



Provisional edition

Thursday 20 March 2025, morning

Official report of debates

Opening of the European Conference of Presidents of Parliaments

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (President of the PACE): Dear colleagues,

I am Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS. I'm the President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

I want to warmly welcome you for accepting my invitation to be with us today.

Dear colleagues,

Those of you gathered here today have travelled a long and demanding path in politics. For years you have worked with dedication on 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 a 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 routes 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 report:

1. Speeches in English, French, German and Italian are reported in full in English.
2. Speeches in other languages are summarised from the interpretation and indicated by an asterisk (*).
3. Speeches in German and Italian are available in full on the Assembly's website.
4. The text of the amendments is available at the document centre and on the Assembly's website. Only oral amendments or oral sub-amendments are reproduced in the report of debates.
5. Corrections should be handed in at Room 1081 not later than 24 hours after the report has been published.

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 communications strategies but through actions and consistency.

As a journalist, as a minister and as an academic, I have witnessed first-hand how politics often yields to economic interests and how the media saves 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 [were] 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 million of citizens who have entrusted us with their votes.

We have to trust our roots and our principles. Democracy may be old but not old-fashioned.

The question is not how 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 motherland Greece, which was the first country to be expelled from the ranks of the Council of Europe back in 1969 because of the junta. And while I refer to this example, I always repeat the same phrase that I'm 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.

Honourable 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 Sergey KHRYCHIKOV, and asked him: Sergey, what are these people waiting for? To be honest my first thought was that they were queuing 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 one euro or even for free.

And that image warmed my heart – maybe because it reminds me of myself at that age while I was taking my first steps in life. Some say that us politicians should take decisions 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 are common Europeans family future.

Despite the challenges we politicians face, including democratic backsliding, uncertainty, polarisation, 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.

[*Applause*]

Mr Alain BERSET (Secretary General of the Council of Europe): Mister President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, dear Theodoros, thank you.

Madam Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly,

Ladies and gentlemen Presidents of Parliaments,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It's a pleasure for me to be able to say a few words to you this morning, not least because I remember that it was exactly fifty years ago that the first Conference of Presidents of European Parliaments took place - an important moment.

As you know, ladies and gentlemen, a few days ago, one of our own passed away. Walter SCHWIMMER passed away on March 12 at his home in Klosterneuburg, Austria, and I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the former Secretary General of the Council of Europe, a committed parliamentarian, a convinced European who guided our Organisation into a new millennium, between hope and upheaval.

In fact, to pay tribute to him today is to pursue our commitment, to ensure that our values shape the new European security architecture that is emerging, and to uphold our principles loud and clear in a reconfigured world order, a world in which war is raging on our continent, in Ukraine, a world in which authoritarian populism is on the rise, a world in which polarisation and misinformation are fuelling divisions in our populations, a world in which the retreat of democracy is undermining the rule of law.

But, ladies and gentlemen, Presidents,

How did we get here? Why is freedom declining worldwide for the nineteenth year running? Why do only 6% of the world's population live in a fully-fledged democracy, compared to 12% ten years ago? Why does 40% of the world's population live under an authoritarian regime? And, most worryingly of all, among those who doubt democratic systems, almost 80% believe that today's children will have fewer opportunities and prospects than their parents. This lack of prospects should alert us. This lack of prospects is our responsibility. This lack of prospects, and the corrections that need to be made, must guide our actions.

And if we don't respond to this democratic malaise, then others will respond in our place; and they won't necessarily do so by supporting it, by relying on our values.

Today, it's the younger generations in particular who are sending us a strong signal. I was in Luxembourg yesterday, and in Luxembourg, 35% of young people are reluctant to say that democracy is the best form of government. In France, almost a third say they have lost confidence in democracy. In the UK, over half think their country would be better off under a strong leader who didn't have to bother with Parliament and elections; and almost a third think the country would be better governed if the army took control.

And we sense that these thoughts exist in all our states. We have to take them seriously. It is probably the result of a succession of crises - what I call endemic crisis, parallel crisis - that have shaken the world and our continent. Of course, we can go back to the fall of the Iron Curtain, to the somewhat naïve optimism that followed; some historians spoke of the end of history, and liberal democracy seemed to be triumphant.

But conflicts very quickly shattered this illusion: in Chechnya in the last century, in Iraq and on September 11th. But for our European continent, I believe that the real caesura, the moment of caesura, was the crisis of 2008. And we've been feeling the effects of the financial crisis for over fifteen years now. For example, we'll have to wait until 2023 - 2023, in other words, fifteen years - for Italy's GDP, its gross domestic product, to return to its pre-2008 level. And youth unemployment remains one of the deepest scars of this crisis. In 2011, over 20% of young people in the eurozone were looking for work. And the vicious circle continues: last year in the UK, unemployment among 16-24 year olds reached its highest level since the pandemic. The pandemic, the climate, unemployment and, above all, the war in Ukraine.

So, in these conditions, young people are obviously keen to vote; but they are struggling to see progress and they are struggling to project themselves into the future. And yet, we need time, democracy needs time, an increasingly scarce commodity; and adapting our democracies to a fast-changing world, giving ourselves the means to offer long-term prospects, while meeting the needs of the present.

Ukraine is a perfect example of this, where Russia's war of aggression has been raging for over ten years now - eleven years, with full-scale aggression now in its third year. In this context, the Council of Europe's action is a long-term one. We know that this action will need duration, solidity and time to be fully effective, both to support the emergency and to accompany reconstruction.

I would like to take this opportunity, if I may, to welcome our friend Mr Ruslan STEFANCHUK, President of the Ukrainian Rada, to this room, this hemicycle.

And then, ladies and gentlemen, building democracy is not just about organising elections. It also means guaranteeing stability, peace and the right conditions to lay the foundations. Building democracy also means imparting a critical spirit, a culture of debate, an awareness of the common good. And that's exactly why we need to make education a central focus of our action. Education is democracy's first and last line of defence.

And finally, we must protect democracy, and to do so, we must refuse to take it for granted. For, all too often, we only realise its value when it falters. As Amartya SEN said, "the security that democracy offers goes unnoticed until it is threatened", and in the end, guaranteeing democratic security means acting before it's too late. That's why we need to fight corruption, electoral interference, disinformation and all the other threats that undermine democracy.

But guaranteeing democratic security is not enough: it must also be strengthened, renewed and adapted. This is the challenge of the new democratic pact we propose to launch within the framework of the Council of Europe, to make our democracy more solid, more agile, more inclusive; to be capable, in essence, of seeing it adapt to the new demands of the times.

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

This ambitious project, this necessary project, this project for a new democratic pact belongs to all of us. And why not create a support group among national parliaments to embody and drive this project forward?

Together, let's strengthen the implementation of the Reykjavik principles for democracy and translate them into concrete action. Let's work together to imagine a forward-looking democracy, driven by the people and protected by the Council of Europe. I believe that this is exactly what you are devoting your energy and time to in your countries, in your parliaments, but also here in Strasbourg, in this hemicycle: here, at home.

Thank you all.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (President of the PACE): I now invite you to adopt the agenda of our Conference, which will be divided, as I said earlier, into three themes.

Our first theme is entitled "Safeguarding democracy".

Later this afternoon at around 4:30 p.m. we will start the discussions of our second theme on "Guaranteeing freedom of expression in times of polarisation and uncertainty".

And tomorrow morning, we shall be dealing with the third and the last theme of the Conference entitled "Violence against politicians".

At the end of our debates, it will be my pleasure to present you orally with conclusions. Are there any comments on the draft agenda?

So the agenda is adopted.

I would like to inform you that the rules of the Conference have been made available to you.

I am pleased and honoured to inform you that Ms Verona MURPHY, Speaker of the Irish Parliament and Senator Maria Byrne, Deputy Speaker of the Senate, will act as Vice Presidents of the Conference today.

The list of speakers for each theme has been distributed. In accordance with the rules of the Conference, the order of speakers has been determined by the drawing of lots during the meeting of the Secretaries of Delegations, held this morning, on the basis of the speakers registered at that time.

I invite the presidents and speakers of parliaments wishing to add their names to one of the lists to do so at the Table Office located on the first floor.

Before we begin our debates, I would like to remind you that the Parliamentary Assembly is pleased to host a lunch which will be offered to participants at 1:15 p.m. in this Palais d'Europe in the Bleu Restaurant, and I would also like to invite all speakers and vice speakers, presidents and vice presidents to attend the traditional family photo which will take place at 1:00 p.m. outside this chamber.

We shall begin our proceedings with our first theme, safeguarding democracy. This theme is of direct concern to us, as representatives of the people. Democracy in Europe faces several major risks: weakening of democratic counterparts, erosion of democratic standards and safeguards, erosion of trust in political institutions, the spread of disinformation and misinformation, external pressure, including hybrid threats, cyberattacks and foreign interference in democratic processes.

As European countries face unprecedented challenges to their democratic norms, institutions and values, it is imperative to continue to identify and promote common strategies aimed at protecting democratic security and stability in our continent, Europe. It is a collective responsibility that requires national parliaments within the Council of Europe to work together, share knowledge and adopt best practices.

Three keynote speakers agreed to introduce the debate on our first theme: our colleague Ms Yaël BRAUN-PIVET, President of the French National Assembly; she will be followed by Ms Bärbel BAS, President of the German Bundestag, and Mr Ruslan STEFANCHUK, Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine.

