January 2020 part-session highlights:

- ALDE group’s Rik Daems was elected President of PACE for the next two years. The group will work hand in hand with the new President to reinforce the role of the Assembly, to protect human rights and defend democracy in all member states.

- ALDE-PACE supported Jacques Maire (France) to lead the group and renewed the composition of its bureau for a two-year mandate.

- ALDE reinforced its positions in committees and sub-committees of the Assembly. For the first time since 2011 liberals will chair two PACE committees.

- Olivier Becht (France) and Michael Aastrup Jensen (Denmark) will chair the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media, and the Monitoring Committee respectively.

- By the end of the January session ALDE confirmed its position as the third largest group of the Parliamentary Assembly with 92 members from 28 member states.

- During the January session ALDE members successfully presented two reports at the plenary. Since the October part-session, group members tabled seven motions for a resolution to serve as a basis for PACE future work.

We wish to thank all members who took part in the group’s work in Strasbourg, defending the liberal position in the plenary debates and committees, presenting reports and participating in group meetings. We welcome new members who joined ALDE-PACE since the last part-session and wish them good work. We thank IFLRY for excellent cooperation. Finally, a very warm and special thanks goes to Peter Kallenberger for his unfailing support and commitment.

ALDE endeavours to be the engine of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe defending the core European values
Visit our website: www.alde-pace.org
On 27 January 2020, Rik Daems, outgoing ALDE-PACE leader, was elected the 33rd President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. He becomes the 6th liberal to chair the organisation.

In his opening address, Rik Daems underlined the importance of cooperation between the Parliamentary Assembly, the Committee of Ministers and the Secretary General of the Council of Europe to uphold European values – “interests divide, but values unite!” While the Organisation has a large acquis that must be defended, there is also a need to move forward and create new rights. Preparing an additional protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights related to environment will be one of the objectives of the coming presidency. The fight for gender equality will also remain high on the new president’s agenda.

Rik Daems concluded his opening remarks to the Assembly by saying:

“I do not feel that the Council of Europe is the council of European countries. My feeling is that we are a council of Europeans defending the same values. And maybe something which may sound strange, but when we are all equal to these values, it doesn’t mean that we are the same. Being equal does not mean being the same, but it does mean cherishing, defending, upholding the same values. That is what is called unity in diversity. This is what the Council of Europe is all about. This is what I would like to uphold, this is what I would like to defend. This is, dear colleagues, what I would like, in the coming two years, to work on together with you in order to uphold our values, and to have, as I said before, results”.

Read more
ALDE-PACE elects new Bureau

On 27 January 2020, ALDE-PACE elected Jacques Maire (France, En Marche) for a two-year term as President of the Group and renewed the composition of its Bureau.

Meet the new President

“We want to be proactive. We do not only want to protect PACE and the European Convention on Human Rights. We want to monitor the situation in the different countries, including those who become more and more authoritarian. But we also want to create new rights. We would like that the two years to come be identified as a milestone for the link between human rights and climate change. This is only one of the topics I would like to address in the coming months together with President of PACE Rik Daems.”

- Jacques Maire, 31 January 2020

See video address by Jacques Maire (English) (French)

Vice-Presidents:

Goran BEUS RICHEMBERGH (Croatia)
Marija GOLUBEVA (Latvia)
Alfred HEER (Switzerland)
Hovhannes IGITYAN (Armenia)
Michael Aastrup JENSEN (Denmark)
Frantisek KOPRIVA (Czech Republic)
ALDE reinforces positions in committees

As the third largest group of the Parliamentary Assembly, ALDE reinforced its positions in committees with two committee chairpersons and five vice-chairpersons. ALDE members are also leading several sub-committees.

