



21 March 2025

CONCLUSIONS OF THE CONFERENCE

presented by

Mr Theodoros Rousopoulos
President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

We are facing a moment in history when our societies and our citizens are confronted with challenges to the international legal order and the democratic values that we have taken for granted for so long. The three themes of our Conference: Safeguarding democracy – guaranteeing freedom of expression in times of polarisation and uncertainty – and violence against politicians, could not be more timely. They are intrinsically interconnected and call for a vigorous and innovative action from our part.

Democracy and peace are strongly intertwined. If ever we had forgotten the lessons of the last war, the past few years we have lived through – when both democracy and peace have been undermined on our continent – have brought this back into crystal clear focus.

Democracy and peace are not established once and for all. We must strive to uphold them each and every day, continuously, in all parts of our continent and beyond. We must hold onto, and uphold, the deeply-rooted founding values on which Europe has been constructed. We must insist upon the full respect of international law, and hold accountable those who violate it.

“Defending Democracy,” sums up what Ukraine is doing today. And, for their part, European democracies must continue to fully support Ukraine in its fight against the Russian Federation’s aggression. For it is clear: the outcome of this war is bound to shape the future of our continent.

Our unity and solidarity are the strongest defense against malign foreign and domestic forces intent on undermining democracy and peace. The Conference looks forward to supporting the work of the Council of Europe on the new Democratic Pact, an initiative which follows through the political commitments expressed by the Heads of State and Government in Reykjavik, at the 4th Council of Europe Summit.

This is a matter for the whole of society and all of our citizens. We must find ways to reconnect to those citizens, especially to youth, and bring back the passion for democracy and peace in place of resignation and division. We must invest in civic education which reaches hearts and minds, throughout society and especially in schools and educational establishments.

And parliamentarians have a special responsibility and a leading role to play. We must be particularly mindful of how we behave in our parliaments and how that shapes public discourse. Over and above party politics, we must exercise our role of oversight as regards the executive, and be resolute in calling out any slipping in democratic standards. We must be transparent in our parliamentary work and bring it close to the citizens, through traditional and new channels, listening to their concerns and restoring their trust in democracy.

Theme I: Safeguarding democracy

The threat to democracy: Today, democratic standards are being eroded through weakened judicial independence, reduced media freedom, curtailed civil liberties, the disproportionate influence of financial elites, the capture of state institutions and the media by authoritarian populists, hybrid warfare, cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure and foreign interference in elections. Hate speech, hate crime and discrimination against minorities are part of the increasing polarisation, fuelled by anti-democratic actors, both internal and external.

Democratic security: More than any other time since World War II, safeguarding democracy is key to peace and security. We must cherish our freedom and democracy as much as our enemies despise them. We should intensify and improve our efforts to demonstrate that democracy, human rights and the rule of law are for the public good and are the guarantee of democratic security.

Democratic values: Democracy is not merely a form of governance – it is a system of societal values rooted in the values of freedom, the rule of law, human rights, inclusivity, media freedom, equality, social justice and the protection of minorities. “Illiberal democracies” lack these essential qualities. Europe must remain a bastion of democratic freedom united by shared democratic values and the belief in open, free and compassionate societies.

Digital threats: Those who seek to undermine democracy use digital technologies, algorithms and artificial intelligence tools to spread disinformation and misinformation to distort reality and to sow division. This poisons the democratic debate within our countries, exacerbating societal polarisation and democratic backsliding. Civic education and media literacy are our main defences against such threats and must be stepped up.

Democratic culture: Democracy is not just about holding elections or political power changing hands. It requires a political climate, at all levels, in which freedom of speech is respected and where political opponents listen and interact with mutual respect, free from hateful rhetoric. Ethical conduct in public office is essential for maintaining public trust and credibility in democratic institutions.

Public engagement and civic education: Engaging citizens – especially youth - in public life is vital to ensure that democratic values will be maintained for the years to come. To tackle the disenchantment of parts of the electorate with the democratic system, decisive and innovative action is needed to empower young people to understand the value of democracy and to become its standard-bearers. Tools to counter political apathy include stepping up exchanges between elected politicians and the electorate, enhanced civic participation through participatory democracy, direct democracy, youth engagement initiatives or even innovative voting methods, such as electronic voting. Increasing awareness-raising within schools and educational establishments about democracy, the rule of law and human rights - as embodied by the Council of Europe’s work – is key in transmitting democratic values to our children and young people, for the future of our societies.

