

**Keynote speech** for Mr Theodoros Rousopoulos,  
President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe,  
**on the occasion of WPL Summit “Democracy for the 21st Century”**

**Wednesday, 20 March 2024**

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Dear colleagues,

Let me first of all thank Women Political Leaders for giving me the opportunity to contribute to this important event.

The theme being discussed during the summit is an ambitious one - Democracy for the 21st Century.

Humanity crossed into the 21st century, already 20 years ago. Perhaps it's a good time to take stock of initiatives and observations to adjust our roadmap for the years ahead.

*The first finding I would like to share with you is that **Democracy evolves, and it evolves towards equality.***

Athens prides itself on being the cradle of democracy.

However, democracy is not set in stone. It evolves. It improves. At least, this should be our endeavour.

We endeavour to achieve a better, more functional, more inclusive democracy.

Today to be qualified as democracy a political system should comply with higher standards.

We believe in representative democracy, and we want it to be really representative of our society in all its diversity.

That is why equality is a fundamental element. Even if we are heading in the right direction, more has to be done so the equality odes do not remain only a principle on paper. We want barriers to fall and everyone to be able to reach the same achievements.

By “we” I mean all those who believe in democracy and human rights. Certainly, those who are gathered here today, to work on a particularly important aspect of equality, which is gender equality.

***So how one can build a new culture of equality out of theoretical principles?***

Firstly by raising awareness of the positive impact of equality. In particular among men.

As I said, we are all in this together: women’s empowerment is as much a man’s business as a woman’s. We are slowly progressing towards equality and empowerment, but some men are reluctant to accept this process. They think : “power-sharing” means “power-loss”. This is a mistake. Equality is not a zero-sum game. On the contrary, the whole is bigger than the sum of its parts.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, which I have the honour to preside and to represent here today, has been consistently committed to promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment. I consider this to be a top priority for the Assembly in general, and for me as its President. I never miss an opportunity to promote the work of the Council of Europe in this area.

Last week, I flew all the way to New York, to attend the CSW, Commission on the Status of Women. I don’t need to explain to this audience what the CSW is, or its importance.

In New York, the Parliamentary Assembly, together with Greece and Iceland, held an event on “Parliaments as Drivers for women’s empowerment”. We

should not be afraid to use the term “women empowerment” and to refer to the notion of power, because that’s what we are actually talking about.

The principle that men are “allies” and not opponents when it comes to promoting gender equality is an approach that the Parliamentary Assembly consistently upholds in all areas. Last year, for instance, the Assembly adopted a resolution on the role and responsibilities of men and boys in stopping gender-based violence. This text reminds us that women have led the fight against gender-based violence for decades, but men and boys also have an important role to play in it. They are part of the solution, not only part of the problem. Men can be positive role models, act as agents of change and use their influence among peers. I have made this call from the Assembly my own, and I encourage men, including fellow politicians, to play such positive roles.

**What else we can do? We can encourage and maintain initiatives like this Forum.**

**The Parliamentary Assembly is also actively committed through its networks and prizes to reinforcing the culture of equality.**

Women face many barriers when it comes to engaging in active politics. Violence, *[which was the topic of the previous panel]* is one of them. Violence has various forms, including harassment within political parties, in institutions, and most visibly, hate speech. The Parliamentary Assembly is committed to counter hate speech in all its forms and it cooperates with a variety of actors, including civil society organisations, to achieve this. **The No Hate Parliamentary Alliance** was set up precisely to engage in this fight.

**Women@PACE** is another body created by the Assembly, at the initiative of Secretary General Despina Chatzivassiliou-Tsovilis, in 2022. It is a non-political,

cross-party, informal platform open to all women members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (around 250 at the moment). The 'Women@PACE' group allows members to channel their initiatives, launch debates and consultations, co-ordinate and discuss in an informal way.

I mentioned role models, male ones in particular, in connection with gender-based violence.

Let's talk of a female role model, who will continue to play her part in matters of political representation. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has decided to create a Prize for Women's Empowerment which bears the name of Vigdís Finnbogadóttir [Vigdiz Finnbogadotir], former President of Iceland, the first woman in the world to be elected as a Head of State. The Prize will be awarded for the first time this year.

I am looking forward to the Trailblazer Award ceremony, which is going to take place this evening, to praise the aspirational leadership model.

Dear colleagues,

It is imperative that we move beyond rhetoric, and we translate our aspirations to gender equality into tangible actions. I have mentioned several concrete steps that the Assembly has taken in this direction. Today, through a variety of panels and sessions, we have the opportunity to exchange new ideas and initiatives that have proven successful in our respective institutions.

Let us share openly and commit to implement these new ideas before returning home. Let us bridge the divide between words and actions and achieve lasting and meaningful change in the lives of women and girls, both in politics and beyond.