Committee Chairpersons:
- Olivier BECHT (France): Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media
- Michael Aastrup JENSEN (Denmark): Monitoring Committee

Committee Vice-Chairpersons:
- Jokin BILDARRATZ (Spain): 2nd Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons
- Claude KERN (France): 3rd Vice-Chairperson, Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy
- Edmon MARUKYAN (Armenia): 1st Vice-Chairperson, Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights
- Petra STIENEN (Netherlands): 1st Vice-Chairperson, Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination

Bureaus of Sub-Committees:
- Goran BEUS RICHEMBERGH (Croatia): Chairperson, Sub-Committee on the Rights of Minorities (AS/Ega)
- Jennifer DE TEMMERMAN (France): Chairperson, Sub-Committee on Public Health and Sustainable Development (AS/Soc)
- Béatrice FRESKO-ROLFO (Monaco): Vice-Chairperson, Sub-Committee on Gender Equality (AS/Ega)
- Jean-Pierre GRIN (Switzerland): Vice-Chairperson, Sub-Committee on Children (AS/Soc),
- Cristina-Madalina PRUNA (Romania): Vice-Chairperson, Sub-Committee on Refugee and Migrant Children and Young People (AS/Mig)
ALDE REPORTS

Isabelle RAUCH (France)
➢ Concerted action against human trafficking and the smuggling of migrants (Doc. 15051)
Rapporteur for opinion AS/Ega, 30 January 2020

Reina de BRUIJN-WEZEMAN (Netherlands)
➢ Combating trafficking in human tissues and cells (Doc. 15022)
Rapporteur AS/Soc, 31 January 2020

ALDE QUESTIONS

Question to Mr David ZALKALIANI, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Georgia, President of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe

Mr Martin POLIAČIK (Slovak Republic) I have two very simple questions. The first one is concerning many attacks from either foreign or interior bodies concerning either elections or opposition or civic workers on Facebook and whether the Committee of Ministers is taking this into account. The second one is about the joint procedure that wants to be proposed, whether the voting of the Committee of Ministers is going to have a fixed time frame?

Mr David ZALKALIANI - The question regarding the attack on Facebook is a very important issue. Unfortunately, for the time being, it’s not a subject of consideration of the Committee of Ministers. But if there is a proposal coming from the respective Member States, one cannot exclude that this can be considered in the framework of the Deputy of Committee of Ministers meeting. Regarding the complementary procedure between the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly, I have already addressed this issue in my intervention. But, once again, to reiterate that, following the decisions taken at the Helsinki ministerial session in 2019 on May 17 this year, the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly have been working on a complimentary procedure for the application of Article 8 of the Statute of the Council of Europe in serious cases of violation by Member States of fundamental principles and values of this organisation, like Article 3. The French Secretary of State, Madame Amélie de Montchalin, transmitted the results of the deputy's discussions to your President by letter, dated November 21st 2019, and asked for the text to be distributed to the Members of the Assembly for information. The text that she sent to you, I believe, enjoys a very large support among the Member States and could thus be a basis for our further discussions. The deputies are now waiting for the final adoption by the Assembly of the report of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy before reaching a decision.
Question to Ms Salome ZOURABICHVILI, President of Georgia

Mr Martin POLIAČIK (Slovak Republic) – Madame President, I have a very simple question to ask. What do you think about the importance of fighting fake news and disinformation? Because in December Facebook deleted hundreds of pages and profiles in Georgia for they, as they stated, "in authentic coordinated behaviour". According to Facebook's official statement, these pages were targeting opposition politicians and civil society organisations. According to digital forensics research lab of the Atlantic Council of Washington, these pages in addition are targeting opposition politicians and spreading anti-European propaganda and messages and might be linked with the government. What has been done to address these concerns?