To open our first debate, I have the pleasure now to give the floor to our French colleague, Ms Yaël BRAUN-PIVET, you have the floor.

Theme 1: Safeguarding democracy

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (President of the PACE): We shall begin our proceedings with our first theme, "Safeguarding democracy".

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To open our first debate I have the pleasure now to give the floor to our French colleague. Madam Pivet, you have the floor.

[Light applause]

Ms Yaël BRAUN-PIVET (President of the National Assembly, France): Ladies and gentlemen Presidents of Assemblies,

Mr President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe,

Secretary General of the Council of Europe,

Members of Parliament,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Seventy-five years ago, one of the founding fathers of the European Convention on Human Rights, Pierre-Henri TEITGEN, a member of the French Resistance and former French Minister of Justice, entrusted the Convention with the task of creating a conscience within Europe to sound the alarm.

But today, the alarm is not sounding: it's screaming. Our democracies are being targeted, our rule of law threatened, our fundamental values - those of the ECHR - violently challenged and attacked. At this critical moment, we, the presidents of assemblies, bear a historic responsibility, a commitment greater than ourselves, an oath of vigilance and resistance. Which oath? That of being the ramparts, the inflexible and implacable shields of our states with rule of law in the face of the perils that threaten them.

The first of these perils is the brutal, frontal attack on the principles on which our international law is founded: the inviolability of borders, the freedom of peoples to self-determination. This threat is at work everywhere, and with unprecedented violence in Ukraine.

Dear Ruslan Stefanchuk,

I am proud that last week the French National Assembly once again adopted, by a large majority, a resolution calling on us to step up our support for Ukraine. Rest assured: we will not give up. Democracy does not die under the sound of cannon fire. The Ukrainian people will not have an unjust and shaky peace imposed on them.

France and its European partners share the same strong will: any peace agreement must be accompanied by robust and credible security guarantees for Ukraine, guarantees that ensure respect for its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. We will not allow premature and biased elections to be imposed on the Ukrainian people. An election must always be free, because it is the right of a people to choose its future that is at stake.

But our democracies are not only threatened by bombs and the clash of arms, in addition to conventional warfare, there is a new form of warfare: hybrid, informational and technological, which transcends our borders. Its aim? To sabotage our democracies from within, to undermine the sovereignty of our states. For what do we see today? Massive vote-buying in Chisinau, disinformation campaigns in Tbilisi, votes manipulated by algorithms in Bucharest, direct American intervention on behalf of the extreme right in Germany. Foreign interference infiltrates, influences and intoxicates democratic debate.

And in France? In France, we long thought we were safe. But we're not. In 2023, during a campaign orchestrated by the Russian FSB, stars of David were spray-painted in Paris. The aim? To fracture and set fire to our societies from within. That's why parliament responded by passing two major laws last year, giving unprecedented resources to our intelligence services and independent regulatory authorities, in order to prevent these serious attempts at destabilisation.

Presidents of parliamentary assemblies, it is up to us to show vigilance and initiative to preserve the pillars of international law that underpin the sovereignty of each of our countries.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

The second danger gnawing at our democracies is the repeated attacks by some on the rule of law. In some countries, members of the opposition are brutalised, the rights of women and homosexuals are denied, and the freedom to demonstrate is threatened. The independence of constitutional judges is also under attack. When the separation of powers disappears, fundamental rights soon follow. Faced with all this, we, the Presidents of assemblies, bear an eminent, crushing, institutional and existential responsibility: that of being, in the assemblies we preside over, the guarantors of the rule of law.

Contrary to what populists would have us believe, the rule of law and democracy are not the preserve of a privileged elite: they are the treasure of the people. Look at the citizens of Romania, Georgia, Serbia and Moldova, who are marching in their thousands to demand justice. As presidents of assemblies, we carry the voices of our peoples. Our responsibility is to defend their rights. Our place is alongside them, alongside all those who fight for democracy, alongside the defenders and protectors of our values who brave all dangers and refuse to be muzzled.

Last week, I received Maia SANDU, President of Moldova, at the National Assembly, after having received Svetlana TIKHANOVSKAÏA, leader of the Belarusian opposition, last month. To these two women of courage and bravery, who are defending our common values, I said: "You are the honour of Europe".

To show our solidarity, to defend our values, let us continue to fight, to commit ourselves, to carry out joint initiatives of parliamentary diplomacy. For my part, as a woman of law, a woman of the rule of law, this is a visceral commitment that I carry deep within me. Defending the rule of law, the principles on which our democracy is founded, and those of the European Convention on Human Rights: these are the objectives of my parliamentary diplomacy policy.

And to safeguard our rule of law, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe plays a crucial and cardinal role. It is the watchdog of European democracy, which does not allow any infringement of our fundamental rights. It has not hesitated to sanction the Russian and Azerbaijani delegations for failing to respect our shared values. To guarantee the integrity and strength of these values, the European Court of Human Rights is also on the front line. As members of parliament, it sheds light on the path we should follow to develop our legislation and strengthen our rule of law, as we have done in France in recent years with regard to police custody or the detention of foreign minors.

I would like to reiterate here, clearly and forcefully, that all our countries must comply with the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights. As for those who, in France or elsewhere, would like to leave the Court, my answer is this: let's not turn our backs on seventy-five years of progress in human rights. Let us not betray the history of Europe and of this Council. It was born out of the ashes of totalitarianism. Our continent must never go back there. Never again.

Finally, a third peril threatens our societies at their core: mistrust of the very idea of parliamentary democracy; the the people tiring of us, their representatives. A chilling poll in France last month confirmed this: 73% of French people are now calling for a real leader to restore order; 41% feel that they don't care about parliament. That's why protecting our democracies also means restoring our fellow citizens' love and desire for government of the people, by the people and for the people.

And to achieve this, there are two main avenues I would like to explore: the first is a return to a form of continuous, living democracy. We cherish democracy, we believe in it. Let's prove it, then, by giving a more regular say to the sovereign people, within the framework of controlled referendums that would guard against foreign interference. For the people must decide without being manipulated.

The second way to make people desire democracy again is to have open assemblies that are open and accessible to the people. Because distance breeds mistrust, our parliaments must become community houses, living agoras, so that our fellow citizens can feel at home.

I would like to conclude with a great voice that has left its mark on France, Germany and Europe: Robert SCHUMAN. On 10 December 1951, in Strasbourg, before the Assembly of the Council of Europe, he issued this solemn warning: "If we fail to decide in time, we risk missing the last chance of salvation for Europe and for our countries".

Ladies and gentlemen, the time has come.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (President of the PACE): Thank you, Madam President, and especially for reminding us that our parliaments are the living agoras, and of course, that we have to defend the rule of law, and thank you for reminding all participants that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, which is based in this very hemicycle, was the first to decide among, of course, with the institution, the organisation, that the Russians must be expelled after the war of aggression in Ukraine.

I will now invite Ms Bärbel BAS, the President of the German Bundestag to take the floor.

Madam Bas, the floor is yours.

Ms Bärbel BAS (President of the Bundestag, Germany): Mister President,

Ladies and gentlemen,

On February 23, Germany elected a new Bundestag, which will convene for its constituent session on March 25. We can look back on an emotional election campaign. At over 80%, voter turnout was higher than at any time since German reunification.

Citizens want to be heard and seen, and they want to help shape the future - that is an important signal. However, authoritarian forces have also benefited from this politicisation - that is part of honesty. Nevertheless, the centrist parties were able to hold their own overall. Together, they still have a clear majority in the German Bundestag. They must now prove that they have people's problems in mind and offer concrete solutions. This is the only way to regain trust - and this trust is the best protection for our democracy.

The CDU, CSU and SPD are currently working hard to find reliable majorities for a new government. And I can assure you of this: in view of the current security situation, everyone is aware of the urgency. The current Bundestag therefore passed important constitutional amendments two days ago with a two-thirds majority, which I hope will also be passed in the Bundesrat tomorrow. With a credit-financed special fund of 500 billion euros, we want to make massive future investments in infrastructure and climate protection. The additional money is to be invested in daycare centers, schools, hospitals, digital networks, rail transport and bridges, for example. 100 billion euros will flow into the climate and transformation fund alone.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is the largest infrastructure program ever seen in Germany. At the same time, we are taking on more responsibility for security, peace and prosperity in Europe. In future, defence and security policy expenditure amounting to more than 1% of gross domestic product will no longer fall under the debt rules. And this applies not only to expenditure on the German armed forces, but also to civil defence and civil protection. It also applies to cyber security, additional military support for Ukraine and intelligence services. These resolutions have also shown that the centrist parties in Germany are standing together. The CDU/CSU, the SPD and the Greens have found a joint solution under great time pressure - across party lines. In view of the polarising election campaign, this was an important sign of a willingness to compromise - and we are now taking this spirit with us into the new election period. One thing is clear: Germany will live up to its responsibility in Europe more than ever before.

Ladies and gentlemen, following the dramatic events of recent weeks, it is also clear that the values of the Council of Europe have never been under so much pressure. We must defend democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Our parliaments are also challenged. We parliamentarians must convey the magnitude of this task to our citizens. This also means being honest. We will have to give up some things in the defence of freedom. A German journalist recently wrote: "*We must become more militant again. I have the impression that we do not love our freedom as much as our enemies despise it.*" End quote.

