Monday, April 22nd 2024

Focal points of the PACE Spring Session 2024

Photo: Parliamentary Services / Sophie Golay

The second part-session 2024 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) was held in Strasbourg from 15-19 April 2024.

Discussions at the session focused on the admission of the Republic of Kosovo as a full member of the Council of Europe as well as on a resolution on the reconstruction of Ukraine and the issue of using frozen Russian state funds for this purpose. The Assembly also addressed the situation of opposition forces and anti-war protesters in Russia and Belarus and adopted a position on the Council of Europe's draft Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence, Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law.

In preparation for the session, the Parliamentary Delegation to the Council of Europe (DCE) met with the head of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis, on 9 April to discuss the latest news from the Council of Europe.

Table of contents:

Preparatory meeting of the DCE on 9 April 2024 in Bern with Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis ©FDFA

1. Focal points of the session

Application by the Republic of Kosovo for membership to the Council of Europe

It is not every day that PACE deals with the admission of a new member state. The last time this happened was in 2007, when Montenegro became independent and applied for membership after seceding from its union with Serbia. In accordance with the Rules of Procedure, the Assembly was invited to submit an opinion on the application for membership before the Committee of Ministers makes a final decision on admission. Following a lively debate, the Assembly recommended the admission of Kosovo to the organisation by 131 votes to 29, with 11 abstentions. At the same time, it recommended close monitoring of the implementation of a series of conditions and requirements.

Rapporteur Dora Bakoyannis (Greece, EPP) stressed that the inclusion of Kosovo, which has so far participated in the Assembly meetings with a delegation but had no voting rights, 'would be the culmination of a dialogue which has developed over a span of two decades but should in no way be seen as the end of a process'. Among the speakers was National Councillor Pierre-Alain Fridez, who argued that Kosovo should no longer be 'a little white speck' on the map of Council of Europe member states.

Support for the reconstruction of Ukraine

National Councillor Pierre-Alain Fridez speaks on Kosovo's application for membership of the Council of Europe ©Parliamentary Services

Before PACE dealt with funding the reconstruction of Ukraine, Ruslan Stefanchuk, President of the Ukrainian Parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, addressed the Assembly.

Speech by Ruslan Stefanchuk, President of the Ukrainian Parliament, to PACE ©CoE

In a resolution adopted unanimously based on the report by Lulzim Basha (Albania, EPP), the Assembly spoke out in favour of using frozen Russian state assets to support the reconstruction of war-torn Ukraine. The resolution and the accompanying recommendation to the Committee of Ministers call for a wide range of measures, such as the creation of an international compensation mechanism under the auspices of the Council of Europe in order to comprehensively address the damage caused, and the creation of an international trust fund in which assets seized from the Russian state are deposited for later use. These instruments would exist in parallel to the register of damage created for Ukraine last year.

National Councillor Pierre-Alain Fridez took the floor to underline Switzerland's commitment to humanitarian demining.

Emergency debate: Alexej Navalny's death and the persecution of the democratic opposition and anti-war protesters in Russia and Belarus

In an urgent debate, the Assembly paid tribute to Alexei Navalny, the prominent member of the Russian democratic opposition and anti-corruption activist. Navalny died on 16 February 2024 in a remote prison camp in Siberia, where he had been subjected to inhumane conditions. The Assembly adopted a [resolution](#) based on a report by Emanuelis Zingeris (Lithuania, EPP). Among other things, it calls on the EU and other states to prosecute those responsible for the arrest, mistreatment and death of Alexei Navalny.

In a report by Thórhildur Sunna Ævarsdóttir (Iceland, SOC), the Assembly condemned the systematic persecution and repression in Russia and Belarus of opposition members and anti-war protesters. The Assembly calls on the Russian Federation and Belarus to 'cease the threats, intimidation and prosecution of individuals who have been targeted due to their anti-war stance, and ensure the immediate release of those who are in detention'. The Assembly also called on its member States to give greater support to the ongoing activity of anti-war movements in Russia and Belarus.

Among those affected is the historian and politician Vladimir Kara-Murza, who was sentenced to 25 years in prison by the Russian authorities for "spreading false information about the Russian military". Yevgenia Kara-Murza, the wife of the imprisoned Kremlin critic, addressed the Assembly at the opening of the debate. In a report by Eerik-Niils Kross (Estonia, ALDE), the Assembly calls, among other things, for those responsible for and involved in the persecution and mistreatment of Mr Kara-Murza to be placed on the sanctions list in connection with the 'Magnitsky Act'.

Current affairs debate: The role of the Council of Europe in preventing a humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza

National Councillors [Nik Gugger](#) (M-E, ZH), [Damien Cottier](#) (FDP, NE) and [Alfred Heer](#) (SVP, ZH) spoke in the current affairs debate on the humanitarian situation in Gaza.

