

**European Commission for Democracy through Law**  
**(Venice Commission)**  
**141st plenary session**

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Welcome remarks by Theodoros Rousopoulos  
President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

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*Madam President of the Venice Commission,*

*Madam Secretary General of the Venice Commission,*

*Colleagues,*

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

Last year, I had the honour of participating in the Venice Commission plenary meeting as a representative of my political group. Today, I am even more honoured to address you as the President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

At the outset, I would like to emphasise the excellent cooperation between the Venice Commission and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, year after year.

The significant presence of the Parliamentary delegation at this meeting reflects the importance that our Assembly attaches to the collaboration with the Venice Commission and the strong interest in the Commission's notable work. I welcome the fact that the current agenda includes the discussion on two draft opinions stemming from a request by the Assembly.

The work of our two bodies is deeply interconnected and it is no secret that we are indeed one of your most important clients. But we are also a client that deeply appreciates and values your important work. When the Assembly requests your advice, it does subsequently promote your conclusions and recommendations at national level.

I am also certain that you follow closely the debates in our Assembly as they also have an impact on your work and highlight certain new and emerging challenges and issues in the areas of rule of law and democracy.

When I was elected President, I committed to increasing the visibility of the Council of Europe, including expanding awareness of the standards developed under its aegis—beyond Europe.

The Venice Commission is already highly successful in this task, thanks to its expanded membership and extensive network of international experts. I am delighted that the two opinions on the topic of elections have been adopted in response to the first-ever requests from the Organization of American States, underlining the position that many issues we deal with are not confined in Europe, but are rather global in nature and therefore require a global response.

The Commission's work is crucial for the Assembly, which conducts post-accession monitoring of member states and engages in periodic evaluations. We face country-specific challenges regarding the rule of law, where the Venice Commission plays an indispensable role.

I want to highlight recent requests made in 2024 to the Venice Commission by the Assembly concerning Hungary, Turkey, Georgia, Poland, and Romania. In relation to the latter, I submitted a request regarding an emergency ordinance amending electoral legislation.

The issue of foreign funding for political parties and election campaigns is particularly significant in today's context where external interference into electoral process and its impact on the election outcomes become really growing concern. The Venice Commission recently adopted two opinions on Hungary and Georgia addressing this issue. I would like to thank Ms. Veronika Bílková, Vice-President of the Venice Commission, for her willingness to engage in an exchange of views with the Standing Committee of the Assembly in May 2024.

Another notable collaboration involves the ongoing update of **the Rule of Law Checklist**, initially developed in cooperation with the Assembly. The Assembly is also contributing to this revision through the report by the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights.

*Dear ladies and gentlemen,*

Rule of Law is unimaginable without **the independence of the judiciary**. Courts and prosecution services must remain free from executive influence, and parliaments should champion judicial independence.

I welcome the fact that there is an understanding of the importance of this component among member states, as evidenced by the several reports on the plenary session's agenda that address various judiciary-related questions.

In the context the findings of violations of **Article 18** of the European Convention on Human Rights by the Court are particularly troubling, as they indicate that national judicial authorities allow themselves to be manipulated to silence critical voices. These findings serve as stark indictments of judicial systems' lack of independence and must be prioritised in the execution of judgments. In this context, the Assembly's work on political prisoners—especially in Russia, Belarus, and Azerbaijan—is of a particular relevance.

**Transnational repression** poses another significant challenge to the rule of law. Governments increasingly resort to measures such as abusive Interpol notices, unlawful prisoner transfers, and even extrajudicial killings to persecute exiled opponents. Following the worrying findings, the Assembly is taking a fresh look at transnational repression.

Protecting **whistleblowers** is another cornerstone of effective rule of law. Individuals who expose corruption, abuse of power, or other violations must be shielded from retaliation. Two recent Assembly reports have addressed this issue, highlighting the need for robust protections to foster transparency and accountability.

The **international rule of law** is under immense threat due to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. The Assembly has prioritised accountability mechanisms, including advocating for the establishment of a Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression and the Register for Damage as a step toward comprehensive reparations. In this context, the proposal by our colleague Mr. Vlasenko to include a chapter on international rules of law in the Checklist is very appropriate. The Venice Commission's work remains critical in addressing such pressing matters.

As I mentioned earlier, another topic of relentless concern in the Assembly's discussions is the widespread campaign of **disinformation and manipulative interference**. Just yesterday, the results of the first round of presidential elections in Romania were annulled by the Constitutional Court and new elections will have to take place now.

I think this is the first time when such an unprecedented decision was justified by an alleged foreign interference (by the Russian Federation in this case) in the electoral process. Unquestionably, this decision highlights an important evolution of the rule of law in the digital age and calls for serious reflection on its legality and legal consequences.

We know that the issue of foreign inference gains prominence as demonstrated by recent reports on election observation in Moldova, Bulgaria, and Georgia adopted by our Assembly and I see an interesting perspective for our future collaboration on this matter.

**In 2024**, Moldovan national security services stated that Russia provided €100 million for campaigns against EU accession, combined with illicit monetary offers to voters. Moldovan law enforcement estimated that over 300,000 individuals were potentially involved in various corruption schemes. Allegations of direct foreign support for certain candidates and parties were made by the authorities.

**In 2022**, it was revealed that Russia had covertly spent €300 million over eight years to attempt to influence politicians in at least 24 countries, and utilised foundations and other fronts to provide backing to extreme candidates.

A recent report by French intelligence services revealed malicious disinformation manipulation by the government of Azerbaijan, including actions targeting some PACE members.

With the instrumentalisation of truth in certain cases, it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between manipulation and legitimate opinion. When propaganda spreads quietly, its effect can be similar to a slow-acting poison.

Addressing foreign interference requires a delicate balance and measures to counter undue influence or enhance transparency must align with human rights standards. I am convinced that the expertise of the Venice Commission can lead

to effective, rights-compliant responses to foreign interference, particularly concerning disinformation, political funding, and transparency.

*Ladies and gentlemen,*

The Assembly will continue to rely on the precious opinions of the Venice Commission and looks forward to another year of fruitful cooperation between our two bodies, whether on country-specific questions or broader issues of general concern, such as the matter of spyware.

I would like to thank you for staying for this agenda item, especially after the intensive work you have undertaken over the past day and a half. Please rest assured of the Assembly's committed support for the Venice Commission.

Thank you for your attention.