Theme 2: Guaranteeing freedom of expression in times of polarisation and uncertainty

Misuse of freedom of expression to polarise: Under the pretext of freedom of expression, pernicious content is exploited by malign actors in a form of hybrid warfare, where online platforms are strategically employed to distort democratic debate and destabilise our democracies.

Democratic model of freedom of expression: In the face of this challenge, it is imperative to define and uphold the democratic model of freedom of expression. We must establish a clear distinction between rights and obligations, between factual information and disinformation, and between freedom and responsibility. This requires a multifaceted approach, encompassing the promotion of media literacy, the protection of journalists, the support of independent media outlets, and adherence to international legal standards.

The role of Internet platforms: The role of Internet platforms in the exacerbation of societal polarisation must be acknowledged. It is thus incumbent upon us to ensure that social networks implement and enforce effective mechanisms to limit the spread of illegal and harmful content. Artificial intelligence can serve as a valuable instrument, provided that it is human rights compliant.

Balancing rights and interests: Parliaments need to strike a balance between the fight against illegal and harmful content and the right to freedom of expression. The escalating polarisation of society must not be utilised as a pretext to impose restrictions on freedom of assembly and association, nor to introduce legislation that favours the opinions of the incumbent government. Parliaments must adopt a resolute stance against the pernicious phenomenon of “cancel culture”, which silences voices and limits pluralism of thought.

Quality journalism: Quality journalism is an essential part of a well-functioning and healthy democracy. A free and independent media landscape furnishes citizens with reliable information and upholds pluralism. Yet today, such journalism is under threat. Public service media’s independence from political and economic influence must be supported by ensuring that adequate funding is provided, stringent editorial standards are upheld, and effective oversight mechanisms are in place. Parliaments must establish effective response mechanisms to address the alerts provided by the Council of Europe’s Platform for the Safety of Journalists.

Media and information literacy: Media and information literacy plays a vital role in reducing polarisation. It is essential to enable critical thinking among the population and promote democratic values, particularly amongst the young. The integration of media literacy into school curricula, the organisation of public awareness campaigns, and the support of organisations dedicated to the education and training of journalists, are all valuable tools.

An on-going challenge: Freedom of expression is not a given, but an on-going challenge and balancing act. Rights and freedoms take decades to achieve and only a moment to be eradicated. We must double our efforts so that freedom of expression remains a force for democracy, not an instrument for division.

Theme 3 - Violence against politicians

Combating violence against politicians: a priority to safeguard democracy: The surge in violence against politicians at all levels in Council of Europe member States is a scourge which disrupts political work and deters many from participating in public life. We agree that addressing violence against politicians is a priority to preserve democracy and protect inclusive societies.

Violence against politicians erodes trust in institutions: Violence against politicians affects personal security but also undermines democratic processes and erodes trust in institutions. We must strengthen our legal and institutional framework to ensure that politicians receive effective support and enhanced protection, at home, in their offices and online.

Violence against women politicians, minorities and LGBTI politicians: Women politicians, minorities and LGBTI politicians are particularly targeted. Attacks against women politicians aim at intimidating them, obstructing their participation, and pushing them out of the public sphere and back into the private domain. We call for systematic investigation and condemnation of any form of violence against politicians.

Reykjavík Principles for Democracy: The Reykjavík Principles for Democracy, adopted in 2023, call for “full, equal and meaningful participation in political and public life for all, in particular for women and girls, free from violence, fear, harassment, hate speech and hate crime, as well as discrimination based on any ground” (Principle 10).

Addressing the root causes of violence against politicians: We must urgently tackle the underlying causes of this violence: they include misogyny, racism, mistrust in political systems, economic inequalities, corruption scandals, and the spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories, notably via social media. We must work together as parliamentarians to create an environment where violence, whether physical or verbal has no place and where confidence in the structures of political and social expression is restored.

Investing in civic education to prevent violence and promote respect: Education and culture play a crucial role in building an informed and engaged European citizenship. This calls for educational programmes, including civic education and media literacy, which foster critical thinking, tolerance and respect for human rights.

Leading responsibly to prevent and combat violence and hate speech: Parliamentarians have both the power and the responsibility to act. As legislators, it is our role to help preventing violence against politicians by leading responsibly, condemning attacks on peers and refraining from inflammatory rhetoric. Parliamentary codes of conduct fostering respect need to be implemented. Political parties must strengthen their actions to prevent and combat hate speech and promote respect in political discourse.