European Conference on Democracy and Human Rights
Opening session

5 May 2025, Kristiansand (Norway),

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

---

Your Royal Highness,

Dear Mr Mayor,

Dear State Secretary,

Dear Deputy Secretary General, dear Bjorn,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me first thank you wholeheartedly for inviting me to this conference that will debate highly relevant and timely matters and for offering me with a possibility to address such a distinguished audience.

Moreover, it is a true privilege for me to represent here the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe – an organisation that was established to preserve peace in Europe after a devastating World War II. It pursued this goal through protecting, promoting and developing what has become the spine of our common European identity – democracy, human rights and the rule of law. The practical implementation of these values helped our societies to live in security and prosperity and make our European project as example that attracted and inspired people around the globe.

But today, once more, we must remember that we need to fight - and fight hard - together – for those hard-won values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The values on which our shared European identity has been forged.

Today we live in a period marked by uncertainly and doubts. Concepts that we considered as given are questioned, principles and values that we regarded as cornerstones of our societies are challenged and the entire architecture of the international order in which we lived over the last 80 years is under serious (possibly even existential) threat. This uncertainly persists and even seem to exacerbate.

The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and its extensive consequences is of course a major factor that feeds this uncertainty. This aggression does not only threaten the very existence of Ukraine, does not only violate international law and humanitarian law, but it also attacks all of us and creates grave dangers, fuelling tensions and conflicts elsewhere in Europe. This war has happened during volatile times with many challenges to representative democracy, when we face the growing erosion of trust in democratic institutions and principles in many of our countries.

We see authoritarian tendencies emerge and democracy backsliding. We see misuse of fundamental rights and freedoms to subvert our institutions and undermine values. We see the growing impact of AI,social media and other modern technologies on elections and other democratic processes. We see the spread of the post-truth politics. And all these trends that we see evidently contribute to the growing uncertainly and doubts when people start questioning whether democracy and the rule of law do indeed still present a value for them.

And this is why we all need to act and act urgently.

We understand now more than ever – 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 strengthen, the deeply-rooted founding values on which Europe has been constructed and which guaranteed prosperity and security for 80 years. 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 brutal and illegal Russian Federation’s aggression and strengthen this support as much as needed. For it is clear: the outcome of this war is bound to shape the future of our continent and from that perspective this is our war too. The war for values and principles that constitute the spine of our European identity, the war for the rule-based international order that helped us build successful and prosperous Europe after the Second World War. This is why standing for Ukraine is standing for Europe, standing for our unity, peace and democracy.

Dear colleagues,

Democracy is of course an old concept, but definitely not old-fashioned. And it is worth fighting for.

That is why I very much look forward to the discussions at this conference today that will focus on how our democracy will survive the ongoing geopolitical storm and how we can collectively ensure that it will come of if stronger and more resilient. The brainstorming of likeminded people who can learn from each other and who can jointly develop responses to the current and emerging challenges is what is most needed now.

I thank the city of Kristiansand for taking this bold initiative and the Norwegian authorities for supporting.

Thank you and let’s have a great conference!