

Address to the Saeima
15 May 2025, Riga, Latvia

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

Dear colleagues,

Allow me to begin with one of my favourite stories — how the Council of Europe was conceived. It was a dark winter night in 1943, as German bombs rained down on London. On BBC radio, Prime Minister Winston Churchill — "the Prime Minister of Victory," as we know him — addressed the British people. Amid the suffering, he offered them hope. He promised that when the war ended, he would take the initiative to build a union of states dedicated to peace and democracy. He even gave it a name: the Council of Europe.

That vision became reality in May 1949, when the Council was founded to uphold democracy, the rule of law, and human rights.

Since then, many nations have joined. Latvia has now celebrated over 30 years of membership — a remarkable milestone.

As President of the Parliamentary Assembly—one of the Council's key pillars—I have the honour of representing an institution of 612 members: 306 representatives and 306 substitutes, drawn from national parliaments across Europe. Our Assembly functions through plenary sessions and a network of committees, much like any national parliament, and its members draft reports and recommendations to promote democratic standards.

Crucially, our work is voluntary and unpaid. This sometimes leads to misunderstanding. Our members may be criticised at home for being “absent,” while in fact they are hard at work in Strasbourg—often from early morning until late evening—advancing the cause of democracy.

Among our most important responsibilities are electing the judges of the European Court of Human Rights, choosing the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, observing elections, and drafting impactful conventions.

The European Convention on Human Rights, now celebrating its upcoming 75th anniversary, is the cornerstone of our legal order—our moral compass. It abolished the death penalty and remains the ultimate safeguard for citizens. More recent conventions include the Istanbul Convention on violence against women, and the groundbreaking international treaty on artificial intelligence, which originated in our Assembly.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me now turn to today’s challenges. One of the most serious is Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine. Both countries were once members of our Council. But just days after the invasion, our Assembly unanimously voted to expel the Russian Federation — a decision later confirmed by the Committee of Ministers.

This wasn’t unprecedented. My own country, Greece, was expelled from the Council in 1969 under the military dictatorship. I have always been proud of that decision. It proved that the Council of Europe stands by its principles.

Ukraine remains high on our agenda. We have debated its situation in every session. The Committee of Ministers discusses it weekly. The Commissioner for Human Rights has visited three times. Under the Latvian Presidency, the Council made real progress: the Reykjavík Declaration, the operationalisation

of the Register of Damage — which Latvia co-founded — and steps toward a special tribunal for the crime of aggression.

As peace discussions begin, human rights must lead the way. There can be no lasting peace without accountability, reparations for victims, the return of deported children, and safe return plans for displaced persons. Women and civil society must have a seat at the table. And above all: “nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine”.

We also care deeply about freedom of expression and the safety of journalists. The “Journalists Matter” campaign — launched under Latvia’s Presidency — is essential. On World Press Freedom Day, we are reminded of the real threats journalists face: legal harassment, online abuse, and political pressure.

The Council of Europe has shaped important legal frameworks — on SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) and AI — that are now influencing EU legislation. The first-ever international convention on AI is already concluded.

We must also strengthen “media literacy” to build public resilience against disinformation and manipulation. Social media are not journalism. And cyberattacks — especially from Russia and Belarus — threaten not only systems, but the very trust on which democracies are built.

I thank Ms. Zanda Kalniņa-Lukaševica for her leadership on the April report addressing foreign interference — a report that will guide European responses to these threats. And I look forward to our “AI and Democracy” conference this December in London.

Latvia is a country rich in forests and a long coastline — naturally sensitive to environmental issues. The Council of Europe is active here too: from the Bern Convention to the draft treaty on environmental crime, including “ecocide”.

The European Court's recent ruling and the Commissioner's work are advancing the right to a healthy environment.

Dear colleagues,

I always repeat that we must not take democracy for granted. It is fragile. The Romanian Supreme Court recently raised concerns about external interference in its electoral process—a stark reminder that no country is immune.

Populism exploits complexity with easy slogans. We must respond with honesty and education. An informed citizen is an empowered citizen.

Let me end with a story from my homeland — ancient Athens. There, participation in the Agora was mandatory. Those who refused were scorned with the term

«ΙΔΙΩΤΗΣ» — the root of the word "idiot."

Dear colleagues, I always close with this reminder: Democracy may be old — but it is not old-fashioned.

Thank you for the honour of addressing your Parliament, in this strong and vibrant democracy.

Together, let us defend the values that unite us — human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.