Dear Ruslan, I know of no other country that is currently fighting for freedom like Ukraine. The people of Ukraine know: the enemies of freedom of our democracy must never win. This admirable determination must be an example to us all. Ukraine is not only fighting for its own freedom, but also for our European values. Dear colleagues, I therefore appeal to you all to continue to support Ukraine. And I would like to thank everyone who signed the joint declaration on the third anniversary of the Russian attack. This is a strong sign of solidarity.

Solidarity with Ukraine is in our European interest - and this has been the case from day one of the Russian attack. And today more than ever, we are called upon to secure military support for Ukraine. At the same time, we must strengthen our overall defence capability and our democracies must become stronger and closer together. For us Europeans, this is the hour of testing. We must become more militant - for our values, for our freedom, for the protection of democracy - now or never.

Allow me to conclude with a topical comment. When we talk about democracy, its values and protection today, the rights of minorities are naturally also part of this. And this also includes having a choice between several alternatives when we have called the voter to the ballot box. The latest developments in Budapest and also in Ankara are cause for concern and criticism. The protection of children, as put forward by Hungary, really has nothing to do with LGBTIQ rights. And the arrest of Istanbul Mayor İmamoğlu, shortly before he was to be nominated as a presidential candidate and run against the incumbent in a free election, is a mockery of democracy. We should make this clear.

Ladies and gentlemen, with my visit here in Strasbourg, I bid you farewell as President of the Bundestag, and I thank you all for the truly trusting and strong co-operation. And I hope that we will all remain strong and continue to move closer together in the future. Thank you very much.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (President of the PACE): Thank you so much, Madam Bas.

Allow me, first, to congratulate you on your re-election and, of course, I want to thank you for receiving me, welcoming me, in Berlin while I had the opportunity to address the Committee about the issues related to what you have already said, and I'm talking specifically about Ukraine. And I want to point out the phrase that you pinpointed: that "peace and prosperity have a cost" and we must pay for this cost if we want peace and prosperity.

Thank you for your inspiring words.

Now I will call Mr Ruslan STEFANCHUK, Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine to take the floor.

Dear Ruslan, you have the floor.

Mr Ruslan STEFANCHUK (Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine): Mister President of the Parliamentary Assembly,

Mister Secretary General, Honourable Presidents of Parliaments,

Madam Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to speak to my fellow presidents of European parliaments in this house of democracy. The theme of our first panel, "Defending Democracy," sums up what Ukraine is doing today. I'm proud that despite the heavy cost and terrible losses, the Ukrainian people stand strong in defending democracy. They are defending European democracy. They are defending global democracy. The result of this fighting will shape not just Ukraine's future but the future of democracy itself.

Let me be clear: no matter how hard it gets, no matter what we face, we will never stop. We will not stop fighting for our freedom and independence, for democracy and development, for the future of our children. In this fight, Ukraine and Ukrainians continue to count on the firm support of our partners and friends.

I want to thank each of you – dear representatives of great nations – for all the help you have given and continue to give Ukraine in these difficult times. We will never forget what you have done for us: when millions of Ukrainians had to seek refuge in your countries. When we had no weapons to defend ourselves. When quick and bold action was needed to stop the aggressor. We will always be grateful for your support, which has helped us stay strong. I bow to you in gratitude and offer my sincere applause, dear friends – to your peoples, the leaders of your nations, your parliaments and your governments.

Dear friends,

I have come to Strasbourg to ask for your continued support. Ukraine needs you now more than ever. Our resources are not endless. The aggressor keeps attacking.

At the same time, we talk with our overseas partners about how to bring real and lasting peace – the peace Ukraine and its people deserve.

I ask you to use your connections in Washington to share the truth about Ukraine. The world must see the scale of our suffering, the destruction we endure and the clear line between the victim and the aggressor.

In our fight for freedom and independence, we count on the strong support of the American people, the bipartisan backing of the US Congress and the leadership of President Donald TRUMP. We believe in "peace through strength," and that strength must force the aggressor to stop the war. For us, the United States will always be Ukraine's key partner and trusted ally.

Just as we rely on the US, we also trust in Europe's unity and strength. Ukraine is part of Europe – our shared home. We are not just neighbours but a country that has been a member of the Council of Europe since 1995 and is now a candidate for European Union membership. We are Europeans who have chosen a free and united future. We are your brothers and sisters who refuse to be dragged back into the darkness of tyranny – where freedom, justice and democracy have never existed. We believe that Europe will not only stand by its future member but will also show leadership, unity and strength in defending itself against Russian aggression.

Dear colleagues,

We have high hopes for the Council of Europe and its Parliamentary Assembly. From this high podium, I again thank you for your unwavering support of Ukraine. The Council of Europe made history when it became the first – and remains the only – international union to expel Russia. This sent a clear message: aggression will not be tolerated, and breaking international law will have consequences.

The Council of Europe must keep leading the efforts to hold the aggressor accountable. This is where key steps for justice and compensation have begun.

The creation of the Register of Damages was a big step, as was the work on setting up the Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression and the Compensation Commission.

But we must move faster to set up the Compensation Fund and complete the full Compensation Mechanism.

Justice delayed is justice denied. We must jointly issue, and PUTIN must pay himself the bill for the war he started! Not the European or US taxpayers, but he himself. I truly hope that the EU Leaders Summit that is taking place in Brussels these days will take important decisions. Firstly, that the crimes committed by Russian troops, their commanders and leaders will not go unpunished. Secondly, that the Special Tribunal will be finally established.

Pressure must increase until peace is secured. Sanctions must stay in place and be made even stronger. Ukrainians want peace more than anyone. We do not seek endless war. We want peace, but not at any cost.

Our goal is not just to stop the fighting but to achieve real, lasting peace that secures Ukraine's sovereignty and future in Europe and NATO. We demand full respect for Ukraine's borders as recognised by international law. We will never accept Russian control over our occupied lands. We will never allow our Armed Forces to be weakened. And we will never give up our right to choose our own allies.

Ukraine needs real security guarantees. Not empty promises. Not just words on paper. We need firm international commitments. That is why NATO membership is the best way to secure Ukraine. Russia must not be allowed to decide Ukraine's future in NATO.

As President Volodymyr ZELENSKY bitterly said in Munich, "...right now, the most influential member of NATO seems to be PUTIN – because his whims have the power to block NATO decisions".

Similarly, PUTIN cannot defy or block any strong and decisive European steps that help Ukraine.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today, I have spoken about Ukraine's struggle, but also about the safety of Europe and the world. No one is truly safe. Russia will not stop unless it meets firm resistance, unless it sees our unity and strength. I do not need to convince you. Ukraine's bitter experience with Russia speaks for itself. But I ask you to share the truth with those who still doubt. With those who still believe the lies that Russia keeps telling. With those who hold the power to shape global security.

Dear friends,

I warmly recall every meeting that we have held. I remember your tears of compassion. I remember your sullen and sad faces in Bucha. I remember your sincere words: "What else can we do for you?" I remember each of your decisive actions. I remember the joint press conference in an Odesa bomb shelter under Russian missile attack. I remember our joint visits to our war heroes in hospitals. I remember...

But above all, I cherish in my memories that very first breath you take before asking me "How are you guys"? Every time it was a breath of hope, a breath of faith, a breath of true compassion. Compassion for Ukraine, compassion for Ukrainian people, for Ukraine's future.

Dear friends, I want to thank you for this very first breath,

Thank you.

Glory to Ukraine!

Glory to Europe!

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (President of the PACE): Thank you.

Thank you, dear Ruslan.

You said that your resources of ammunition are not endless but we have all witnessed that the resource of courage of your people is unlimited.

Dear colleagues,

The list of speakers has been distributed to all of you. I should like to remind you that according to our rules, the speaking time per statement is limited to 5 minutes.

The first speaker on my list is Mr Martin HOJSIK, Vice President of the European Parliament, who I call to take the floor.

Mr Martin HOJSIK (Vice-President of the European Parliament): Thank you very much, Mister President.

Dear colleagues,

A few weeks ago, when the US Vice President J.D. VANCE was speaking at the Munich Security Conference, the expectations were high. Everybody expected him to address the aggression of PUTIN's regime against Ukraine, that he would assure us of the US's unwavering support for democracy, for freedom, for independence. Instead, what we heard was something else. Somehow, that Europe is the problem, that we are not free.

What we face today, is sadly a situation where Europe is pushed away from the table – we are not sitting at the table, we are about to be served at the table as a meal. And don't get me wrong, this is not only about Ukraine, this is not only about the European Union – this is about all the European countries. This is where I believe that we should be strong and we should be able to stand up and say "No, we are ready to safeguard democracy. We are going to stand up for the freedom, for liberal democracy, the democracy of freedom and we are not going to be giving in to populist narratives."

Because the real threat today is the rise of illiberal democracy, as I call it, fake democracy. It is a system where you have elections but you don't have the rule of law. You don't have judicial independence, you don't have media freedom, civil society is being suppressed and the very foundations of democracy are eroded. And we cannot allow this trend to continue.

