

Plenary sitting of the Austrian National Council

Austrian Parliament, Vienna, 15 May 2024

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

Dear President Sobotka,

Dear Fellow parliamentarians,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Please let me express my sincere gratitude for this invitation to address you, distinguished members of the National Council of Austria, in my capacity of President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Entering your iconic parliament building, I had the impression of entering ancient Greece. Firstly because I was entering the temple of democracy and secondly because this building was inspired by the classical era. Theophilus Hansen, who left Denmark and went with his brother to Athens, created many iconic buildings in the Greek capital, such as the Public Library and the Academy of Athens. Soon afterwards he came to Vienna as a guest of Francis Joseph and created the best work of his career. The building where I have the honour to stand and address you representing the Assembly of the Council of Europe.

The Assembly which I represent here is one of the two governing bodies of the Council of Europe (the other being the Committee of Ministers). It provides a unique platform at the European level for interparliamentary dialogue and parliamentary diplomacy, bringing together parliamentarians from 46 member States, observer States and our Partners for Democracy

States. Parliamentarians who represent the whole spectrum of political life
- ruling and opposition parties, left, right and centre.

I know that it is rare for foreign guests to address your Parliament and I greatly appreciate this honour. It is, to my mind, confirmation of the unwavering commitment of Austria to the values and principles of the Council of Europe – human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

Honourable President and distinguished members of the Austrian Parliament: Events in Europe and beyond unfortunately demonstrate that these values, which are the cornerstone of our European identity, are by no means won forever. They need our determination, our collective wisdom and courage, and our solidarity, and that is why this invitation is so important to me.

Austria has always been, and remains, a key partner to the Parliamentary Assembly. A partnership that started with Austria's accession to the Council of Europe on 16 April 1956. Representatives of both Chambers of the Austrian Parliament are amongst our most active and constructive members, taking on roles as Rapporteurs, members of election observation missions, following the work of Council of Europe committees and institutions, participating in our plenary debates and in the many other activities which are part and parcel of our functioning. I see many of these friends here today. Let me mention just one or two of them:

- the leader of the Austrian delegation to PACE, my good friend Reinhold Lopatka who brings his wisdom and authority to our Assembly
- Petra Bayr, who works tirelessly as the current Chair of the Committee on the Election of Judges to the European Court of Human Rights and as an extremely active and engaged member of the Equality Commission

- Stefan Schennach, whose experience and determination in election observation missions has been tremendously valuable on many occasions
- Andrea Eder-Gitschthaler, who is currently working in particular on raising awareness on the need to combat discrimination against older people
- Stephanie Krisper, who is active in our Migration Committee and looking at the human rights situation at some of the most fragile European border points
- And all the other Austrian members of our Assembly, I pay tribute to you all. The Austrian Parliament can be proud of how it is represented in Strasbourg and your members have served as examples of political wisdom, responsibility and integrity for other delegations.

On 5 May the Council of Europe marked its 75th anniversary, which it will formally celebrate later this week in Strasbourg. The Organisation was created in the aftermath of the Second World War as a unique peace project with a clear goal: to prevent a new war in Europe. European countries agreed to collectively build democratic security on the basis of every member State's commitment to the rule of law, human rights and democracy.

Half a century later, after the end of the Cold War, this project finally brought all of Europe together. Despite the challenges and clear setbacks facing us today, we should not forget this: we can be proud to say that this dream of the political titans of the post-second world war period has been - and still is - a success story. The values which the Council of Europe embodies remain our compass and part of our European DNA; they are part of the fabric of our political, social and cultural life. They remain as relevant as ever, and I am convinced that these values are the only way to navigate through the rough seas and storms of this 21st century.

For the full-scale aggression launched by the Russian Federation against Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was nothing less than an attack and existential challenge to this peace project and to these shared values. I am proud that our Organisation was the first – and so far the only – international body to take the decision to expel the Russian Federation as an immediate and direct consequence of this war. In so doing, we stood up not only for our member State Ukraine, but for all our member States and for the citizens of Europe and even beyond, who count on the international community to uphold the democratic stability of their institutions and societies.

Let us not forget that this blatant aggression by the Russian Federation is not the only attack on our values and institutions. Across Europe, we are witnessing growing signs of democratic backsliding which should serve as an alarm call. These signs are characterised by the gradual erosion of fundamental freedoms such as the freedom of expression, a weakening of checks and balances, the spread of misinformation, disinformation and hate speech, and overt or covert attempts to silence any dissenting voices, including those of the media or political opposition. Is it surprising that our citizens are increasingly turning away from political engagement, losing trust in their institutions and in their representatives. Indeed, is it surprising that many politicians, particularly women, are asking themselves how they can continue their work, faced as they often are with a political climate in which polarisation, hate speech and personal attacks are rife?

