Conférence européenne des **Présidentes et Présidents de Parlement**
European Conference of **Presidents of Parliament**

Strasbourg, 20-21 mars 2025 / 20-21 March 2025

COUNCIL OF EUROPE

CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Safeguarding democracy

Background document

We, the Heads of State and Government, are committed to securing and strengthening democracy and good governance at all levels throughout Europe. (…) We consider democracy as the only means to ensure that everyone can live in a peaceful, prosperous and free society. We will meet our obligations under international law. We will prevent and resist democratic backsliding on our continent, including in situations of emergency, crisis and armed conflicts, and we will stand firm against authoritarian tendencies by enhancing our shared commitments as member States of the Council of Europe.

Reykjavík Declaration, preamble to the Reykjavik Principles for Democracy

4th Summit of Council of Europe Heads of State and Government

Introduction

Democracy, human rights, and the rule of law are the three core values that underpin the Council of Europe and its member states. However, as geopolitical, political, social, and technological dynamics evolve, the integrity of democratic systems is increasingly threatened. The rise of populist movements, the spread of disinformation, external interference, and the erosion of trust in political institutions all present growing challenges to democracy.

The Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine: a wake-up call for democracies

Democracies do not act as aggressor States. The Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine is a tragic reminder of what the Council of Europe founders already knew: the best guarantee against war is building strong, resilient democracies, respectful of human rights and based on the rule of law. At the same time, the best guarantees for a just and lasting peace in Europe are continuing to support Ukraine as long as it takes; ensuring the accountability of the Russian Federation and its current regime for their many wrongful acts; and redoubling efforts to enhance the societal and institutional resilience of European democracies.

External threats

The war of aggression waged by the Russian Federation against Ukraine is the most glaring example of an external threat. Democracies, however, also face other types of external pressure, including hybrid threats, cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure and the public administration, and foreign interference in democratic processes, including elections. Council of Europe member States should urgently take measures to prevent and counter these threats. At the same time, efforts to respond to these threats should not be misused to silence dissent, stifle political pluralism and shrink the space of civil society.

Disinformation and misinformation

The rise of digital technology has created significant challenges to safeguarding democracy, particularly because of the spread of disinformation and misinformation at the hands of malignant actors who use it to manipulate public opinion, influence elections, disseminate fake news that triggers fear and uncertainty among citizens, and create mistrust in democratic institutions. Such actions widen polarisation and aggravate democratic backsliding. Combating fake news and ensuring that the public has access to reliable, fact-based information is crucial in the digital age. Media and non-governmental organisations play vital roles in fostering a vibrant democracy by promoting transparency and accountability. Disinformation and misinformation must be understood as soft and hybrid security threats, against which a whole-of-society approach is necessary.

The erosion of democratic standards

One of the most pressing challenges facing democracies today – including established democracies – is the gradual erosion of democratic standards and safeguards. Manifestations of democratic backsliding include weakened judicial independence, undermined rule of law, reduced media freedom and curtailed civil liberties. Early signs include denial of legitimacy to political opponents, abuse of power by the majority, politicisation of state institutions, encouragement or tolerance of violence, and opposition to pluralism and media independence. In recent years the political landscape has changed significantly, with traditional political parties losing ground to new political forces and movements, often heralding a populist message. In parallel, the political debate has increasingly moved to online platforms, which often amplify societal polarisation.

Protecting constitutional safeguards: the importance of mutual respect and forbearance in a healthy democracy

The separation of powers between parliament, government, and the judiciary is crucial for safeguarding democracy. Constitutional safeguards, self-restraint and a culture of inter-institutional respect and openness are core elements in protecting democracy. Institutional forbearance – showing restraint and avoiding discrediting or undermining other institutions – is essential for a healthy democracy, as is refraining from the politicisation of institutions and public administration. Constitutional norms place the defence of democracy above party politics. However, shifts in the respect for constitutional safeguards can be more or less visible, making it difficult to spot the moment when the balance has been upset and democracy is actually threatened. Political institutions and parties must respect constitutional safeguards, to protect judicial independence, and avoid weaponizing institutions for political gain. Political parties have a significant role in upholding democratic values, including through their choice of candidates and the values they represent.