Ms Salome ZOURABICHVILI – For fake news, and that concerns by the way the initial statement also referring to some declarations by President Ivanishvili, I think that we are all in Georgia, and me personally, I'm constantly under the pressures of fake news, distorted information about what I've said or not said, using partially some of the things I've said. Yes, social media are totally a full of different accounts, and my personal social media is infested with attacks from bots and other forms of attacks, as I'm sure you all know and have in your countries. Now we have a choice here. The choice is to respect the freedom of expression of social media or to start restricting. We are not among the countries that have started to restrict in any way. I've been myself one of the promoters of the platform in the presidency to try to tackle the issues of disinformation, of fake news, of hate speech, because all of that goes together and we are entering the phase of political elections, parliamentary elections, that are coming in October. We have a very strong neighbour that can use and has used in other countries disinformation or fake news. So we need some form of regulation while respecting freedom of expression. That's a difficult task. I'm offering the presidential platform for that, which is neutral and can accept all political parties, but I'm also ready to support any other attempt to tackle this issue.

Question to Mr Igor DODON, President of the Republic of Moldova

Mr Iulian BULAI (Romania) – Last year recordings were made public in which you yourself admit receiving official Russian funds for the financing of the party you lead. This is of course illegal. The chief anti-corruption prosecutor opens an investigation into this. Then with a change in government he was dismissed and put under investigation himself. Do you find appropriate for a president, a member of the executive power, to make such considerations about an anticorruption case in which he himself is suspected to be involved?

Mr Igor DODON – This is a topic that is widely discussed in the Republic of Moldova and not only there. Many of the pro-presidential parties are socialist. We are speaking about different criminal cases started by the previous government of Plahotniuc back in 2016 especially created to blackmail a party of socialists. This is why the president and the pro-presidential party were those who broke down this regime in June 2019. I strongly believe there are no violations of the legislation. However, I encourage an investigation with reference to any person, to the first persons, to the parties or the governing persons and every single investigation must be finished. We should achieve the results. This is the only way we can move forward. We should overcome what was selective justice before. I will give details about this later. We want an equal approach for everyone.
Question to the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ BURIĆ

Mr Martin POLIAČIK (Slovak Republic) – Madam Secretary General, I'm glad to hear about reforms that are meant to make the Council of Europe more effective. But before you became Secretary General, you talked about the need to prevent and fight corruption inside and around the Council of Europe. Where the any concrete steps taken? And the second, are you prepared to seize the Venice Commission over the proposal in Russia which might put internal law over the international one and was proposed by Mr Putin?

Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ BURIĆ – [...] Corruption was a very, very important theme during last year of the campaign. I know that especially this Assembly, but the organisation as a whole, has suffered for the corruption that happened and that took a while to be investigated. And I know also that there was an IBAC report which clearly put some duties on Secretariat to investigate but also, and in particular, I will insist on that, in the Parliamentary Assembly, GRECO gave - if I'm not mistaken - 10 or 11 recommendations, which are in line, according to what I remember, quite much in our national legislations what we do, so it is important to see also how much we followed this. But let me first tackle what was done on the level of the Secretariat of the house, which is primarily my role. Since that has been happening there is a lot that has been done, from e-learning of what fraud may be, to recognise a certain situation, or the corruption. The ethic officer was included and actually our, I think, one of the members of GRECO Secretariat also can be a person who can be seized to ask advice whether there is a corruptive case or something like that. [...] Now for your question for the Venice Commission. [...] I understood that the Parliamentary Assembly already asked, or decided to ask, the opinion of the Venice Commission, so one part of the organisation is enough to ask for that. I think it is good and I come back to what I reply in my first answer. I did, in my communication to the Committee of Ministers, in larger terms expressed my concern and warning over this issue because it's not only one country that sometimes has this questioning of supremacy of international law and our court judgements and the European Convention of Human Rights over the national. [...] Of course, for Russia, we don't know what that will entail, it's only announced so it will be preempted to react on that but I think it would be good to seize and as Parliamentary Assembly body has decided, I think it is a good way to proceed, but in general there is a clearer obligation of all member states and there is a clear provision in Vienna Convention of 1969, where it's clearly said that the national treaties are above the national legislation when they are ratified by national parliaments. Read more
appeasement and, at the same time, I would also like to point out the "provocation" of President Putin's statement a fortnight ago, when he indicated as a kind of general statement that, from now on, all treaties would be subject to Russian national law. I think that this kind of message should concern us and make us react. If this message is being delivered today, even though Russia is once again returning to its full rights within the Council of Europe and the Parliamentary Assembly, it augurs future difficulties. On the other hand, it also sets a precedent which I find extremely dangerous for other countries which, in the same situation, would take the same direction. Read more, voting results

