

**Farewell address
1548th Committee of Ministers' Deputies meeting**

21 January 2026, Strasbourg, France

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I noticed in your programme that today's meeting carries the number 1548.

That number led me, almost instinctively, back to history. In 1548, Europe was emerging from a violent period of religious war. In the German states of the Holy Roman Empire, Catholics and Protestants had fought bitterly against one another. After a military victory, Emperor Charles V attempted to impose unity and restore stability. The war had ended—but peace proved harder to impose.

The effort failed, not because power was lacking, but because dialogue and mutual understanding were absent. Unity and respect cannot be imposed by force. They must be freely chosen in order to be sustained.

How strikingly contemporary this lesson sounds today. We ask for unity and respect —and this is precisely why we are gathered here, in this Council.

Not to impose, but to agree.

Not to prevail over one another, but to coexist within shared rules.

And while we live in an age increasingly defined by artificial intelligence, it has become painfully clear that what is often missing is something more basic: simple intelligence—the capacity of leaders to act with responsibility.

Dear all,

When one leaves a position of responsibility, there are two temptations. The first is to speak nostalgically. The second is to speak defensively. I will try to do neither.

Instead, allow me to speak politically —about what we learned, what we protected, and what remains at risk. I began this presidency on a cold day in Strasbourg, in the back seat of a car, not knowing that a casual question - addressed to me by a political group leader, not from my own party- would change the course of the next two years.

That moment reminded me of something essential about democracy: its most decisive turns rarely announce themselves loudly. They begin quietly, in conversations, in doubt, in responsibility accepted rather than sought.

From the first day, I was acutely aware of one fact: The Parliamentary Assembly does not govern. But it tests the moral temperature of Europe. And this is where the relationship between the Assembly and the Committee of Ministers becomes crucial—not as a competition of competences, but as a shared guardianship of values.

During these two years, the world did not become easier. On the contrary: democracy became more fragile, truth more contested, power more tempted by shortcuts. We were confronted with wars that refused to end, with authoritarianism that learned to disguise itself, and with technologies that moved faster than our institutions. And yet, again and again, the same fundamental question returned: How much deviation can democracy tolerate before it becomes something else?

This question was not theoretical. It was painfully concrete.

We faced it with Russia, when war made membership morally impossible. And we face it every time we are asked whether dialogue without rules is still dialogue—or merely delay.

I have said it openly, and I repeat it here, before the Committee of Ministers: Inclusion is not an end in itself. Membership is not decorative. And values are not negotiable commodities.

Europe's oldest political organisation for Democracy cannot survive if it loses its red lines, because once red lines blur, cynicism fills the vacuum. That is why the expulsion of Russia was not an emotional reaction. It was a constitutional necessity.

And that is why the work on accountability for Ukraine is not about revenge, but about memory, law, and limits. Without justice, peace becomes merely a pause.

Allow me here a brief personal reference. When the war began, my wife and I wrote to a Ukrainian colleague offering something very simple: a home, if ever needed. Her answer was immediate and dignified: "We will stay. We must protect our country." That sentence has stayed with me. Because democracy survives not through institutions alone, but through people who refuse the comfort of resignation.

Throughout my presidency, I tried to insist on one idea: That the Council of Europe is not about money, power, or prestige. It is about dignity.

Allow me, very briefly, to recall how these principles were translated into action during these two years. During my two-year mandate as President of the Parliamentary Assembly, I sought to turn commitments into action while strengthening both the substance and the visibility of the Council of Europe.

I kept Russia's war against Ukraine at the top of the Assembly's agenda and contributed to the development of accountability mechanisms, including for the crime of aggression and compensation for victims, while launching the Parliamentary Network on the Situation of the Children of Ukraine.

- I placed the impact of artificial intelligence on democracy, human rights and the rule of law among the Presidency's core priorities, establishing a dedicated sub-committee and organizing -in London- a high-level parliamentary conference on AI and European democracy.

- I supported the Secretary General's New Pact for Democracy and concluded my mandate with the creation of a new PACE Committee on this initiative.