Unlike these fake democracies, liberal democracy is rooted in the enlightenment values: the separation of powers, the rule of law, human rights, civil liberties and political freedom for all citizens. These are not abstract ideas, they are all the very foundation of European progress and we are resolutely committed to defending them.

Our commitment is enshrined in Article 2 of the Lisbon Treaty and the Charter of Fundamental Rights, which uphold the EU core values: human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and human rights. And let's be honest, without these, there is never going to be lasting peace.

But what we have to do is protect them and we first have to start by looking within because words are not enough and if we say that we uphold the rule of law, we actually have to do that. We also have to look inside of the European Union and we must leverage all the tools at our disposal. It is to make sure that, if you are committed to something, you uphold it. And a democracy that tolerates the erosion of its own principles, is really on borrowed time. That is why I believe, and the parliament believes, that the EU must strengthen the link between financial support and the respect of the rule of law.

The European Union is not a hand-out machine. You will not belong to the club, you agreed to the rules of the club, you should follow the rules of the club. Hence, the European Union conditionality mechanism adopted in 2020 that allows the suspension or the reduction of EU funding to member states in cases of proven violations that compromise the sound financial management of the Union. It ensures that the EU resources support policies that we actually agreed on, the policies that uphold our fundamental principles, and that's where the Parliament played a really crucial role in bringing this to life and I'm happy that the European Court of Justice upheld these mechanisms.

Additionally, we have the European Commission's annual rule of law report that provides a comprehensive assessment of the rule of law situation across the member states, helping to identify and address potential democratic backsliding before it becomes critical.

The objective is that we help each other to strengthen our democracies and we work together in making the rule of law, the true liberal democracy work. But we also have to, sadly, look at protecting us from outside interferences. That's why the European Parliament has established two committees on foreign interference, INGE 1 and INGE 2 and they highlighted the public awareness about what is happening. They shape the European debate and showcase the present threats of information and external manipulation. Following the two and a half years of investigation, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on 1 June 2023 highlighting the urgent need to combat foreign interference, and let's be honest, particularly in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine. We called for a co-ordinated EU strategy including a risk-based approach to identify and deter foreign influence through clear sanctions, but also to support media literacy as civic education.

Education is the cornerstone, I am very happy that this was already highlighted. Without civic education, without people who are aware of what is happening, and who are not just sheep, we will not have democracy. We need to counter AI-driven disinformation, which is also sadly spreading rapidly. We need to regulate foreign-controlled media ownership and how also, of course, the social networks impact and their algorithms. It is not about freedom of speech, it's about who is suddenly amplified the most. Everybody should have a voice, but it should be a fair voice.

And, of course, we need to strengthen cybersecurity and protect European elections.

Now, we also stress the risks posed by the foreign-controlled critical infrastructure and we were advocating restrictions on companies like Huawei, ZTE and TikTok. And we also denounce foreign corruption attempts, including those involved with Qatar and Morocco, and we have to, let's be honest, improve our own standards, and ethics used in the European Parliament. We always have to keep reminding ourselves, as parliamentarians, we have to do our homework and also be able to be responsible for our actions, held accountable.

A special concern is now the Russian interference in electoral processes and referenda. This is why I believe that we have to strongly work together in countering this.

As the European Parliament, we have now established a European democracy shield, which is looking at a broader disruptive trend where state and non-state actors alike are exploiting the openness and pluralism of our societies. They are trying to use our strength as our weakness, and we need to make it a strength again. And this special committee started work just now in February 2025 with a 12-month mandate and I hope that it will help strengthen our protection of democracy.

Sadly, we arrived at the moment, when our transatlantic allies are questioning the support. That's where, we indeed, have to strengthen our own military security. It is not something that I say lightly. Money is always needed elsewhere but sadly, without it, we might be left to mercy. That is why we continue to support Ukraine. That is why co-operation on this is super important.

But also we should be aware that we cannot say that we need to invest in our defence and yet send billions and billions predominately for self-use to PUTIN's regime. We have to become stronger and more independent and by that help our security, help our economy and help protect the climate.

And last but not least, it is about enhancing democratic development assistance for neighbouring countries. Where we see the US retreat, Europe has to help safeguard democracy. We have to help in the areas near regions, the Balkans, Ukraine, Georgia and North Macedonia, but we should not forget the rest of the world.

Colleagues, democracy does not perish overnight. It erodes slowly when harmful influences take root and I believe that the time to act is now. If Europe does not defend its democracy and the fundamental values that have propelled our progress's enlightenment, no one else will do that for us.

This battle cannot be solved from Brussels. National parliaments as direct representatives of our citizens, we are together on the first line of defence against democratic backsliding. Parliaments have a place overall in safeguarding democracy by holding governments accountable and ensuring free and independent media and in strengthening civil society in civic education.

Democracy is not just about elections, it is about the daily practice of freedom, rights and accountability. If we fail to protect it now, we may wake up too late to find it gone.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (President of the PACE): Thank you.

Next is the Vice-President of the Swedish parliament, Mr Kenneth G. FORSLUND.

Mr Kenneth G. FORSLUND (Vice-President of the Riksdag, Sweden): Mister President,

Thank you very much for this opportunity.

President Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS started with saying democracy may be old, but not old-fashioned. I think we should stop there for a short moment and think a little bit about that, because I think it is very wise, actually.

At a time when democracy is questioned by some, some ideas, some forces, we as politicians and parliamentarians have to take those forces and ideas on. We have to try to counter that.

I think one of the best ways to do that is actually meeting the population in our countries, in our constituencies; meeting the voters, meeting the schoolkids, meeting the elders, the ones running the businesses, and so on – make ourselves available as politicians, meeting them. I do that a lot of my time, especially back home in my constituency but also back home in Sweden. And quite often, I get a somewhat surprised comment by the

ones who are attending whatever meeting that it is. "Well, you seem to be quite normal..." And they're surprised about it. And I tell them, "well, I am quite normal. I just happen to have a somewhat [out of the] ordinary, or unusual, task at the moment, but I am a human being, yes, as you are".

Speaker Ms Yaël BRAUN-PIVET pointed out that hybrid war attacking our democracy is now one of the big threats. And that is happening from the inside of our societies and democracy. I think we have a big task for us to strengthen the means to tackle such activities. I think we should do that in co-operation with each other, learning from each other's experiences, share practices with each other, and of course improve in meeting those threats, and in some ways new, but in many ways also old threats to democracy, and the thought of free speech and so on.

Speaker Ms Bärbel BAS pointed out the fact that you had the highest voter turnout in your latest election. I think that that is actually a comforting word to hear in these times, because that shows a public belief in democracy, and a willing to participate and actually make a difference. Now you're in the process of following up the election and finding a solution and forming a new government. We're all following that process very eagerly because it is an important process, not only for you in Germany, it's also an important process for all of us in Europe, and probably also globally.

Chairman Mr Ruslan STEFANCHUK, my old friend, frequent in Sweden and in many of our other countries. There has been a lot of talk lately about the importance of showing gratitude, and you touched upon it also. I agree. We should all show our gratitude to Ukraine and to the Ukrainian population. The brave Ukrainian population. We should give you not just gratitude; we should also give you support as long as it is needed, and the extent that it takes. Because what you do is that you are literally standing on the frontline in the fight for democracy for all of us, and that doesn't only take gratitude - that also needs resources.

Safeguarding democracy is our obligation, collectively. That is a task that we all have to take upon every hour, every day, every week, all the year around, because that is the only way to be able to fulfil the foal to safeguard democracy.

Thank you.

[Applause]

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (President of the PACE): Thank you Mister Kenneth G. Forslund.

I will now call Ms Elisa SPIROPALI, the speaker of the Albanian parliament.

Ms Elisa SPIROPALI (President of the Kuvendi, Albania): Honourable President, honourable Secretary-General, honourable Secretary-General of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, fellow speakers of parliament, esteemed colleagues, ladies and gentlemen.

Democracy does not weaken overnight, nor does it remain strong without effort. Across Europe, political landscapes are shifting, trust in institutions is being tested, and external forces seek to manipulate public opinion. These changes rarely announce themselves clearly. They unfold gradually, reshaping norms, influencing governance, and challenging the foundations we rely on.

Albania has experienced firsthand how fragile, and yet how resilient, democracy can be. Thirty years ago, when Albania joined the Council of Europe, after total isolation, democracy for Albanians was still just an ideal. The rule of law had just began to replace the party state, the party law, and human rights – in particular the political, religious and property rights – had started to become an aspiration for our citizens.

After 30 years of membership in the Council of Europe, Albania has reached the gates of the European Union with significant and tangible achievements in the three main pillars of this outstanding European organisation.

The decision of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in April 2024 to remove Albania from the full monitoring procedure is a confirmation of our achievements. The national strategic objective of my country to join the European Union by 2030 and complete the technical negotiations by 2027 have the full support of the European Union.

The decision of the Albanian parliament to establish... to the European parliament to establish the Western Balkans Office in Albania is a reaffirmation of the fact that Albania is not only the candidate country with the clearest vision, the highest speed and the greatest determination towards the European family, but it is also centre, and a leader in promoting regional co-operation and the European integration of the countries in our region.

Albania's progress towards the European Union is also the result of close co-operation with the Council of Europe and its recognition of our achievements, especially with regards to the independence of the government branches, the deep and comprehensive justice reform, the fight against corruption and organised crime, the protection of minorities, human rights and media freedom.

