

Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media

“Culture as a Cornerstone of Strong, Peaceful, Democratic  
and Diverse Communities”

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Speech by Theodoros Rousopoulos  
President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

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Dear colleagues, dear friends,

When I walk through the corridors of the Council of Europe, I often think:  
every plaque, every flag, every document echoes with anniversaries.

1950—the European Convention on Human Rights.

1989—the fall of the Berlin Wall.

2005—the Faro Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage.

These are not just historical milestones. They are anchors of meaning.

They do not merely commemorate dates. They summon memory, they shape  
identity, and—perhaps most powerfully—they draw a line between who we are  
and who we aspire to be.

This is why we honour national and cultural anniversaries. Because Europe,  
from the earliest steps of its history, has always been an amalgam of peoples,  
languages, and cultures. A mosaic of different ethnicities.

Within this diversity, anniversaries are the way each thread affirms its colour—  
without vanishing from the European weave.

Take, for example, Norway, our host country today. Every year on 17 May, for more than two centuries, Norwegians celebrate the anniversary of their 1814 Constituent Assembly. That day is not a military parade. It is a celebration of childhood, a family procession, a flag-draped act of democratic remembrance. Schoolchildren march, brass bands play, families wear traditional dress and celebrate the peaceful birth of a democratic state.

Norway does not honour a battle or a victory—but a pact of coexistence. And this is the heart of every true anniversary: it reminds us not only who we were, but who we choose to be.

Cultural anniversaries are democratic acts. They give voice to many stories. They help us forgive mistakes—without forgetting them. They show us how history is written: not only by the victors, but by the societies that resisted, that stood upright, that refused to vanish into silence or submission.

In my country, for example, it is not the end of the Second World War that we commemorate most intensely, but a moment of resistance—October 28th—when the Greek Prime Minister said “No” to Mussolini’s ultimatum and refused to surrender to fascist forces.

What followed were months of battles. Not only did the Greek army hold the line—it counterattacked, repelled the invaders, and pushed deep into Albanian territory, liberating lands until the superior German forces invaded and occupied the Balkans.

Yet Greece chose to remember not just the outcome of the war—but the stance, the resistance, the “No” to fascism. Because this anniversary highlights the value not only of final victory, but of standing up for democracy and freedom.

This function of anniversaries is also recognized by the European states: Many national and cultural commemorations are designated as public holidays, marked by parades, official ceremonies and community events—not only strengthening collective memory, but empowering collective participation.

They become a shield against forgetting, and a bridge to belonging. They inspire common purpose without enforcing uniformity.

Let me return, once again, to an example involving my compatriots—this time from a different era, the 17th century: when the Most Serene Republic of Venice welcomed many ethnic communities into its realm but imposed harsh restrictions upon them. It denied them the right to feel equal or to freely express their ethnic identity.

So, what did these people do to preserve who they were? They did not build walls. They did not reject the city. They created anniversaries. Ceremonies. Memory.

They celebrated their saints, preserved their Byzantine heritage, wove collective narratives and ritual acts. These ceremonies were acts of identity, powerful and silent statements of their ethnic identity.

And perhaps you ask: when did this practice of anniversaries begin?

Sorry, its again the ancient Greeks who held annual festivals—like the Panathenaea—to honour their gods, but also to celebrate the unification of Athens and the shared identity of its citizens.

Later the Romans commemorated the founding of their city—on 21st April each year—as a political tool of civic identity.

In the Middle Ages, the feast days of saints and martyrs anchored identity and belief.

After the French Revolution, anniversaries became pillars of national narrative: Bastille Day, Liberation Day, Unity Day.

Today in Europe, we have evolved. We honour not exclusion—but inclusion. Not the glory of conquest—but the dignity of survival. Not the silence of a single narrative—but the living polyphony that reflects the European reality.

In brief I want to share with you five thoughts for today:

1. Democracy is memory in action.
2. Human rights have a history—and must be remembered.
3. Cultural diversity is the foundation of unity—not a threat to it.
4. Science, education, the media—and even myths—shape culture.
5. Anniversaries deepen our sense of belonging.

Dear friends,

Each year, on 24 February, we commemorate the start of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

The war continues. And yet, we persist in honouring that anniversary—not because it belongs to the past, but because it remains a brutal present. We persist—because memory must not fade. We persist—because injustice must not become familiar. We persist—because if we fall silent, we risk legitimising the unacceptable.

This, for me, is the essence of a true anniversary: Not a ritual of routine—but an act of moral resistance.

Let us honour our stories. Let us teach them wisely. Let us celebrate anniversaries that include, not exclude.

And let us do so under the flag of the Council of Europe—not as an institutional obligation,

but as a beacon.

A beacon of memory, dignity, and hope.

Thank you.