Tuesday 28 January 2020

The functioning of democratic institutions in Poland AS/Mon (Doc. 15025, Doc. 15025 Add.)

Mr Iulian BULAI (Romania) - I think all of us, as lawmakers with a deep belief in equality before the law and the separation of powers, are or should be worried when facing a concerted effort to impose a dictatorship of the majority. And this is what is happening now in Poland. In different moments, the civil society, the press, the public opinion in general and various international bodies have protested the changes affecting the Polish constitutional court or the pressure against independent voices in the judiciary. But I have to stress one of the main observations in the report: the most outrageous acts of the government and the Polish momentary majority in the Parliament are only the most visible side of what in fact is an attempt to abolish the independence of the judicial power. [...] In the name of the ALDE group and in light of the findings of this report, I have to say it appears that the threats against the independence of the judiciary and democratic freedom in general in Poland need to be further put under scrutiny. We ask the Committee to start a full monitoring procedure for Poland, irrespective of the schedule of periodic reviews. Read more, voting results

Threats to media freedom and journalists’ security in Europe (Doc. 15021)

Mr Petri HONKONEN (Finland) - In today’s world, we are constantly subjected to huge quantities of information. This information disorder is hard to handle for anyone, but we still have a responsibility to tackle it. The point of departure should be to start as early as possible. Therefore, it's essential that media literacy and source criticism are strengthened already at an early age of our lives. [...] Another dividing aspect in today’s news environment is disinformation. Studies show that targeted disinformation campaigns have led to people making uninformed decisions and it has even affected the results of election campaigns and referendums. As a result, journalists have an important responsibility, and also possibility, to counter all forms of disinformation and dissect all current issues profoundly and accurately. Read more, voting results
Wednesday 29 January 2020

The protection of freedom of religion or belief in the workplace (Doc. 15015)

Ms Petra STIENEN (Netherlands) At the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe group, we believe that freedom is an essential element of the identity of individuals, and can be important for believers, atheists, agnostics, or secular citizens alike. Or, in other words, this freedom is a freedom to hold religious beliefs, to hold or not to hold a belief, and to change religion and to practise or not to practise religion. And indeed it sounds perfectly reasonable to have this freedom at one’s workplace as well. But I would like to raise serious concerns about this report, as it tries to introduce the concept of “reasonable accommodation” to freedom of religion or belief without deference to non-discrimination law. [...] The reasonable accommodation duty requires an analysis of the individual situation of a person with disabilities. Accommodation of freedom of religion or belief would mistakenly shift the focus from the individual to the group. And the creation of a right to request accommodation would privilege religion over other protected characteristics. This could have, dear colleagues, significantly harmful implications for the rights of individuals, to gender equality and non-discrimination on prohibited grounds such as sex, gender, or sexual orientation. Read more, voting results

Complementary joint procedure between the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly in response to a serious violation by a member State of its statutory obligations (Doc. 15024)

Mr Michael Aastrup JENSEN (Denmark) We now have a chance to end a year-long debate, and especially to give us an instrument to handle a case as severe as the one we’ve been debating for years. Namely, that a country goes in and attacks and occupies a part of another member state. But also to give us an instrument where we will not only be solo in our sanctions, but also in line with what the Committee of Ministers and the Secretary General could do. Therefore, we think it’s important to also highlight some issues that we believe are important. Firstly, that our Assembly should be as involved as possible in this process. We believe it’s important to have an instrument that we as members of parliament back home may use to have a debate with our foreign ministers before the debate takes place in the Committee of Ministers. Read more, voting results