The parliament of Albania remains steadfast in its leadership, ensuring democratic legitimacy and inclusiveness in the European integration process, advancing and deepening reform, supporting justice institutions and their independence, as well as protecting values and consolidating the democratic institutions. Democracy that fails to uphold institutional balance risks losing its ability to serve its people.

When parliaments struggle to exercise oversight, when checks and balances begin to weaken, governance drifts away from its core purpose.

The role of legislative bodies extends far beyond passing laws. It strengthens their ability to question, to challenge, and to hold governments accountable. In Albania steps have been taken to reinforce parliamentary oversight, ensuring that institutions work with, not against, each other.

Parliament has recently established two special committees: the committee on the deepening of the fight against corruption, good governance, and rule of law, and accelerating the pace of EU membership, and the committee of the protection of democracy against disinformation and foreign interference in democratic processes.

Yet institutions alone cannot sustain democracy. Laws may govern societies, but public trust determines their legitimacy. Albania has sought to bring decision-making closer to the people, opening new channels for engagement and fostering a political culture that encourages participation beyond election cycles.

A system that listens stands a far better chance of enduring. Public engagement depends not only on access, but on awareness. Without the ability to critically assess information, individuals become vulnerable to manipulation and public debate loses its foundation in reasoned discourse.

Albanians expanded media literacy efforts, not as an academic initiative, but as a practical response to a world where misinformation can distort reality.

Dear colleagues,

The Council of Europe is not complete without the presence of Europe's newest state, Kosova. It is hard to find another country that after 26 years of freedom and 17 years of independence has established such a vibrant democracy as Kosova has. Therefore, that mission of Kosova to the Council of Europe, which has the support of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, is the most important request of the speaker of the parliament of Albania to this conference.

Democracies in our countries cannot thrive sustainably while the freedom, sovereignty, and integrity of nations are under attack.

Therefore, our firm support of Ukraine in front of Russia's aggression is not only a contribution to peace and security, but also a commitment to defending democratic values and systems in our countries.

Wishing a successful proceeding of discussions of this important conference, I thank you for your attention.

[Applause]

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (President of the PACE): Thank you.

Thank you Madame Spiropali.

I call now the Speaker of the House of Commons of Canada, Mr Greg FERGUS.

Mr Greg FERGUS (Speaker of the House of Commons, Canada): President Rousopoulos,
General Secretary Berset,

Esteemed colleagues, dear friends,

It is an honor for me to be here with you in Strasbourg.

The theme we are tackling this morning, "Safeguarding democracy", has never been more relevant. From my perspective, it's about two valleys: defending and enhancing democracy.

Mr Greg FERGUS (Speaker of the House of Commons, Canada): The statute of the Council of Europe, the founding document of this organisation, affirms that individual freedom, political liberty and the rule of law are the core principles of genuine democracy.

For over 75 years, this organisation has acted on this credo.

Mr Greg FERGUS (Speaker of the House of Commons, Canada): Although Canada has observer status at the Council of Europe and its Parliamentary Assembly, Canadian parliamentarians participate regularly and enthusiastically in the sessions of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Mr Greg FERGUS (Speaker of the House of Commons, Canada): The work of this Organisation and all its organs in safeguarding democracy aligns seamlessly with Canadian values.

The global statistics on democracy are sobering. According to The Economist Intelligence Unit, well less than 10% of the world's population lives in a full democracy. 39.4% live under authoritarian rule.

What's more, over the last few years we have seen authoritarian regimes do their utmost to overturn democracies.

Mr Greg FERGUS (Speaker of the House of Commons, Canada): Russia, with its ongoing illegal war of aggression against Ukraine, is of course the most obvious example. And I would like to take this opportunity in the presence of my colleague and dear friend Mr Ruslan STEFANCHUK to reiterate Canada's unwavering support for Ukraine.

Wars against democracy take many forms. Disinformation campaigns are multiplying, as is foreign interference. These campaigns succeed in turning our fundamental freedoms against us, and they exacerbate divisions in our societies. They pit citizens against each other and try to convince them of the virtues of authoritarian regimes.

Mr Greg FERGUS (Speaker of the House of Commons, Canada): And unfortunately, unfortunately, these campaigns have proven to be quite effective.

In 2024, the Pew Research Center stated that more than half – 54% – of respondents were dissatisfied with their democracy. And one-third of people across 24 nations were supportive of authoritarian governance systems, including, I am afraid to say, one quarter of Canadians.

Mr Greg FERGUS (Speaker of the House of Commons, Canada): But how can we convince our citizens, especially our young people, of the value of democracy? There is no magic bullet.

For my part, I'm convinced that the solutions lie in community, inclusion and competence. We need to ensure that our young people are active members of our societies. This inclusion would make our democracies more representative, more resilient and more secure.

Mr Greg FERGUS (Speaker of the House of Commons, Canada): Because we cannot build strong democracies in an environment of isolation, exclusion and inefficiency.

While building community and inclusion is hard to do, democracy depends on them.

Being able to deliver programmes and services to our citizens reinforces the value of our democratic governance.

So let us recommit to the legacy of democracy-building; and mutual support that is the hallmark of the Council of Europe and its Parliamentary Assembly.

Democracy is too precious and too fragile for us to shy away from the work that needs to be done.

Thank you for inviting me to join you here in Strasbourg for this important conference and these important conversations at this very critical time for democracies across the world.

I look forward to hearing all of your perspectives and engaging with many of you over the course of this conference.

Thank you very much [*repeats it in French*].

[*Applause*]

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (President of the PACE): Thank you dear Greg,

And allow me to congratulate you, because the Canadian delegation – though you are representing a country which is an observer country – the organisation is always there, and very effective.

I call now the Speaker of the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference, Mr Alfons RÖBLOM.

Mr Alfons RÖBLOM (Speaker of the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference): Mister President, honourable Presidents, distinguished colleagues, esteemed guests,

It is a privilege to address this distinguished Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe today, on the pressing matter of safeguarding democracy. It is an issue that is of existential significance in today's world.

We gather here at a time when the very fabric of democracy is being challenged. The Reykjavík Principles for Democracy, adopted by the heads of states and governments of the Council of Europe, underscore our shared responsibility in preventing democratic backsliding and resisting of authoritarian tendency.

We as parliamentarians bear a profound duty to uphold these principles.

In the Baltic Sea region, we see both these as challenges and the resilience of democratic institutions.

Our 33rd Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC) in Helsingør last year reaffirmed the commitment of our parliaments to democratic resilience and security. We emphasised the need for stronger co-ordination to counter hybrid threats, disinformation and external interference.

The war of aggression against Ukraine is the starkest reminder that democracy cannot be taken for granted. The BSPC has constantly expressed its unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, recognising that the threat to democracy anywhere is a threat to democracy everywhere.

We stand firm in condemning the continued Russian aggression, which is not only a violation of international law, but an assault on the democratic values that we cherish. We do not want to see a system where the largest and strongest rule at the expense of the other.

Democracy is not about the rights of the powerful, but the rights of the people. The right for everyone to be heard, to have influence, and to be part of shaping the future.

In this regard, Mr Ruslan STEFANCHUK's powerful and deeply moving speech today during this session has once again demonstrated how vital it is for Ukrainian representatives to have the opportunity to present their perspective on the current situation and developments. This dialogue is essential, not only to understand Ukraine's realities, but also to ensure that we remain steadfast in our support.

Therefore, dear Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada, following up on our short discussion yesterday, I would like to extend a warm invitation to you from this very podium to speak at our BSPC conference on the Åland islands. It is a crucial opportunity to present Ukraine's perspective, and engage in discussions with the parliamentary delegations of all democratic Baltic Sea states.

My homeland, the Åland islands, is a good example of crisis management. Thanks to international agreements in 1921, we today are a neutralised and demilitarised autonomy in the Baltic Sea. In daily life, we are referred to as the island of peace, and we are proud of that. But dialogue and co-operation, particularly in times of crisis, can only achieve a fair solution if all parties involved can accept it. We need more examples of just peace, real and lasting.

We are witnessing an alarming increase of cyber attacks on infrastructure, the manipulation of public discourse through disinformation, and attempts to weaken trust in democratic institutions. The BSPC reaffirms that securing our democratic institutions against these threats requires co-ordinated actions.

So how do we, as parliamentarians, safeguard democracy in practice?

First, by strengthening the rule of law and constitutional safeguards. A healthy democracy requires strong, independent institutions. The BSPC has called for firm action against the erosion of democratic standards, urging parliaments to protect judicial independence, media freedom and civil liberties. As the background paper rightly states, we must resist the politicisation of state institutions and ensure that constitutional norms are upheld above party interests.

Second, by countering disinformation and external interference. The digital age has brought new vulnerabilities, malicious actors exploit social media and digital platforms to sow division and weaken democracies, and it is happening at a speed rarely seen in the world. The BSPC resolution of 2024 called for enhanced media literacy and fact-based public discourse.

Third, by fostering civic engagement and youth participation. Democracy is not only about elections; it is about active, engaged citizens. The BSPC has placed great emphasis on securing young people's participation in decision making. The BSPC Youth Forum is held each year back to back with our annual conference, and includes young representatives in our conference, and the results of their work in our resolutions.

