

"Thinking of You" exhibition inauguration
Donation of Black Dress

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

Ladies and gentlemen,

As President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, I am deeply honored to participate in Thinking of You—a powerful exhibition that gives voice and presence to women who were silenced by violence, especially sexual violence in conflict.

Today, I am donating a black dress that belonged to my wife, Mara Zaharea—a journalist, chief editor, and evening news anchor at Star Channel TV in Greece. Through her work, Mara has told countless stories of women—many no longer able to speak for themselves—who were victims not only of sexual violence, but of murder, systemic neglect, and the indifference of society.

This black dress speaks of dignity. Like black in art and in life, it absorbs every light and shade—grief, memory, resistance. Its apparent nothingness is hiding everything, because black is made of all colors.

And it commands us to truly see again, to restore what we once forgot.

The Ukrainian-born artist Louise Nevelson, talking about black color, once said: "You can be quiet, and it contains the whole thing."

As I read more about Alketa's work, beyond this extraordinary exhibition, I came across a photograph that gripped me. It shows Alketa herself, breastfeeding her baby daughter.

The title: "Mum, Am I a Barbarian?" It took my breath away.

Because in that image, there is both everything we hope for—and everything we fear. The fragility of a child. The promise of life. The unspoken question: What happens to a human soul before it turns violent? Who teaches a boy that power lies in the domination of a woman's body?

Who allows that lesson to grow unchecked? The rapist. The killer. He was once an infant, fed with love. And still—he became what he became. Somewhere, between cradle and cruelty, we failed. We failed to protect. We failed to teach dignity, empathy, humanity.

And that is why we are here. Because art like this forces us to look. Because dresses like these are not empty—they are full of memory. Because women like Mara — my wife — have used their voices to carry the voices of others, long after they were silenced.

This is not just a ceremony. It is a call. To listen. To remember. To never look away again. Today, I am not only donating my wife's black dress. I am also donating a scarf, given to me by Irida Women's Center, winner of the 2024 Vigdís Prize.

This scarf belonged to a woman from Syria who fled her home while pregnant, escaping domestic violence. She described the fear of boarding an inflatable boat to cross the sea, saying: "When I saw the inflatable boat and the people getting ready to board, I was so terrified that I said there was no way I could go through with it. They gave me one last chance the next day before I would

lose the money I had paid. It was a huge risk, but I ultimately decided to move forward."

Today, she lives in Greece under international protection. She works. Her child is thriving in school. And against all odds, she has laid the foundations for a safer, more hopeful life. Her journey, marked by courage and resilience, is now guided by the promise of peace and possibility.

It is a small piece of cloth, but it holds a world of pain, survival, and dignity. Just like the dresses that hang here, it speaks for those who endured—and those who overcame.

To every woman whose pain became invisible, whose story was never told—this dress says: We see you now. We think of you.

Thank you.