Heer during the debate on the latest developments in the Middle East / © Council of Europe



## Urgent debate on the situation of children in Ukraine

The Assembly held an urgent debate on the situation of Ukrainian children forcibly transferred or abducted to the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, the Russian Federation and Belarus. The First Lady of Ukraine, **Olena Zelenska**, addressed the Assembly via video link and called for the support of the member states of the Council of Europe to help find and return the abducted children. The Ukrainian government estimates that over 19,500 children have been deported or abducted.

## Election of new Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

The Assembly elected **Michael O’Flaherty** (Ireland) as the Council of Europe’s new Commissioner for Human Rights on 24 January. He will take up office on 1 April.

The Commissioner for Human Rights is an independent and impartial non-judicial institution. It was established by the Council of Europe in 1999 to promote awareness and respect for human rights in the member states of the Council of Europe. The Commissioner is elected by PACE from a list of three candidates drawn up by the Committee of Ministers and has a non-renewable term of office of six years.

## Election of judges to the ECtHR

The Assembly elected **Stéphane Pisani** (Luxembourg), **Gediminas Sagatys** (Lithuania) and **Diana Petrova Kovacheva** (Bulgaria) as judges at the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). Each member state has one judge at the ECtHR, but they are not representatives of the states. The judges are elected by PACE for a term of office of nine years (non-renewable). The current Swiss judge at the Court is **Andreas Zünd**.



Statement by **Nik Gugger** (M-E, ZH)



Hannes Germann



Valérie Piller Carrard

## 2. DCE points of note

### Candidature of former Federal Councillor Alain Berset for the office of Secretary General of the Council of the Europe

The DCE held a discussion with Switzerland's permanent representative to the Council of Europe, Ambassador **Claude Wild**, on the candidature of former Federal Councillor **Alain Berset** for the post of Secretary General of the Council of Europe. The delegation was delighted with **Alain Berset**'s nomination and unanimously supported his candidature. The members are confident that Switzerland has put forward an excellent candidate, so emphasising the importance of the Council of Europe. **Alain Berset** was in Strasbourg for the first informal meetings and also exchanged views with the delegation.

### Vice presidents of PACE

At the opening of the January session, the Assembly elected its 19 vice presidents. As a rule, Switzerland is entitled to one vice president every five years for two years. Last year, this office was held by **Sibel Arslan** (Greens, BS). **Pierre-Alain Fridez** (SP, JU) was elected vice president for 2024.

### Preventing child abuse in public institutions

Based on a report by **Pierre-Alain Fridez** (SP, JU), the Assembly adopted a resolution without dissenting votes calling on the member states of the Council of Europe to officially and formally apologise to past and present victims of child abuse in state, church and private institutions, to prosecute and punish the perpetrators, to compensate the victims and to create places of remembrance for institutional abuse. The report refers to the example of Switzerland, where the Federal Council apologised to the victims of compulsory social measures and paid a solidarity contribution. Following the debate in plenary, a press conference was held together with Guido Fluri, the initiator of the Justice Initiative foundation, and victims from Romania, Germany, Spain and Portugal. The victims testified to the abuse to which they were subjected as children in a wide variety of institutions. The press conference was also attended by Switzerland's Permanent Representative to the Council of Europe, Ambassador **Claude Wild**, and the chairperson of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development, **Simon Moutquin** (Belgium, SOC).



Pierre-Alain Fridez



## Migration and asylum in election campaigns

Based on a report by **Pierre-Alain Fridez** (SP, JU), the Assembly adopted a resolution on the issue of migration and asylum in election campaigns and the consequences for the reception of migrants and their rights. The report expressed concern about the increasing and one-sided treatment of the issue of migration and asylum in election campaigns, which legitimises political programmes aimed at hindering migrants' access to their rights. The resolution puts forward proposals to promote a debate on migration and asylum that is in line with the principles of the Council of Europe.



Sibel Arslan

Presentation of the report by  
**Pierre-Alain Fridez**



**Pierre-Alain Fridez** of PACE on his  
report on migration and asylum  
(in FR) ([youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com))



### 3. Further statements by DCE members

#### The role of the OECD since the start of the Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine

A meeting of the enlarged assembly takes place every two years. The enlarged Assembly consists of PACE, enlarged to include the delegations of the national parliaments of the OECD member States that are not members of the Council of Europe and a delegation from the European Parliament. The enlarged assembly debated the role of the OECD in mitigating negative globalisation trends in the context of current crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. In a [resolution](#), the enlarged assembly called on the OECD to step up its work in the areas of youth unemployment, education, public health, training and adequate pensions.



Statement by **Roland Büchel**  
(SVP, SG)

#### Allegations of systemic torture and inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment in places of detention in Europe

Based on a report by **Constantinos Efstathiou** (Cyprus, SOC), the PACE adopted a resolution calling for stronger measures to combat illtreatment, degrading treatment and excessive punishment in European detention centres.



Statement by **Damien Cottier**  
(FDP, NE) for the ALDE-Groupe

Statment by **Pierre-Alain Fridez** (SP, JU)



Niklaus-Samuel Gugger, Marianne Binder-Keller



## Reporting on the monitoring of parliamentary elections in Serbia on 17 December 2023

Statement by **Pierre-Alain Fridez** (SP, JU)

### Speeches before the Assembly:

Daniel Risch (Prime Minister) and Dominique Hasler (Foreign Minister, President of the Committee of Ministers), Liechtenstein

Question from **Roland Büchel** (SVP, SG) to **Daniel Risch**

Question from **Roland Büchel** (SVP, SG) to **Dominique Hasler**

**Nikos Christodoulides**, President of Cyprus

Question from **Damien Cottier** (FDP, NE)

**Jakov Milatović**, President of Montenegro

Question from **Damien Cottier** (FDP, NE)

## 4. New mandates for DCE members

**Damien Cottier** was elected chairperson of the Sub-Committee on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights.



Damien Cottier

**Pierre-Alain Fridez** was elected vice-chairperson of the Sub-Committee on the European Prize.



Pierre-Alain Fridez