Finally, by reinforcing democratic security through inter-parliamentary co-operation. The BSPC has long been a forum for strengthening regional stability through democratic dialogue. In the phase of rising geopolitical tensions, our co-operation with the Council of Europe, the CBSS (Council of the Baltic Sea States), the Nordic Council and the Baltic Assembly is more crucial than ever.

Colleagues,

Safeguarding democracy is not a passive endeavour. It demands vigilance, co-operation and decisive action.

Let us remember: democracy is not just a system of governance. It is a shared commitment to freedom, justice and human dignity.

The resilience of our democratic institutions will define the future of our nations.

The BSPC remains steadfast in its mission to uphold democracy in the Baltic Sea region and beyond.

We stand ready to work with all of you in ensuring that democracy prevails.

Thank you very much.

[Applause]

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (President of the PACE): Thank you, Mister Röblom.

I am calling now Ms Kari HENRIKSEN, Vice President of the Storting, Norway.

Ms Kari HENRIKSEN (Vice-Speaker of the Storting, Norway): Dear Mister President, distinguished colleagues,

I would like to start by honouring Ukraine.

The title of our debate is safeguarding democracy. There is no one here today fighting and safeguarding democracy day in, day out as hard as the people of Ukraine, so thank you.

In recent years, we have had similar debates to the one we are having today. The messages we sent were clear, we must stand up for our common European values and avoid democratic backsliding.

More than at any time since the end of the Second World War, safeguarding democracy is also about defence and security. And this is why we are so grateful to Ukraine and to President ZELENSKY's strong diplomacy visiting so many countries. Today, he is in Norway.

Norway builds strong collaboration with the Verkhovna Rada and two weeks ago a united Norwegian parliament agreed together with the government to more than double Norway's financial support for Ukraine for 2025 from 35 billion to 85 billion Norwegian kroner. And all the other speakers before me today have mentioned important examples in practice of how we can safeguard democracy.

Norway has also taken steps to significantly strengthen our own defence in close co-ordination with European allies.

And dear colleagues, we must safeguard democracy on the frontline of Ukraine but we must also safeguard it back home. All over Europe, including the Nordic countries, considered by many to be a democratic stronghold, we face governing polarisation, hate speech, hate crime, discrimination against minorities and disinformation.

Furthermore, some surveys indicate that the younger generation is losing faith in democratic institutions, governance and political efficiency. This is clearly not the development we would like to see, so dear colleagues, what can we do?

As presidents and speakers of parliament, we are in a key position to safeguard and strengthen trust in democratic institutions. We have the power to, indeed we are expected to, safeguard the constitutional principles, which regulate the relationship between the government and the national assembly. It is our responsibility to ensure that constitutional rules are upheld in all parliamentary matters.

In any democratic constitution this means particularly safeguarding the separation of powers between parliament, government and the courts. It also means exercising our power and duty to scrutinise the government and by that to ensure that parliamentary debate is not bypassed by the government on the misplaced grounds of urgency.

Irrespective of our different parliamentary traditions, it is also our duty to ensure high standards for parliamentary debates and that they respect democratic and constitutional norms without extreme or hateful rhetoric. As democratically elected representatives of the people, it is our duty to counteract polarisation in society by showing an active interest in what our opponents have to say, no matter what background, sex, ethnicity, sexual preference, political affiliation or social status.

This isn't just an expectation, this is an obligation. And why should we do this? Why fight for democracy? Because history has shown us that democracy is by far the best way to secure lasting and prosperous peace in Europe and to ensure that our children and grandchildren can live their lives in peace and security.

A well-functioning democracy would never have allowed a governing regime to go to war against a neighbouring sovereign state like PUTIN's regime did to Ukraine.

Democracy is about our security and our individual freedom as human beings.

Thank you and *Slava Ukraine*.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (President of the PACE): Thank you Madam Kari Henriksen.

I will call now Mr Loïc HERVÉ, Vice-Speaker of the Senate, France.

Mr Loïc HERVÉ (Vice-Speaker of the Senate, France): Mister Chairman, ladies and gentlemen

Presidents,

Fellow parliamentarians,

Ladies and gentlemen,

In these troubled times, our commitment to democracy must be unwavering. As we have just marked the start of the fourth year of war in Ukraine, dear President STEFANCHUK, we are more aware than ever that peace and prosperity depend on democracies that are strong, respectful of human rights and founded on the rule of law.

Seventy-five years after the creation of the Council of Europe, one might have thought that these values, which form its bedrock, would be shared, that they would somehow have become part of our customs, and that they would never again be challenged.

Unfortunately, this is not the case. Current events and recent developments in Europe and beyond bear witness to this, as do the debates within the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the decisions taken in recent years: the exclusion of the Russian Federation from the Council of Europe following the war of aggression waged against Ukraine; the refusal to ratify the credentials of the parliamentary delegation of Azerbaijan, a state that is hostile to France; and, more recently this year, the conditional ratification of the credentials of the Georgian parliamentary delegation, which has finally decided not to sit in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe for the time being.

Our very conception of democracy is being called into question, and it is our values that are under attack, our concepts that are sometimes hijacked, with freedom of expression being used by some as a banner to manipulate information or weaken our democratic systems, as in the institutional crisis.

At the same time, we are witnessing a growing polarisation of our societies and a worrying disengagement of civil society from democratic processes. In the digital age, hate speech and division are being amplified and shared with clicks and *likes*, fostering fractures within our nations.

In the face of these difficulties, it is up to us as parliamentarians to rise to our mission and safeguard our democracy, our democracies. To do so, we can and must rely on the same tools that can become our allies. If digital technologies can spread disinformation and erode our fellow citizens' confidence in democratic institutions, we must reappropriate them and put them to work in the service of enlightened debate.

First of all, we must strengthen our legislative structures to combat the manipulation of information and disinformation, and severely punish those guilty of it. At the same time, we need to educate our young people, and make our fellow citizens aware of the need for critical thinking in their daily use of social networks. It is also important to defend the freedom of the press, particularly the professional press: the freedom and ethics of the press. In France, we have begun this work, and we are committed to seeing it through.

Finally, ladies and gentlemen, I am convinced that co-operation between our parliaments is an essential aspect of safeguarding our democracies. We need to exchange ideas, help each other and share our experiences. We need to dialogue and support each other. Together, we can and will be able to defend the democratic values we hold so dear, and build appropriate responses to contemporary challenges.

Thank you for your support.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (President of the PACE): Thank you Mister Hervé.

I will call now the Vice-President of the Riigikogu, Estonia, Mr Toomas KIVIMÄGI.

Mr Toomas KIVIMÄGI (Vice-President of the Riigikogu, Estonia): Mister President, dear colleagues, dear friends of democracy, dear friends of Ukraine,

I will focus on two key issues: the most urgent threat to our democracy and how countries can enhance citizen participation in elections.

The greatest threat to democracy today is war, Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine. Mr Vladimir PUTIN's aggressive goals remain unchanged – he wants all of Ukraine, but not only.

Every one of us must admit that Russia's aim in connection to this war is much broader – Russia wants to push NATO out of Europe and create a buffer zone beyond its borders. Ultimately, Russia seeks to dismantle the European security architecture. The outcome of this war is existential to the whole of Europe.

Both Ukraine and Europe need a just, lasting peace based on international law, territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Therefore, talking about "safeguarding democracy", our priority must be strengthening Ukraine's position vis-à-vis the aggressor – both for peace negotiations and long-term security. This requires increased military support to Ukraine.

Estonia has pledged 0.25% of its GDP to Ukraine's military aid until 2027 and we continue calling on other countries to do the same.

But all the European countries must increase their own defence spending. In fact, the EU itself, plus UK, Norway – we have a huge potential to be militarily much stronger and independent, because our GDP is at least 10 times bigger than the GDP of Russia.

We need the co-operation OF the United States of America, but there is no reason to underestimate Europe's own potential.

We just need to change our mindset.

Yes, it means maybe less new roads, less new sport areas for the next years, but as the President said, peace and prosperity have a cost.

What happened in Ukraine proves that security must be the priority number one for every country in Europe.

The latest news from this week is that Estonia decided to increase defence spending over 5% from GDP starting from next year. Our long-term plan is to keep this level for the next 10 years.

Europe needs to move into a higher gear.

While supporting Ukraine, we must raise the cost of aggression for Russia.

In this context one crucial step is confiscating immobilised Russian Central Bank assets. I am not talking about the interest, I am talking about the assets themselves.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Free and fair elections are the foundation of democracy. We can call it a festive day of democracy. But we must admit that many countries in Europe struggle with low turnout. Germany of course excepted, as we heard.

We have found a good solution about how to reverse it: it is called e-voting. Estonia started e-voting already in 2005. It means that we have already 20 years of experience. I am very glad to say that during our last parliamentary elections in 2023, for the first time, a majority of votes – 51% of votes – were cast online.

Digital voting increases participation, especially among young voters, whose voices are vital for the future. They are not eager to move to polling stations and they prefer to vote at home. I know what the sceptics say: this is not safe.

As I said, we have used it during the last 20 years and we have not faced any significant incidents. Very often those doubts are fuelled by some political parties, because the percentage of young people among their voters is much lower than their competitors.

Therefore, I encourage you to take over innovative voting methods, because they are crucial to reversing the trend of low participation.

