

Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media meeting

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Trondheim, Norway, 3 June 2025

Opening speech by Theodoros Rousopoulos
President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

Dear colleagues, dear friends,

When I travel to a place I have never been before I always read its history. What I discovered about Trondheim was not just a city of striking beauty, but a place where legend and history converge in a way that speaks directly to our theme today.

In the 11th century, King Olav Haraldsson—once a fierce Viking warrior—was killed at the Battle of Stiklestad. But what rose from that fall was not defeat, but a legacy. Within a year, he became Saint Olaf, and Trondheim became the spiritual heart of Norway. His burial place gave rise to the great Nidaros Cathedral. But more than a monument, it became a symbol: of cultural transformation, of reconciliation between old beliefs and new values, between the Norse sagas and the Christian world.

And that, I believe, is precisely what culture does. It transforms, it transcends, and it binds. It shapes not only memory—but identity and future.

Some of you know that before entering politics, I studied journalism and worked as a journalist for two decades. At the same time, driven by a lifelong passion for the arts, I pursued further studies in civilization and culture. And, following Socrates' advice—that we must remain students throughout life—I

later earned a doctorate in history. But long before those academic choices, I was simply someone fascinated by stories—the stories that shape who we are, how we live, and what we believe. Stories passed down in churches, classrooms, and family gatherings. Stories of both triumph and loss. In short: cultural stories. Through stories we understand each other and through the wonder of science, journalism or art we discover each other.

That is why I believe that culture is not an accessory to democracy—it is the beating heart of democracy.

All too often, culture is treated as something decorative. But it isn't an ornament—it's the very architecture of democracy. Let me explain myself:

It holds our public spaces together.

It gives meaning.

It invites people to question! To create! To belong!

The Council of Europe understood this early on. In 1954, still in the shadow of war, we adopted the European Cultural Convention—an act of hope that culture could help rebuild not just nations, but trust. And that vision still guides us.

We've built a cultural Europe through shared experience:

Through European Heritage Days, where millions cross thresholds of memory—churches, schools, town halls—to reconnect with their roots.

Through the Faro Convention, which put people at the heart of heritage—where a dialect or village chapel can be just as meaningful as a monument.

Through the European Landscape Convention, reminding us that the hills, fjords, and paths we walk are not just scenery—they are part of who we are.

Through the Cultural Routes Program, which stitches Europe together through the footsteps of saints, scholars, and artisans—from the Via Francigena to the Routes of the Olive Tree.

These aren't just policies. They're bridges—across generations, borders, and memories. They remind us that Europe is not just a place. It's a story we continue to write together.

As someone who was for many years a member of this very Committee, I have seen up close the passion, dedication, and expertise that you bring to this mission.

You have long understood that culture is not a luxury—it is essential. You have protected it, promoted it, and helped embed it deep into the democratic life of Europe.

I want to acknowledge that work—and to say how important it is that we continue together: ensuring that access to culture remains a right, not a privilege... that education and cultural life grow hand in hand... and that we measure not only our economic growth, but the depth of our cultural participation.

I know many of you will also be addressing issues of media freedom. As a former journalist, I cannot be indifferent. Because while the access to information has exploded, so has disinformation. And today, journalists—especially in times of conflict—face grave risks. We all heard of Victoria Roshchyna, the Ukrainian investigative journalist, tortured to death in a Russian prison. She died for truth. Her story reminds us that a journalist's pen

can carry the same weight as any political decision—and can carry just as much risk.

Let me also commend your work on the cultural value of sport. Not only as competition, but as community. As a platform for integrity, for human rights, for inclusion. This is why I personally supported the creation of the Parliamentary Alliance for Good Governance and Integrity in Sport. It is a platform that echoes our values, and it deserves our full political support.

Let me end with something more personal.

As I said for many years, I was proud to serve as a member of this very Committee. And today, standing before you as President of the Assembly, I feel deeply privileged to return to its work—not only as an institutional duty, but as a matter close to my heart.

I travelled to Trondheim from Kraków, where I was taking part in the city's celebrated Documentary Festival—another stop in a journey that reflects one of our Assembly's newest and most meaningful initiatives: the "Human Rights in Motion Award".

It was my honour to propose the creation of the "Human Rights in Motion Award"—a new initiative that was accepted by our Assembly to bring the voice of human dignity to the screen. This award recognizes documentary filmmakers who shed light on human rights struggles through the power of storytelling. I am convinced that this award must endure beyond my term as a president. And I trust that this very Committee will remain its natural guardian.

Because I believe that culture is not only memory—it is vigilance, empathy, and truth in motion.

Because I believe that culture and human rights belong in the same frame.

Because I believe that politics speaks to the mind—but art speaks to the soul. And our role, as political leaders, is not to lose sight of either. It is to bring reason and empathy together—to make policy with both our heads and our hearts. That is the true art of politics in Democracy: to remain close to those in need, and to never forget that dignity can also be defended through a lens, a verse, or a voice.

Thank you.