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"Democracy... brings aspirations into harmony... aggression and civil war unthinkable" said the President of USA George Bush senior in Helsinki 1992.

I still hear his voice in my ears.

I was in Helsinki, 33 years ago, as a journalist who was covering all major international events. I was filled with optimism. The Cold War had ended. East and West were coming together as partners. It felt like a new era—of reconciliation and lasting peace.

One year later, in 1993, while covering the Vienna Summit of the Council of Europe's heads of states, it was said that: **"The end of the division of Europe offers an historic opportunity to consolidate peace and stability on the continent..."**. Thus Europe could become a vast area of democratic security.

In 1995, I was visiting the NATO's SHAPE headquarters near Brussels. I recall the sense of optimism between Russia and NATO while Russian officers were being stationed there. It was a powerful symbol: former adversaries no longer preparing for confrontation, but engaging in cooperation.

Back then, many of us believed we were building a new Europe—founded on peace, democracy, and the rule of law.

And yet... today, war has returned to our world. From Ukraine to the Middle East, from disinformation to democratic backsliding, we are once again confronted with the same fundamental question: **How do we secure peace, freedom, and dignity—for all?**

The Council of Europe and the OSCE were born from the same post-war vision: to make dialogue stronger than division, and to place human rights, democracy, and the rule of law at the heart of peace.

In 1975, the Helsinki Final Act was not just a diplomatic milestone. It was a moral statement: that the security of states depends on the security of people. That belief lives on in what the Council of Europe calls democratic security—a concept reaffirmed in our summits, from Vienna in 1993 to Reykjavík in 2023.

Democratic security tells us that only by protecting democratic institutions, safeguarding elections, and ensuring media freedom can we truly prevent conflict. It has often been said—and widely studied—that democracies do not go to war with each other.

But where do we stand today?

Across Europe, people fear for the future—war, insecurity, and the erosion of rights. People ask: Are we safer today than we were 30 years ago? And if not, why?

I believe the answer lies partly in the difference between visionary statesmen of the past and the often-short-term political cycles of the present.

We need to make people believe in democracy again. Surveys show many young people admire authoritarian leaders, and even some of our member States face authoritarian tendencies. We need to be more vigilant while

observing elections together. In the era of AI, election manipulation threatens the foundation of democratic Europe.

I know that members of the OSCE or even of the Council of Europe do not all agree with the establishment of an international tribunal on accountability for the crime of aggression against Ukraine. This is not about vengeance, but about restoring the primacy of international law—and the belief that rules matter.

Today, 50 years after the Act of Helsinki, we gather to be reminded of our responsibility: that being participants in the same organisation but not respecting its values leads to chaos. Only authoritarians thrive in chaos. Those who believe in democracy call for fair elections, respect dissent, and do not jail political opponents.

If we want to stand together, we must serve these principles. Appeasement always leads to failure.

We need to find Security and Cooperation again, based on principles and not on the power of the strongest. International law must prevail on the use of force.

Thank you.