Stop war and open new modern methods of participating in elections are two key messages from me in order to safeguard democracy.

Last but not least,

We must stand united in defence of democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

Thank you very much, [*repeats it in French*].

[*Applause*]

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (President of the PACE): Thank you.

Thank you Mister Kivimägi.

And now I call the President of the National Assembly of Armenia, Mr Alen SIMONYAN.

Mr Alen SIMONYAN (President of the National Assembly, Armenia): Dear president of the Parliamentary Assembly, Secretary General, Secretary-General of the Parliamentary Assembly, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to speak in this chamber, which for more than seven decades has worked to unite Europe around the shared universal system of values, inspired by the grand belief in the dignity of human beings.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I stand before you not only as a representative of Armenia, but also as someone who deeply believes in the power of democracy. It is this conviction that compels me to reflect on our present state.

The madness of our times must be observed with absolute clarity. A storm is not gathering, it is here. Havoc is obscured in the fog of double speak. Fact is fake. Allies are enemies. Victims are aggressors. Truth is a hoax and the innocent are guilty. So much that [is] precious has turned to ash. The pillar of liberalism quakes and the sacred flame of freedom dims. Democracy is in danger.

The nightmare is not one from which we may miraculously awaken.

Europe, the cradle of enlightenment, must once again rise to defend liberty.

The zeal to destroy must be countered by the resolve to create.

Only through united and unrelenting effort can the frail blossom of democracy flourish.

Armenia for its part remains committed to democratisation. For us, democracy is more than a system of governance – it is the foundation of our national identity and security, the driving force behind our aspirations.

The 2018 Velvet Revolution marked a turning point in our history. It set Armenia on a path towards transparent elections, independent institutions, and a government free from corruption.

Our goal remains clear: to build an open and accountable system where every citizen feels empowered and secure.

To achieve this, we have embraced ambitious reforms with the support of the Council of Europe, a conscious action plan for Armenia as a vital tool for strengthening public trust in our institutions and aligning them with European standards. Judicial independence, media freedom and the fight against corruption remain at the heart of our agenda.

In this regard we particularly value the assessment of organisations regarding the progress Armenia has made toward establishing a resilient democracy.

I would also like to report on the peace process with Azerbaijan.

No doubt you are aware that Armenia and Azerbaijan have fully agreed on the text of [the] peace treaty. We hail this progress and believe that peaceful co-existence and regional co-operation are the best guarantees of security and prosperity. Our Crossroads of Peace initiative aims to reopen regional communications and promote economic development based on mutual respect and sovereignty.

Yet, humanitarian issues remain. In Azerbaijan, Armenian prisoners of war and civilians have endured prolonged detention, inhumane treatment and kangaroo court proceedings. The immediate release of these prisoners is of paramount importance.

Moreover, I feel that the recent failed statements by Azerbaijan about Armenian military activity are escalating the situation on the border. In this context, we emphasise the importance of confidence-building measures, such as those provided by the EU civilian mission, and arms control mechanisms. Most of our resulting issues are addressed in the agreement itself or within the framework of the working group created by it.

Armenia is ready to co-ordinate with Azerbaijan as to the time and place for signing the agreement. We hope that Azerbaijan shares our will to enshrine a new era.

Colleagues,

As we approach the 25th anniversary of Armenia's admission to the Council of Europe, we reaffirm our unwavering commitment to democratic principles. We will never fail to defend these values and from this course we will never deviate.

Thank you very much.

[*Applause*]

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (President of the PACE): Thank you, Mister Simonyan.

I call now the Vice President of the Hellenic Parliament, meaning Greece, Mr Ioannis PLAKIOTAKIS.

Mr Ioannis PLAKIOTAKIS (Vice-President of the Hellenic Parliament, Greece)*: Honourable President of the Parliamentary Assembly, Secretary General, Speakers of parliament, ladies and gentlemen,

The Council of Europe was born after the horrors of the Second World War with the aim of uniting European states on the basis of common principles with respect for human rights, freedom, democracy and the rule of law, as a means of avoiding wars and preventing the prevalence of authoritarian regimes.

In the declaration of the Reykjavík Summit, we reaffirmed our mutual commitment to a rules-based international system, a system based on multilateralism and the need to respect international law.

We declare among others that democracy is for all of us the only way to ensure that all of us can live in peace, freedom and prosperity, and that we commit ourselves to resist and to prevent any backsliding of democracy in our continent, even in times of crisis, by honouring our common commitments as member states of the Council of Europe.

Democracy is one of the most fundamental and precious assets of our societies. It cannot be taken for granted. Neither is it self evident; but it requires ongoing vigilance, protection and strengthening. In a never changing world in conditions of global volatility, democracy is faced with a variety of challenges. The role of national parliaments and institutions is vital in the protection of democracy.

Parliaments are the guardians of democratic principles. Ensuring transparency, independence of justice and accountability of the executive power are essential conditions for maintaining a healthy, democratic framework. The existence of institutional checks and balances enhances citizen's trust and prevents abuses of power. Democracy is not only about holding elections and having a rotation of power – rather a rotation of parties in power – it also means protecting minorities and their rights. It means protection of human rights, even in times of crisis or emergency, which must be a top priority.

Political rhetoric must foster dialogue and reduce social polarisation, because extreme polarisation and hate speech weaken the democratic cohesion and prevent democratic citizens from participating in the political process. Parliaments should promote constructive dialogue; should combat misinformation and should create a political environment that fosters co-operation and respect for different views. The freedom of the press and media pluralism are vital rights in democracy that facilitate the formation of public opinion in a society that allows for different opinions and that tolerates disagreement.

At the same time, the advance in technology is a challenge that we have to address, because on the one hand the digital platforms offer an opportunity for broadening democratic participation and do facilitate citizens' access to information. However, on the other hand, the uncontrolled spread of fake news and manipulation of public opinion, and the abuse of algorithms can damage the democratic process.

The implementation of clear regulatory frameworks and strengthening of transparency are crucial.

Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues,

Education is one of the most important pillars of democracy. Strengthening democratic education in schools and promoting political participation from an early age can contribute to the formation of an active and responsible civil society, because democracy is not just limited to the exercise of the right to vote by citizens, but must also encourage participation of civil society in public life and decision making. Therefore, it is our duty to make sure that democracy remains resilient and vibrant. This requires action on many levels, from political institutions and parliaments up to citizens themselves, promoting participation, protecting fundamental rights and ensuring transparency are vital.

Finally, it is only through collective effort that we can make sure that democracy not just withstands the challenges of our times, but is also strengthened and evolves to build strong, resilient and inclusive societies that leave no-one behind.

Thank you very much for your attention.

[Applause]

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (President of the PACE): Thank you Mister Plakiotakis and I call now Mr Saulius SKVERNELIS, President of the Seimas, Lithuania.

Mr Saulius SKVERNELIS (President of the Seimas, Lithuania)*: Distinguished President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe,

Honourable presidents of parliaments,

Secretary General,

Ladies and gentlemen,

This European Conference of Presidents of Parliaments is hosted at the headquarters of the Council of Europe, an organisation that demonstrated its strong commitment to international law by expelling the aggressor state from among its members in the face of Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

I'm proud that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has provided a key impetus for this political decision. Russia's aggression against Ukraine has been ongoing for four years now. Russia is rejecting the idea of a peace plan put forward by allies and Ukraine. This is the typical Russian approach manifested in practice – no to peace, yes to war.

I, therefore, call for continued comprehensive support for Ukraine where, at the cost of suffering and lives, men and women are defending their country's freedom and territorial integrity, defending the free and democratic world against PUTIN and the Kremlin's imperialism.

All the humanitarian, economic and military assistance we're offering to Ukraine in the face of aggression constitutes only a small part of the settlement of the moral and historical debt we owe.

We, in Lithuania and other Baltic states, have bitter experiences from our relations with Russia. We appreciate the efforts of the new US administration in achieving peace, but we encourage you to remain vigilant. Transatlantic ties need strengthening too, yet this cannot be done at the expense of the territorial integrity of our partners.

In addition to the US-offered security guarantees, it is time for us in Europe to take responsibility and leadership for the security of a free and democratic Europe. This requires new thinking, greater political ambition, unprecedented investment in our own security and defence, and full solidarity among and within countries.

Democratically elected parliaments have a clear responsibility to promote, support and fund the respective decisions and actions of our governments. We also must support those for whom US financial aid has been discontinued today, such as independent media, NGOs, including the initiative for the return of Ukrainian children.

Today, we are witnessing with concern, the spread of authoritarian tendencies and methods of governance in a number of countries and regions. Take, for example, our neighbouring country, Belarus, which has been suffering from LUKASHENKO's dictatorship; or Georgia, which enjoys our historical sentiment and friendship and whose democratic and European choices we had long believed in and actively supported.

With government-sanctioned violence against their own populations and against people's will, these countries are steadily heading towards authoritarian rule and pleasing the aggressor, Russia. Only new, free and fair elections closely monitored by international institutions can bring these countries back on the path of democracy and ensure democratic legitimacy for their governments.

In 2024, Lithuania held the presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. Our top priority was support for Ukraine through implementing the decisions of the Council of Europe's Reykjavik Summit held in 2023. We consistently supported the efforts to shape the Council of Europe's role in establishing this special tribunal for the crime of aggression and in creating a comprehensive compensation mechanism for Ukraine on the basis of the existing Register of Damage.