The role of parliamentary ethical standards

Ethical conduct and respect for values in parliament are crucial for safeguarding the credibility of democratic institutions and public trust in political life. Yet, also parliaments have become the scene of extreme or hateful rhetoric. Speakers of parliaments play a vital role in promoting respectful language, conduct, and the expression of diverse views. Parliamentary structures and procedures should be designed so as to ensure that democracy is upheld by encouraging a plurality of voices in debates and respect for democratic institutions and democratic political culture.

Elections, direct democracy, and the role of civic participation

Ensuring the integrity of elections and continuing to promote participation in elections and referendums is important for the credibility of their results. Official election observation missions, both long-term and short-term, help to monitor and ensure credible elections. Speakers of parliaments play a key role in promoting legitimate activities that strengthen democratic processes, including by supporting the work of official international election observation missions.

In a thriving democracy, civic participation goes beyond voting; it involves active engagement in public life, which strengthens the accountability of elected officials and keeps government responsive to the diverse needs of its citizens. Parliaments play an important role in engaging the public and young people to maintain trust in democratic institutions. However, challenges such as political apathy, especially among young people, hinder this engagement. Participatory democracy, involving citizens in decision-making processes, such as citizen assemblies, or direct democracy, such as referendums, can help to address this problem. They can also help to promote a better culture of civic compromise in society. Overall, greater efforts are needed to create opportunities for young people to participate actively in shaping the future of democracy.

Conclusion

Safeguarding democracy and protecting democratic security and stability in Europe are not a task for any one country or organisation alone. It is a collective responsibility that requires national parliaments within the Council of Europe to work together, share knowledge, and adopt best practices. As European countries face unprecedented challenges to their democratic norms, institutions, and values, including from hostile state actors, it is imperative to continue to debate and collaborate on strategies to ensure that democracy not only withstands the pressure but thrives. Such a discussion will be particularly instructive in the context of the Council of Europe's ongoing work to build on the Reykjavik Principles for Democracy following the Summit in 2023.

Questions for discussion:

- How can national parliaments strengthen the checks and balances that protect democratic institutions and act as an effective check on the executive?
- How can parliaments encourage civil discourse and reduce polarisation in society?
- How can parliaments ensure that the rule of law is upheld, and human rights respected, even in times of crisis, such as during national emergencies or pandemics?
- How does one balance the freedom of expression with provisions around hate speech or inappropriate language?
- In what ways can technology and digital platforms be used to enhance democratic engagement and to protect political free speech, without facilitating manipulation, exploitation or the spread of disinformation?
- How can the education system be used to foster critical thinking and media literacy, ensuring that citizens are able to navigate the complexities of the digital age?
- What mechanisms can be put in place to ensure that populist rhetoric does not result in authoritarian policies or threaten democratic values, including pluralism, inclusivity, and minority rights?
- How can States better strengthen the security of electoral systems against cyber threats and foreign interference?
- How can national parliamentarians best collaborate internationally to protect democratic institutions from external threats?
- How can national parliaments mobilise greater civic participation, particularly among younger generations, to counteract political apathy?
- How can parliaments address the growing public disenchantment with democratic institutions to ensure that democracy remains inclusive and responsive?

Appendix: key reference documents

Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

Resolution 2538 (2024) "Promoting the revised Code of Good Practice on Referendums".

Resolution 2537(2024) "Relationship between the parliamentary majority and the opposition in a democracy".

Resolution 2552 (2024) "Strengthening democracy through participatory and deliberative processes".

Resolution 2553 (2024) "Strengthening a youth perspective in the work of the Parliamentary Assembly".

Resolution 2506 (2023) "Political consequences of the Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine".

Resolution 2513 (2023) "Pegasus and similar spyware and secret state surveillance".

Resolution 2515 (2023) "The role of the Council of Europe in preventing conflicts, restoring credibility of international institutions and promoting global peace".

Resolution 2444 (2022) "Recent challenges to security in Europe: what role for the Council of Europe?"

Resolution 2437 (2022) "Safeguarding and protecting genuine democracy in Europe".

Council of Europe
4th Council of Europe Summit, United around our values – Reykjavík Declaration, 2023.

Building a new Democratic Pact - Concept note