Challenge, on substantive grounds, of the still unratified credentials of the parliamentary (Doc. 15050)

Mr Martin POLIAČIK (Slovak Republic) – If we look at the credentials, in the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe we don’t have one single idea what to do with them. But what we came up with as the ideal solution is that probably it’s good to have the Russian delegation at the table and talk with them. But there should be certain limits to the credentials, and they should not be full. This would send a very clear signal that we do want the Russian delegation in the House. We want a dialogue. We do want to talk with them. But at the same time, we are not satisfied with the way the situation is in Crimea. We’re not satisfied with the way the situation is in Chechnya when it comes to the LGBTI community. We are not satisfied with the fact the 312 people are still political prisoners in Russia. We’re not
satisfied with this and that's why we think the credentials should not be full when it comes to the rights and when it comes to possibilities to work in this institution. [...] That's why I'm not satisfied with the report of Mr Tiny KOX, which I think is a little bit castrated, and I'm not satisfied with the fact that the report in the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs yesterday was dumped. Read more, voting results

Thursday 30 January 2020

Urgent debate: International obligations concerning the repatriation of children from war and conflict zones (Doc. 15055)

Mr Jokin BILDARRATZ (Spain) – We're talking here about a subject which is cruelly relevant to these children. We're talking about a group of children who are entitled to protection and if this group of children are entitled to protection that means that we, individually and as an institution, are obliged, and I repeat, obliged, to ensure that they get that protection. The effect for these children of living in dangerous contexts is something which will have short-, medium- and long-term consequences. And we can't turn a blind eye to that. We can't continue to say that they should be kept well away from our countries. Whenever it comes to human rights, we simply can't do that. We'll be talking about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 22. We need to talk about the situation which prevails in so many of these camps where thousands of children are dying because of the indirect consequences of war: the lack of food, malnutrition, lack of health care, lack of sanitation. The supreme interests of these children should be the overriding concern for all of us. Read more, voting results

Reported cases of political prisoners in Azerbaijan (Doc. 15020)

Mr Alfred HEER (Switzerland) – The European Court of Human rights has issued a very large number of judgments finding violations of the Convention arising from arbitrary arrests and detention of opposition politicians. The arrests and detention of politicians just because they are in opposition to the ruling government is in no way acceptable. Democracy lives from the different views of different parties. Arresting people just because they have a different view is a serious matter and the Council of Europe must act. I want to invite our parliamentarian friends from Azerbaijan who are present here and certainly know about our values and the importance of the European Convention on Human rights to bring those values into effect in the political life in Azerbaijan. We know that the former states of the Soviet Union have a harder way to take and did not have hundreds of years' time to develop a democracy like other countries, including mine. I thank the Azeri delegation for being here and cordially invite them to cooperate with the Council of Europe and to implement court rulings and take Point 11 of the Resolution as an invitation and a way to make Azerbaijan a place for democracy and rule of law. Read more, voting results

Current Affairs Debate: Recent developments in Libya and in the Middle East: what consequences for Europe?

Ms Nicole TRISSE (France) – The situation in Libya, far from improving, is tending more and more towards confusion and the absence of any prospect of stabilisation. Despite the efforts of the international community to promote cooperation between the Government of National Accord of Mr. Fayez el-Sarraj and General Haftar, the civil war is still going on. [...] The seeds of Libya's difficulties, which are at the root of the current chaos, are still at work in different forms. Several Council of Europe member states are more or less
openly providing military and political support to the belligerents, without seeking to encourage dialogue and national reconciliation, which is the only viable prospect for a sound reconstruction of the country in the long term. This situation is regrettable and worrying. The ALDE group, for its part, would like to see the geopolitical games disappear behind collective responsibility and the ambition for a better future for Libya. Read more

