

12th edition of the World Forum for Democracy
Democracy and Diversity
Can we transcend the divides?

Strasbourg, 6 November 2024

Introductory remarks by Theodoros Rousopoulos
President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

Esteemed participants, distinguished guests and friends,

Many times, we have the false impression that things that happen around us are happening for the first time.

But if one delves a little into history, one will be surprised to find that populism has existed in every era of human political history; one will find that the so-called yellow press was not born with fake news or deep fake news in our era but is there for centuries since newspapers started to be published on the European continent.

There have been businessmen editors and irresponsible journalists who exploited the good faith of their audience to pass on fake news.

There were publishers who signed contracts with other publishers to share the profits from blackmailing politicians.

There were and are politicians who - in the name of democracy - committed crimes against their people because it would serve to keep them in power.

Dear participants,

I could just stick to a greeting that would formally reiterate how great it is that politicians, policymakers, academics, active members of society have gathered here today;

I could repeat the declarations that this year marks the 75th anniversary of this great political organization, the Council of Europe, whose Parliamentary Assembly I have the honor to represent before you as its elected President.

I could leave behind 43 years of public life, 20 of which were spent in active and militant journalism that led me to meet historical figures and to experience first-hand wars and injustices.

Or the additional 24 years of political activity as a Member of Parliament or a Minister, or the many decades that, alongside journalism or politics, I have taught as a visiting professor at many universities.

But I would prefer to tell you two stories which I believe are perfectly in line with the issues to be discussed at the twelfth meeting of the World Forum for Democracy.

The first story has to do with a BBC documentary that I watched just a few days ago. Its title is "The Rise of the Murdoch Dynasty". This documentary describes in the best way I have seen to date how a powerful media businessman chooses to support politicians who do not hesitate to enter the service of big media in order to win elections. Because one of the sections you will discuss here has to do with the media, whether it is digital or in the traditional form, this documentary describes in the best way what it means to be interfered with by powerful interests in democracy, what it means to be manipulated, what it means to be a powerful financial player and uncontrollable.

The second story is what I personally experienced a few years ago in Greece, when, as Minister of State, responsible for the media and working very closely with the Prime Minister on a daily basis as an informal coordinator of the government's work, I experienced blackmail from big business interests. Two publishers who were in trouble with the judiciary, one was evading taxes and the other had accepted black money fees,

turned to me to help them escape prosecution. When I replied that I was not interfering with the work of the judiciary, their response was mud-slinging with thousands of publications in the media at their disposal. They fabricated a so-called scandal for which not only I but all the defendants were acquitted. I myself brought my detractors to justice and they were convicted a few years later. In the meantime, however, public opinion in my country, to a large extent, had believed their lies. I was forced to leave politics, to which I returned ten years later, vindicated by the vote of the people who elected me to the Greek Parliament. I was really disappointed understanding how easy it was for some who had media and financial power to undermine democracy.

But, I did not give up.

I did not compromise.

I did not surrender.

These three phrases condense the messages I want to give you today.

Do not give up.

Do not compromise.

Do not surrender.

These are the weapons with which democratic citizens must fight against all kinds of authoritarianism, against all kinds of populism. Some of you will claim that citizens have the right to know the truth.

I agree.

But allow me to say that people also have the obligation to be more responsible. They must read a lot to be better informed, not to be seduced by easy, hawkish politics. Active and not passive citizens are the oxygen of

democracy. You have come here not just to participate in a platform for theoretical debate but to find ways to put into practice a vision of a more democratic world, a world of diversity, a participatory democracy. I invite you to find ways in which democracy protects its citizens and itself from those who exploit it for personal gain. I invite you to remember that being involved in the public sphere is not a profession but a mission. The 612 parliamentarians of PACE are standing and fighting by your side.