Ladies and gentlemen, I have been in the public sphere of my country since 1981. I have personally participated as a journalist, as a Member of Parliament, as a minister and as a university professor in important historical moments of our time which have filled me with experience and hope. When I witnessed the US-Soviet Union arms reduction agreements I breathed, like all my contemporaries, the oxygen of mutual understanding. When I met Mikhail Gorbachev in the Kremlin, I met the man who would

change the course of history and was captivated by his vision. When I saw the Berlin Wall coming down before my eyes and heard the architect of the unification of Germany, Helmut Kohl, describe the difficulties he faced and his determination to end the division of his country, I was filled with hope for a better tomorrow. When I met Margaret Thatcher for the last time in Paris with François Mitterrand and George Bush Sr. talking about peace in the world, I believed that the divisions had finally come to an end.

It was 34 years ago, just one year after the fall of the Berlin Wall, on 21 November 1990, the leaders of all the countries of Europe, East and West, the United States and Canada, met for the first time in Paris, now as representatives of countries with freedom as their common denominator, democracy, commitment to the principles of good neighbourliness, respect for the inviolability of borders and the sovereignty of States, commitment to the peaceful settlement of disputes and cooperation, commitment, commitment, commitment, commitment.

The 34 leaders of the then CSCE, including such worthy leaders as Margaret Thatcher, François Mitterrand, Helmut Kohl, George W. Bush (Sr.) and Mikhail Gorbachev, signed the Paris Charter for a New Europe, a document that we smugly called historic at the time.

When I talked with the leader who taught that patience and perseverance in the goal of equality, Nelson Mandela, is the only way to a better world, I believed again in the vision of democracy. But a period of renewed tension followed. A war in Yugoslavia, new tensions in the Balkans, ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, an Arab Spring that was not Spring after all but a new winter that brought to Europe, along with other conflicts around us, new migratory flows and millions of refugees seeking hope for a better life. But along with it came the currents of reaction to the migrants. There came nationalist movements and attacks on the weak. There were new divisions, reinforced by the financial crisis of 2008 which left a deep wound of division

in Europe and created troubled citizens around the vision of a united Europe.

But we would be unworthy descendants of great political leaders if we did not try again and again. Frustration is inherent in effort, but lack of effort leads to what the ancient Greeks called idiocy. What in English today is called an idiot and the root of the word suggests that an idiot is one who, in ancient Athenian democracy, was not interested in the common good and did not participate in the decisions of the Agora.

That is why we continue the effort.

It was for all these reasons that our Heads of State and Government participated so actively and massively in the Council of Europe's Reykjavik Summit just one year ago: only the 4th Summit in the history of the Council of Europe. At this Summit, our leaders stood together in reasserting their will to support Ukraine for as long as it is necessary and to find sustainable answers to the threats to democratic stability and peace on our European continent.

There, the place of the Council of Europe as guardian and watchdog of human rights, democracy and the rule of law was reasserted. The leaders of our 46 member States adopted an ambitious and clear roadmap setting the priorities and an action plan for the months and years ahead for the Council of Europe.

First and foremost, the ongoing war of aggression of Russia against Ukraine, which continues to bring death and suffering to its people every day, must be at the centre of our attention and efforts.

It has been said before but cannot be repeated enough. Ukraine is fighting this war not just for its own freedom and sovereignty, but for the freedom of us all. It is fighting for the values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law which are the cornerstone and the pride of our European

continent. We must not weaken our resolve to stand by Ukraine. We must not hesitate, at this critical moment, in supporting Ukraine. I call on the Austrian Parliament and government, as I call on all European countries, to double and triple their efforts to allow Ukraine to repel the invader, regain control over its illegally-occupied territories and to restore peace based on justice throughout its land.

At the 4th Summit in Reykjavik last May, the Heads of State and Government did not ignore the call from the Parliamentary Assembly to set up a comprehensive accountability system as quickly as possible and to ensure that all the crimes committed by Russia are properly investigated, prosecuted and punished, and that justice is indeed done. The very first accountability mechanism for the consequences of the Russian aggression - a Registry of Damage – was launched at the Summit and today it is fully operational and already receiving individual claims.

