

**Lord Speaker's Lecture
on 75th Anniversary of the Council of Europe
UK House of Lords, Sovereign's Robing Room
26 February 2025, 18:00
Address by Theodoros Rousopoulos
President of the Parliamentary Assembly
of the Council of Europe**

Honorable Lord Speaker,
Lords and Ladies,
Ambassadors,
Dear Colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me share with you my favourite story which begins in the winter of 1943, February as it is now.

Winston Churchill, in one of his hundreds of speeches over BBC radio and as bombs rained down over London, announced his dream of creating a United Nations of Europe as soon as the tragedy of the war is over.

He proposed the establishment of a Council of Europe to maintain peace on the European continent. And the dream took wings and flew over Europe; and again here in London, on 5 May 1949 ten states signed the Treaty to establish the Council of Europe, which also included the creation of the first ever international parliamentary body - what is now the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

And permit me also to mention that a British parliamentarian - Scottish Labour MP Margaret Herbison, known as Peggy – was the only woman representative at the first meeting of the Parliamentary Assembly in August 1949. Today, women from

across our 46 member states make up half of our 612 parliamentarians!

We have come a long way!

I am a historian by training, and these details of history matter.

In our Assembly, which meets in plenary four times a year in Strasbourg but whose committees meet many more times a year, we do not pass laws as you know, but reports. We do not substitute the autonomy of each of our Member States. We call on it to respect the principles that we have all agreed together and which add value to Western civilisation.

Our members participate in the Council of Europe on a voluntary basis and without any additional remuneration. Indeed, I like to repeat that many, when they serve their role properly, risk not being re-elected as they are often absent from their constituencies.

Among the important responsibilities of the Assembly that I have the honour of chairing are the election of judges to the European Court of Human Rights and the sending of MPs to observe electoral processes in Member States under observation.

Last year we celebrated the 75th anniversary of our foundation. This year we celebrate 75 years since the signing of the European Convention on Human Rights.

By strengthening democratic processes and protecting human rights, the Council of Europe has laid the foundations for peace in Europe, as we argue that conflicts can and must be resolved through dialogue, through legal channels but not through violence and the law of the strongest.

A few weeks ago in Strasbourg I had the supreme honour of being re-elected President of the Assembly, and unanimously by the five political groups representing the 306 full and 306 alternate Members of our Parliament. In my speech I told a story that I think you will also find interesting. The story is about ancient Athenian democracy and while we often praise Ancient Athens, I decided to reflect on a darker chapter of its history: the Dialogue

of Athenians and Melians, found in Thucydides' *Historiae* (Book 5). It recounts the debate between Athens and the neutral island city of Milos during the Peloponnesian War (416 BC). The Athenians, portrayed as pragmatic and cynical, argued that power determines law, while the weaker Melians appealed to morality. When negotiations failed, the Athenians besieged Milos, executed the men, and enslaved the women and children -an act of cruelty emblematic of hegemonic arrogance.

Did the Athenians pay for this cynicism? Yes.

Their actions contributed to their downfall, starting with their catastrophic Sicilian campaign (415-413 BC) and eventual defeat by Sparta. The collapse of Athenian Hegemony is a stark reminder of how arrogance and oppression can lead to isolation and ruin.

The symbolism is timeless.

This is what we have to counteract.

We must resist cynicism.

We must resist everything that undermines democracy, the Rule of Law and Human Rights.

This year that we celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Human Rights Convention let's give of our best to support our principles against cynicism and anti-democratic obsessions.

Let me continue for a moment with the Modern Greek democracy, when it was lost because of the dictatorship between 1967 and 1974. Then - in 1969 to be precise – my country was expelled from the ranks of the Council of Europe. I declare myself proud of this decision because this is simply a powerful example that the Council does not turn a blind eye when its principles and values are violated.

Three years ago, we decided to expel Russia from our ranks after its unprovoked invasion of Ukraine.

It should be noted that we are the only international organisation that has made such a move with quick reflexes.

The case of Russia allows for a brief historical reflection. I have spoken of 46 states, home to 750 million free European citizens — once divided — but united through the Council of Europe after 1989.

Our role in integrating newly free democracies fostered dialogue, ensuring equal footing for all members. This exchange has eased many tensions peacefully.

Yet, fundamental values set clear red lines, and Russia's violation of these led to its expulsion. Today, talk of ending this brutal conflict dominates headlines. We all seek an end to suffering, the return of refugees, prisoners of war, and the thousands of children forcibly taken from Ukraine.

But any solution for peace must be based on justice and the respect of international law. A different starting point for this process can only fail and can only undermine the very foundations not only of international law, but also our shared values, and ultimately our European security.

The Russian Federation has not only invaded a neighbour, triggering the largest conflict in Europe since WWII, but has also escalated hybrid warfare, destabilising democracy beyond its borders.

Meanwhile, democratic backsliding and citizen disengagement pose additional threats. Eroding trust in institutions drives people toward divisive, simplistic solutions. Even top leadership now questions democratic principles at a time when unity is essential to tackle global challenges, from climate change to AI.

The Council of Europe stands as the backbone of our democracies, addressing migration, trafficking, gender equality, hate speech, and technology's risks.

Bringing together governments, parliamentarians, civil society, and youth, we craft solutions rooted in human rights and the rule of law.

Social media and AI are increasingly misused to spread hate and misinformation, subtly shifting societies towards autocracy.

Politicians need to denounce falsehoods consistently and invest-morally, financially, and publicly - in democratic institutions across party lines, setting aside personal ambition for the common good.

Your venerable House of Lords has a tradition of playing the role of watchdog and guardian of the basic fundamental rights and values which first made your country a beacon for democracies everywhere.

And you have often been the strongest supporters of the Council of Europe and the European Convention on Human Rights which is its centrepiece. I have the greatest admiration and respect for the way in which you have defended international law principles at the national level even in the most politically charged situations, and at times when courage has been needed. I am extremely heartened that the UK government today, led by Prime Minister Starmer, has been so explicit in its support for the Convention on Human Rights.

In the current international context, the commitment and leadership of the United Kingdom in upholding and promoting across the world the rule-based order and democratic principles matters more than ever. I look forward to continuing working with your excellent parliamentary delegation, representing you and your country, to uphold democracy in the face of the current perfect storm.

Ladies and Gentlemen

As we march towards the middle of the 21st century, we could not have imagined that we would once again be faced with dangers we thought we had left behind forever. And if it is the duty of historians not to forget what others have ignored, it is our duty not to be paralysed in the face of turmoil but to take the initiative to build the new era together with our allies.

Our response to the flattening politics of violence, populism and power is the intangible values we have conquered over the last centuries. We inherited them from ancestors who fought and gave their lives for them, and we have a duty to pass them on to the next generation.

Thank you very much for your attention and for the immense honour for me to address such a distinguished audience here in the House of Lords.