

European Conference of Presidents of Parliaments

20 March 2025, Strasbourg

Opening speech by Theodoros Rousopoulos
President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

Dear colleagues,

Those of you gathered here today have travelled a long and demanding path in politics. For years, you have worked with dedication, overcome challenges, and earned the trust of your fellow citizens, securing election and re-election. Many of you have attained the highest parliamentary office—that of the Head of Parliament.

The trials you have encountered are not new. For 25 centuries, since the Athenian democracy first introduced the concept of popular participation, political life has been a landscape of challenges. This is why I have chosen as the first theme of our discussions the very protection of democracy itself. To be more extensive on that, I will only refer to the war of aggression in Ukraine that challenges the democratic ideals we stand for.

The freedom of expression is one of the fundamental pillars of democracy, and it is the second of the three key topics I have chosen for us to discuss over the next two days. The spread of hate speech, which has always existed in political life, is now increasingly cultivated and disseminated through the new roots of the so-called social media.

More and more citizens, according to many polls, are being misled and manipulated by those whose interest is to undermine democracy and grow uncertainty.

And as faith in democracy is undermined and hate speech increases, we are leading to the widespread violence against politicians, which is the third topic of our Conference.

Such violence not only endangers politicians but also discourages political participation and erodes public trust in democracy. Addressing violence against politicians is framed as essential to preserving democratic integrity and ensuring political engagement to open, fair, and inclusive societies.

In this difficult era, where citizens increasingly question political systems and distrust politicians, we must ask ourselves: Should we strive to be less agreeable but more useful? Is it our role to follow the masses, or to lead them?

My journey in politics and public life has taught me that the trust of the people is not won through temporary communication strategies but through actions and consistency. As a journalist, as a minister, and as an academic, I have witnessed, firsthand, how politics often yields to economic interests and how the media shape public consciousness. If we do not resist the pressures exerted by those who hold financial power, how can we expect citizens to trust us?

We live in an era where financial influence dictates many political decisions.

We recently witnessed an inauguration ceremony where billionaires seated in the front row, while government ministers were placed behind them. Instead of serving the interests of the few powerful elites, we serve the millions of citizens who have entrusted us with their votes.

We have to trust our roots and principles.

Democracy may be old, but not old fashioned.

The question is not to make Europe great again. Europe was and still remains great because of its principles and values that are timeless and attractive globally.

And this is the historical moment to be again a role model for the rest of the world.

Distinguished Colleagues,

I often use the example of my mother land Greece, which was the first country to be expelled from the ranks of the Council of Europe, back in 1969. And while I refer to this example, I always repeat that I am proud as a Greek for this decision, because it is a mere proof that the principles and values of the Council of Europe are not negotiable.

Honorable Presidents,

Last night, as I was leaving my office and walking through the city centre, I noticed a long queue of at least 100 young people waiting. I turned to the head of my office, Mr. Khrychikov, and asked:
– Sergey, what are these people waiting for?

To be honest, my first thought was that they were queueing to enter a trendy bar or restaurant. But he replied:
– They are students in need waiting to receive a meal provided by the French government for just 1€, or even for free.

And that image warmed my heart, maybe because reminds of myself at that age, while I was taking my first steps in my life.

Some say that major political decisions should be taken in cold blood. On the contrary I believe that empathy is a privilege for a politician.

Because this is how we understand that more than others these students I referred to, these people in need are the ones we must stand by and serve.

These people who are studying.

These people who are working hard.

These people who fight every single day with dignity—just to live or even to survive.

These people who try hard to build their own future and indeed our common European's family future.

Despite the challenges we politicians face, including democratic backsliding, uncertainty, polarization surrounding freedom of expression, and in some cases violence against us, I believe these very obstacles make it all the more essential for us to tirelessly advocate for the people I mentioned earlier. This is the very heart of our mission.

This is why we are in politics.

Thank you.