We now call on member and non-member States to swiftly advance on future steps towards accountability and justice, namely the establishment of a comprehensive compensation mechanism for the damages recorded in the Register of Damage, and a compensation fund to pay out the decisions for reparation of damage. Our Assembly was amongst the first voices advocating for the establishment of an ad hoc international tribunal for the crime of aggression and we continue to actively support all international initiatives in this direction. The Assembly is also active in supporting every effort to bring back the children of Ukraine particularly those who have been deported or displaced to the Russian Federation, Belarus and occupied territories. Amidst all this horror, we are looking too towards the future recovery and rebuilding of Ukraine, and I invite you to examine the very solid and rich reports we have been working on over the last two years which detail all this.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine is at the forefront of our Assembly agenda, but unfortunately the challenges do not end there. Our world is in

constant flux, and we cannot ignore the tectonic changes occurring in Europe and globally, which without a doubt will have repercussions on our system of values and principles.

I am, of course, thinking about the emerging new generation of human rights in such areas as climate change and environmental protection and the exponential growth of the use of artificial intelligence in all spheres of life. Our Assembly is often the trailblazer in the Council of Europe in calling for new thinking on human rights issues, adapting our legal framework if necessary and putting in place multilateral co-operation mechanisms to work together to find the best ways forward.

None of us can have failed to notice the landmark judgment of the European Court of Human Rights several weeks ago, pointing to a responsibility of States Parties to the Convention (of which all European states are part) to take the necessary steps to protect the human rights of citizens faced with the effects of climate change. This is a topic on which the Assembly has long called for action. PACE adopted, back in 2021, seven resolutions that call for a paradigm shift in international and national law and policies to ensure that a healthy environment is recognised as a basic human right. The Council of Europe is now working on a new Strategy to bring together and build upon its existing legal instruments and activities in this area, and to determine what would be the best legal framework for the future. Or in fact I should say - for **our** future and that of our children and grandchildren.

A priority close to my heart for my Presidency is addressing the issues raised by the swift proliferation of artificial intelligence. It is a dazzling new world, and I am among those who believe that rather than fearing or avoiding it we need to actively engage in reflecting upon its impact on our daily lives, on our democratic experiences and on how to regulate it so that its huge potential can be used at its best – and not that we are used by it.

A hundred years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville [***pronounce: Alexi de Tokvil***] - following what I told you earlier about the ancient Athenian Agora and those who preferred to abstain from their obligations to democracy- identified the loss of interest in public debate, the withdrawal into one's private sphere, as a major threat to democracy. Today this withdrawal can be exacerbated by social networks and algorithms that create cleavages among people, who end up interacting with only those who think alike. Such fragmentation may lead to radicalisation. It may ultimately lead to conflicts and wars.

In short, we have to strike the right balance between mitigating the risks and making full use of the advantages that AI can offer, and I believe that one of the first steps is to open up the discussion, including all parties including public and private sectors, civil society and citizens, and to set together the rules of the game.

For these reasons, I am very pleased that the Committee of Ministers responded to the Assembly's call to draft a legally binding document on Artificial Intelligence and human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. I hope that Austria, along with other member States, will accede to this Convention as soon as it is opened for signature, enabling its entry into force and its development in practice.

In concluding, I would like to add a few words about my own experience since becoming a member of the Parliamentary Assembly, Chair of its Migration Committee, and now its President.

The Council of Europe is a relatively small organisation compared to some on the international stage. Certainly, its budget is tiny compared to that of some other European institutions.

And yet, I do believe that the Council of Europe punches above its weight in the fields in which it has a unique mandate, expertise, moral authority and a certain agility and flexibility of action which others might lack. I am

convinced that the Council of Europe has a clear role and purpose in today's international landscape, and that it is capable of reacting to new challenges and of taking proactive steps in previously unknown territory.

This capacity and agility rests strongly on our multilateral foundation, on trust and co-operation with and between national governments and national parliaments. Sir Winston Churchill realised the importance of effectively-functioning multilateralism as a means for ensuring a peaceful European future when founding with his colleagues the Council of Europe, and his words remain valid till this day. And governments are certainly more than aware that without national parliamentarians, this precious multilateralism cannot function as it should.

I thank once more the Austrian National Council, for your consistent support, and I would like to assure you in return of the support of the Parliamentary Assembly for your own parliamentary activity. We can all learn from each other, parliamentarians and parliamentary bodies.

Let us work closely together and innovate together, for the peaceful future of Europe and for the democratic stability of our continent.

I thank you for your attention.