Joint debate: Concerted action against human trafficking and the smuggling of migrants (Doc. 15023) & Missing refugee and migrant children in Europe (Doc. 15026)

Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK (Ukraine) – ALDE group is fully supportive of messages and instruments recommended for both the Committee of Ministers and the member states in the draft documents we are considering now. Though I have to draw the attention of the members of the Assembly to hidden factors that inevitably lead to the growing number of victims of human trafficking. These are threats which we, unfortunately, witness on the territories suffering from protracted military conflicts or frozen conflicts across the continent. For people residing in non-government-controlled areas and frozen conflict zones, obtaining birth certificates and other life important documents is a painful and even dangerous process. Risk of statelessness is the growing challenge in protracted conflicts, hitting the teenage population the most. People without internationally-recognised identification documents are easy targets for human traffickers. [...] I would like to underline what the Assembly’s Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination draws attention to. Human trafficking disproportionately affects women. 71 per cent of victims are women and girls according to a study published by the European Parliament in 2016. This problem must be particularly addressed by delegations at the national level, national parliaments and the Assembly as a whole. Read more, voting results 1, 2

The progress of the Assembly’s monitoring procedure (January-December 2019) (Doc. 15031)

Mr Jacques MAIRE (France) – I would like to emphasise in this debate that this monitoring procedure is a crucial working instrument for the Assembly. It has its full place in our organization, both for countries that are subject to specific monitoring and also for countries that are subject to periodic review. Mr Schennach mentioned France - and that is a good example - with the police problems that have been mentioned. It was interesting to see that much of President Macron’s speech a few weeks ago was in fact intended to go into the details of the response to each issue that France had been subjected to. This proves that there is no exemption. There is no exemption, but there must be a regularity, an automaticity in the criteria of the periodic reviews, which must not suffer - in my opinion - from any kind of exception. More serious, indeed, if I may say so, is the situation of those countries that do not contribute to these periodical reviews - some of them have been mentioned. It is very important, indeed, to have this cooperation because the idea is not one of aggression but of assistance. Read more, voting results
Ms Béatrice FRESKO-ROLFO (Monaco) – I would like to begin my speech by mentioning the advantages of using social networks. [...] Unfortunately, the positive aspects are often accompanied by negative aspects, and they are, on reading the report, rather numerous. You have listed them: misinformation with this tendency to fake news, data theft, the intensification of hate speech on the net, the shaping of opinion gradually diminishing the electorate's interest in a confrontation of political ideas. I can only worry about it. You also point out in your report - and this is an extremely alarming point - the repeated interference by a foreign country in national elections. I would like to conclude my remarks by calling on you, all parliamentarians, to first of all support this resolution, which proposes, inter alia, to promote media education, to encourage mechanisms for verifying information but also to support [the work of the Venice Commission in this domain]. Read more, voting results

Joint debate: Organ transplant tourism (Doc. 15029) & Combating trafficking in human tissues and cells (Doc. 15022)

Mr Jokin BILDARRATZ (Spain) – We are looking at two reports we consider very positive, very comprehensive, which give us an overall vision of this situation, which describes the risks stemming from lack of legislation, regulation, or lack of cooperation between states. These risks are true for organ transplant tourism or the trafficking in human cells and tissues. [...] We need a public debate about this. We need public awareness and we also need a response from the public administration so as to better address this situation in a more organised way. We also need international cooperation. With regard to the second report on trafficking in human tissues and cells, it's a far more recent issue, it's very complex. It's a recent research field. We feel that it's essential to have an international regulatory framework under the leadership of the World Health Organisation. As the resolution says, there is no universally accepted definition of what trafficking in human cells and tissues is. This is one of the first difficulties we have. We also make sure that there is coordination of information, in particular about the public tissue and cell banks. We also need an international framework to ban certain practices linked to remuneration of persons giving their tissues and cells. We need to make sure about consent. Read more, voting results 1, 2