National Councillor Nik Gugger speaks in the current affairs ©Parliamentary Services

National Councillor Alfred Heer speaks in the current affairs ©Parliamentary Services

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

On 25 March 2024, the Committee of Ministers adopted the 'ticket', the list of candidates for election as the new Secretary General of the Council of Europe, and referred three candidates to PACE in the order of the votes they obtained: former Federal Councillor Alain Berset, followed by Indrek Saar, former Estonian Minister of Culture, and Didier Reynders, up to now EU Commissioner for Justice from Belgium.

The election of the new Secretary General will take place in the third part-session of PACE on 25 June. During the April session, four of the five parliamentary groups held initial hearings with the three candidates. The Swiss candidate made a very good impression throughout. Former Federal Councillor Berset used the session to hold bilateral meetings with members of the Assembly and set out his priorities for office.

Former Federal Councillor Alain Berset at the hearing in the ALDE Group ©R. Büchel

Councillor of States Franziska Roth at the PACE plenary meeting ©Parliamentary Services

Councillor of States Hannes Germann at the PACE plenary meeting ©Parliamentary Services

Elections of judges to the ECtHR

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has appointed the Swiss lawyer Alain Chablais as Liechtenstein's judge at the European Court of Human Rights. His nine-year term of office begins on 1 September 2024. The Assembly also elected the judge for Ireland (Úna Ní Raifeartaigh) and the judge for Latvia (Artūrs Kučs). The judges are elected by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe from a list of three candidates nominated by each State that has ratified the European Convention on Human Rights.

Councillor of States Marianne Binder-Keller at the PACE plenary meeting ©Parliamentary Services

National Councillor Roland Büchel at the PACE plenary meeting ©Parliamentary Services

3. Further statements from members of the DCE

Urgent debate on the Council of Europe's AI Convention

On 14 March 2024, after almost two years of negotiations, the Council of Europe's Commission on Artificial Intelligence (CAI) finalised the first global, legally binding convention on artificial intelligence, human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The Assembly was invited to provide an opinion on the draft convention. National Councillor Nick Gugger (M-E, ZH) made a contribution, as did National Councillor Damien Cottier (FDP, NE), who spoke on behalf of the ALDE Group.

National Councillor Sibel Arslan in the climate debate ©Parliamentary Services

Protecting children from violence on the internet

Based on the report by Joseph O'Reilly (Ireland, EPP), the Assembly adopted a resolution calling for the creation of a legal framework to protect children online, including age verification and educational programmes. Cooperation with the players in the digital industry and taking children's interests into account when developing measures are essential steps for effective protection. National Councillor Valérie Piller Carrard (SP, FR) spoke on this topic. National Councillor Pierre-Alain Fridez (SP, JU) spoke on behalf of the Committee on Social Affairs.

National Councillor Damien Cottier speaks in the current affairs and emergency debate on the Council of Europe's AI Convention ©Parliamentary Services

Climate debate

The meeting adopted a resolution based on the report by Simon Moutquin (Belgium, SOC) on 'Mainstreaming the human right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment with the Reykjavik Process' and a resolution based on the report by Yuliia Ovchynnykova (Ukraine, ALDE), 'Towards Council of Europe strategies for healthy seas and oceans to counter the climate crisis'. National Councillor Pierre-Alain Fridez chaired the debate in his capacity as Vice President of PACE. National Councillor Sibel Arslan (Greens, BS) also spoke on the topic.

National Councillor Valérie Piller Carrard speaks on the topic of protecting children from violence on the internet ©Parliamentary Services

4. Speeches to the Parliamentary Assembly

Mihai Popşoi, Deputy Prime Minister of Moldova and member of PACE from 2019-2023, addressed the Assembly on the first day of the session. He spoke of the numerous reforms that his country has undertaken in recent years, in particular to tackle corruption in the judicial system and counter the influence of oligarchs in politics, business and the media. He also addressed the major challenges facing Moldova since Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Mihail Popşoi answered questions from PACE members, including those from National Councillor Pierre-Alain Fridez (SP, JU).

Hereditary Prince Alois von und zu Liechtenstein ©CoE

His Serene Highness, Hereditary Prince Alois von und zu Liechtenstein made a speech to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. He emphasised that Liechtenstein, as a geographically small state, relies on the effective functioning of the international rules-based order. However, Prince Alois also emphasised that small states make up the majority of the international community and contribute important perspectives, particularly in multilateral forums. These states can have an influence there that is disproportionate to their geographical size. Liechtenstein holds the chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe until May 2024.