Building on an idea initiated by my predecessor Tiny Kox, I invested sustained political effort in the establishment of a Platform for Dialogue with Russian Democratic Forces, holding numerous meetings with representatives of the Russian democratic opposition from Berlin to Paris, from Washington to Strasbourg.

I hope that next Monday morning the Bureau will approve the final list of participants, so that the Assembly may give a voice to democratic Russians living in exile, just as—during my Presidency—we gave a voice to the democratic forces of Belarus.

I also engaged extensively with Israeli and Palestinian interlocutors. I held bilateral meetings with the Speakers of the two parliaments and I hope that my successor will continue these efforts and that the Assembly's experience and expertise may prove useful when the region finds its way back to peace and cooperation.

A distinct chapter of my Presidency concerns Georgia and Azerbaijan. Despite sustained dialogue at the highest parliamentary and governmental levels, Georgia chose not to re-engage with the Assembly for this year. As for

Azerbaijan, I have devoted considerable effort and political engagement and continue to hope for progress until the very last day of my mandate.

Finally, I placed strong emphasis on outreach and visibility, engaging with universities, young people and international partners, and increasing the Assembly's international media visibility by 65% in the first year and by 195% in the second year of my Presidency, according to data from the Communication Office.

I said earlier that the Council of Europe is not about money, power, or prestige, but about dignity. This dignity is embodied nowhere more clearly than in the European Court of Human Rights —where judges serve without re-election, without bargaining, without fear. A system that quietly says something revolutionary in our times: justice does not campaign. And it is defended by a Parliamentary Assembly whose members are volunteers—often criticized at home for being “absent”, yet present where it matters most: in prisons, in elections, in forgotten corners of Europe.

Democracy, I often say, is like a bicycle. If you stop pedalling, it falls.

That image leads me to the metaphor that gave the book I wrote, as my presidency draws to a closeness which you will have on hand next Monday morning.

The title of this book is: “**The canary of Democracy**”.

In the old coal mines, miners carried canaries not for their beauty, but for their vulnerability. When the canary stopped singing, the air had turned toxic.

Today, young people are the canaries of our democracies. When they withdraw, when they stop trusting institutions, when they turn to easy certainties or authoritarian saviours, it is not a generational flaw. It is a warning signal.

If the young stop singing, the problem is not them. It is the air we have allowed to spread: an air polluted by disinformation, populism, and political illusion.

I devoted much thought during this presidency to illusions—especially those cultivated by authoritarian leaders. They promise simplicity in a complex world. They replace truth with narrative. And they dress power as destiny.

Don Quixote fought windmills believing they were giants. Modern authoritarians convince societies that windmills truly are giants—and then ask for applause when they attack them. The danger today is not only repression. It is illusion.

And illusion spreads faster than truth, especially in a digital world governed by algorithms rather than accountability. This is why the Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence adopted under the Council of Europe's auspices is so important.

It is not anti-technology. It is pro-human. It asserts something radical in our century: That innovation must remain subordinate to human dignity, democratic oversight, and the rule of law.

We now navigate, as I said in Malta, between Scylla and Charybdis: Between the old monster of authoritarianism and the new vortex of uncontrolled technology. Odysseus survived not because he was stronger than the monsters—but because he was wiser. That, I believe, is Europe’s challenge today.

Before concluding, allow me one last reflection—about cooperation.

I deliberately chose to meet all ambassadors since the very first days of my presidency. Not for protocol. For trust. Trust does not grow in plenary speeches. It grows in honest conversations, including disagreement. I am grateful for the cooperation we built between the Assembly, the Secretary General, and the Committee of Ministers.

Not always perfect—but sincere. And sincerity, in institutions, is rare and precious.

As I take leave of this role, I do so without illusions. Democracy will not become easier. It will not become quieter. And it will not defend itself. But I remain convinced of one thing: Despite its flaws, despite its slowness, despite its noise, democracy remains the only system that allows human beings to live with dignity rather than fear.

And as long as the canary still sings—even faintly—we still have time to change the air.

Dear Ambassadors

Thank you for the trust.

Thank you for the cooperation.

And above all, thank you for continuing the difficult, necessary work of keeping Europe democratic—not by habit, but by choice.