The Council of Europe joined the International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children. We consistently raised the issue of international crimes committed by Russia, the situation of Ukrainian soldiers and civilians in Russian captivity and the role of international organisations in stopping aggression and ensuring international accountability for the crimes committed.

We have made voluntary contributions to support the implementation of the plan of action for Ukraine, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the safety of the journalists' platform, the work of the European Court of Human Rights and the activities of the counter group with Belarus civil society.

During our presidency, we opened for signature the groundbreaking Vilnius Convention, the Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

Distinguished presidents of parliaments, colleagues,

Unfortunately, one must admit that Russia's direct and indirect aggression against the freedom and democracy in Ukraine, Belarus and the countries of the South Caucasus, has left the political situation in our continent unstable. The experience of Ukrainian prisoners of war in Russian captivity is beyond comprehension. Soldiers who have been captive keep asking "Where are the international and humanitarian organisations, why don't they tend to us?"

Colleagues, let us not tolerate impunity. Let us take responsibility and ensure accountability before the people and let us take ownership for the future of our continent.

Thank you, Mister President.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (President of the PACE): Thank you, Mister Skvernelis.

Dear colleagues,

We have two more speakers before the closing of the morning session: the Speaker of Latvia and the Speaker of Palestine.

I will first call Ms Daiga MIERINA, Speaker of the Saeima, Latvia.

Ms Daiga MIERINA (Speaker of the Saeima, Latvia)*: Esteemed Mister President, honourable colleagues,

It is an honour to address you today in the beautiful city of Strasbourg.

Today democracy is not merely a form of governance. It is a system of societal values based on involvement, the rule of law, and our individual responsibility.

Democracy means free elections, freedoms, human rights, and freedom of speech. We Europeans enjoy these privileges every day.

In these turbulent times, defending democratic values is of vital importance. How can we protect European democracy from the threat it faces?

War is raging in eastern Europe. An imperialist state led by a criminal dictator is tearing apart democratic Ukraine. Latvia is on Europe's eastern border. We have felt the proximity of war for three years now. Despite growing concerns about security in our region, our people stand with the Ukrainian people in their thoughts and actions.

The people of the Baltic states spent 50 years under Soviet occupation. We suffered overwhelming Russification, collectivisation, and restriction of personal freedoms. Having witnessed this historical injustice, we can identify with the Ukrainian people fighting for their freedom and independence in the 21st century.

Crimes against humanity are committed in Ukraine every day. It is our duty to ensure that the perpetrator is held accountable, sooner or later. Russia and Mr Vladimir PUTIN must face justice. Crimes must be investigated. Otherwise, we risk undermining the principle of justice, lowering our moral standards and eroding our value system.

All of us hope for a positive outcome in the upcoming peace negotiations. A just and lasting peace must be based on the protection of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. These principles must form the foundation for the peace process in Ukraine. Peace in Ukraine must be built in conditions that are fully acceptable to the Ukrainian people.

Threats are also upheld in the Baltic states. The aggressor has also launched a hybrid war against Ukraine's closest allies. The attacks aim to destabilise democratic institutions; spread fear and lies amongst our people. Cyber attacks, disinformation, foreign interference in elections and sabotage of critical infrastructure. These are real examples of how Russia's aggression extends far beyond Ukraine's borders. It is spreading ever deeper in Europe, and we face it every day.

Undersea telecommunications cables that connect the democratic nations across the Baltic Sea have been damaged multiple times. It is our duty to develop regional solutions to prevent such incidents in the future, and to ensure the safety of our people.

Education is a crucial element in strengthening societal resilience. We must focus in particular on young people who are the most active users of the digital space, but also the most vulnerable. The enemies of democracy use algorithms and nowadays even artificial intelligence tools to spread their narratives. Now, likewise, we must respond effectively by countering manipulative systems as well as by implementing effective legal frameworks concerning artificial intelligence.

Democracy does not come for free. It requires a financial investment by every single one of our states.

Stability and confidence in Europe has led to radical political forces rising to power. Our society seeks increasingly louder slogans which in most cases are nothing more than empty promises. It is crucial to remember that the founders of a united Europe did not rely on loud slogans. They focused on actions, with restraint and respect.

Democracy is the home of a civilised Europe, a haven for Europeans and for those seeking refuge from autocracies worldwide. Dissidents from Russia and other states flee to Europe because here in Europe, we can provide a safer haven for humanism.

Dear colleagues,

In conclusion, we must be vigilant. The enemies of democracy are the same forces that threaten our physical borders. However, our opponents will not get far if our societies are resilient and united enough. The best tools have been known to us for decades: freedom of speech, independent media, the rule of law, and democratic principles.

Thank you.

[Applause]

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (President of the PACE): Thank you Madam Mierina.

The last Speaker of this morning session is the Speaker of the Palestinian National Council, Mr Rawhi FATTOUH.

Mr Rawhi FATTOUH (Speaker of the Palestinian National Council, Palestine)*: Mister President, ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me at the beginning to extend the greetings of the Palestinian people and leadership.

The only people in the world who are still suffering from the oppression of the occupation – an ugly occupation, and a successor of colonisation.

The Palestinian people are experiencing a systematic and disproportionate genocidal war, and a cruel displacement, and massacres in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, by the occupation and its settlers, while the world is watching and hearing without taking any action against these crimes, except by some who rejected and condemned such crimes, but without actions on the ground.

Despite the dozens of resolutions by international bodies and agencies affirming the right of our people to freedom, independence and self-determination, dozens of thousands of victims were murdered through seeking their rights. And dozens of thousands were injured, and [more] dozens of thousands were arrested. There are thousands of casualties under the rubble.

Meanwhile, the unjust siege and destruction of homes, educational and health facilities as well as infrastructure continues, targeting citizens living under the open skies, without shelter, in difficult [living conditions].

The crimes of the occupation were extended to the West Bank and Jerusalem, where the sanctity of Islamic and Christian sites is violated. The Palestinians have adjusted to an unfair course, and they seek their independence and freedom and to take part in the making of human civilisation together with the peoples of the world.

Therefore, from this platform, and to maintain security, stability and peace in this world, and to prevent the cycle of violence from expanding to include other areas, due to the practices and the threats of the occupation, I call on the international community to bear its responsibility, honestly and strictly to end this occupation, and start the implementation of the international legitimacy resolutions, as well as the signed agreements, and to take the initiative to hold an international peace conference, and implement the UN

Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 and 2334, and the UN General Assembly Resolutions 181, 194 and the Resolution 69/19 on the status of Palestine in the United Nations, and to adopt the Arab Peace Initiative introduced by the Arab League of Beirut 2002, which calls for equitable, lasting and comprehensive peace, so that the region and the world will live in security, peace and stability.

For maintaining the democratic practice, and to maintain the two-state solution, the states of Israel and Palestine living together side by side in peace and security, and for maintaining the democratic practices, and to hold periodic and general presidential and legislative elections, timely, it is required to enable the environment away from the interference of the occupation forces and settlers who disrupt our democratic life and conduct of the general elections in Palestine, as the case was in 2021, when Israel prevented the conduct of elections in East Jerusalem in violation of the signed recent agreements (that had been signed).

Since we believe in strengthening the democratic life of our peoples, supported by the concepts of justice, equality, freedom and peaceful co-existence of peoples away from violence and wars, it is not allowed to replace ballot boxes – ballot boxes may not be replaced by bullet boxes.

From this platform as well, I warn of the continued escalation of hostilities and crimes in the Palestinian territories by the occupation. Unfortunately, after the ceasefire was reached, in the Gaza Strip, Israel / Mr Benjamin NETANYAHU's government resumed a criminal and genocidal war and displacement, alongside the strangling siege which continues with an extreme disruption of health organisations and scarce humanitarian aids.

The world should understand the seriousness of the occupation and its practices, and their crimes and the repercussions.

Our people firmly and strictly reject the calls for displacement and uprooting. We wonder about the calls for displacement of people from [their] land, especially those who are in the Gaza Strip: 1.3 million refugees in the Gaza Strip were displaced from their homes in 1948. So why [can] they not [be] return[ed] to their towns, instead of displacing them once again?

The best solution is that the occupation should leave the West Bank and Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem, and to stop the massacres, and to stop the settlement expansion, and the settlers' crimes and annexation.

This situation is not only threatening world peace and security, but this requires an international coalition or alliance to implement the two state solution, which is supported by most of the countries of the world.

The Palestinian state should assume responsibilities in the Gaza Strip. Stop forging the facts that make people busy in other affairs rather than the crimes of occupation.

Finally, we hope that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe will exert further pressure on Israel in co-ordination with the relevant parties to support the establishment of an independent Palestinian state besides the state of Israel to live together, side by side, in security and peace.

Thank you.

Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (President of the PACE): Thank you, Mister Fattouh.

Dear colleagues, we have reached the end of this morning's session, before joining us for lunch, I invite all speakers, vice speakers, presidents and vice presidents to now proceed to the traditional family photo, which will take place just outside this hemicycle.

Allow me to say that the keynote speakers will be placed in the front row and on the staircase we have all vice presidents and presidents in alphabetical order of the countries.

The sitting is adjourned until 3 p.m.