



**Provisional edition**

Thursday 20 March 2025, afternoon

## Official report of debates

### Theme 1: Safeguarding democracy

**Ms Verona MURPHY (Ceann Comhairle of Dáil Éireann):** Dear colleagues.

I hope you enjoyed this break and the moment of conviviality in our extremely busy schedule.

So let us return to theme one of our conference, which we started this morning.

I call on our next speaker on the list Mr Faisal EL-FAYEZ, who is the President of the Senate of Jordan.

**Mr Faisal EL FAYEZ (President of the Senate, JORDAN):** Your Excellency,

The right honourable, Mister Theodoros Rousopoulos, President of the Council of Europe,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to start by expressing my sincere thanks to your excellency, Mister President, for this gracious invitation to share with you some thoughts on the protection and promotion of democracy in a world rife with tensions and conflicts everywhere.

I would also like to address the topics raised for discussion in this conference which focuses on the violence against politicians, issues of democracy and its protection, and ensuring freedom of expression amidst the polarisation that our world is currently experiencing.

That is in addition to many other challenges, such as the rise of representative regimes, growing violence, religious and ethnic fanatic intolerance, failure of intercultural dialogue, and the spread of fake news through the spread of disinformation and misinformation that is social media.

Disinformation campaigns can manipulate elections, deepen social divisions, weaken trust in democratic institutions, and last but not least, economic inequality which can lead to social unrest in many countries. Unfortunately, the United Nations, as well as international human rights and humanitarian organisations have been unable to dissolve many of these conflicts. For instance, in my part of the world, the Palestinian people have been coping with an oppressive and harsh Israeli occupation for nearly eight decades. Since 7 October they have been subjected to the most disastrous and destructive aggression by the Israeli occupying state which is committing massacres, war crimes and practising genocide and ethnic cleansing against the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip and the Palestinian-occupied West Bank. The death toll amounts to 50 000 – mostly women and children – in addition to 100 000 injured and excluding thousands who are under the rubble.

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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.

Mister President, ladies and gentlemen, democracy is a fundamental value that guarantees the rights and freedoms of citizens and promotes equality and social justice for all people, making its protection a shared responsibility.

Sadly, today, democracy is in decline. The prevailing reality confirms that the Western powers often apply double standards when it comes to issues of public freedoms and democratic practices. Moreover, Western policies towards the Middle East and its faithful national issues mostly adopt positions that are hostile to the aspirations of its people and their existential causes. Particularly what we have been witnessing in Western capitals, such as the violent repression of students' peaceful freedom of expression, moves on many university campuses protesting the genocidal crimes committed by Israel, repression that really represents a real manifestation of this double standard practice.

The strengthening and preservation of democracy require political and security stability as it is one of the most important components of safeguarding and consolidating democracy in societies.

Furthermore, as development necessitates the abandonment of double standards and the dedication of efforts to protect international institutions and organisations that safeguard justice, human rights and public freedoms rather than undermining and weakening them.

Mister President, ladies and gentlemen, the future of democracy depends on our ability to work on strengthening the shared values between our people, cultures and civilisations and to build bridges for responsible dialogue and the mutual acceptance of the other whether within societies or amongst states, an acceptance that should never be tarnished by any negative considerations such as gender, race or religious beliefs.

Therefore, clear policies and effective legal frameworks must be established to guarantee freedom of expression, transparency and integrity along with legislation that protects the independence of the judiciary and combats corruption. It is also essential to protect minorities through legislation that guarantees their religious and ethnic rights as well as their legitimate political participation.

In addition, the importance of educating citizens on democratic culture, political principles and the rights and duties of citizens within a democratic environment in schools and universities cannot be overstated. Democracy is not a luxury, it is an essential tool for the survival of societies that strive to live with dignity and peace.

Let us therefore together draw the outlines of the future that reflect our shared aspirations and ensure that democracy remains a beacon in our turbulent world.

Thank you very much.

**Ms Verona MURPHY (Ceann Comhairle of Dáil Éireann):** Thank you, Mister El Fayed.

I now call on Mr Igor GROSU, President of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova who will be followed by Mr Mircea ABRUDEAN acting speaker of the Senate of Romania.

**Mr Igor GROSU (President of the Parliament, Republic of Moldova):** Dear colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I'm glad to be together with you here in Strasbourg.

In the Republic of Moldova, we have a young democracy, a democracy which for over 30 years has been facing huge challenges. Although we managed after half a century, to free ourselves from Moscow's authoritarian regime, still the Kremlin has never let us enjoy our democracy. All these years they manoeuvred the Republic of Moldova's internal policies through politicians who were bought by criminal groups that were stealing the country's resources or who were selling the country to the Kremlin, maintaining the dependency of the energy sector, on Gazprom, and promoting Russian propaganda channels.

However, we Moldavians have proven that we can fight and that our democracy, despite its vulnerability, is genuine. Moldovans are able to choose with their heart. They did it in 2020 when they voted for Maia SANDU to be president and in 2021 when they elected a pro-European party to govern the country – a party which I'm honoured to lead.

In 2024, we achieved two more historic victories; Maia SANDU was reelected, being the first president of the Republic of Moldova whom the citizens entrusted by direct vote on two successive mandates; and in addition, Moldovans declared themselves European in a referendum.

In all these complicated polls, with unprecedented interference from the Russian Federation, with three years of an unjust and inhumane war at our border, with an entire propaganda machine against us, our voice – the voice of the people who want to live in peace, democracy and freedom – was stronger.

The year 2025, as we may see, is a difficult one not only for the Republic of Moldova but for all of Europe. The fundamental values of our societies are under threat. It is a fight that will decide the future of the European continent.

We welcome the results of the elections in Germany and we keep our fingers crossed for our friends in Romania and Georgia. In the autumn of 2025, parliamentary elections will be held in Moldova. As well, elections that are truly crucial for our European future. We already fully sense how the aggressive state of Russia and the local criminal groups have united and want to hand us on a platter to the Kremlin regime to be used as a conflict zone, to keep us poor and fearful.

That is why, dear friends of Moldova, I'd like to ask you to continue to help us defend our democracy and country. It is not an easy path but we are not looking for shortcuts either. We want to be respected and not to be used anymore as the instrument of modern imperialism that aims at keeping nations in its fear of influence.

Ladies and gentlemen, our democracy is three decades old but we know its value, we know that the best conditions for development, modernisation and prosperity can be created only in a democratic system. For us Moldavians, democracy means peace, prosperity and freedom, while for authoritarians it means war, fear, hunger and poverty. Moldovans have understood that the vector of European development is closely linked to democracy and freedom. Our national goal is to become a European Union member state by 2030 and we are going to work hard until then to reach this goal.

Moldova will endure and Moldova can be an inspiration to others in uncertain times. Democracy will resist provided that we do not lose our faith and stand by it until the end. And we will.

Thank you.

**Ms Verona MURPHY (Ceann Comhairle of Dáil Éireann):** Thank you Mister Grosu.

I now call on Mr Mircea ABRUDEAN, acting Speaker of the Senate of Romania.

**Mr Mircea ABRUDEAN (Acting President of the Senate, Romania):** Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great privilege for me to participate in this important conference.

I recall that two years ago, in October 2023, I had the pleasure of taking the floor in my capacity as Secretary General of the government of Romania, on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of Romania's membership in the Council of Europe. Being back here in Strasbourg, this time as acting President of the Senate of Romania, is a great honour for me.

As an engaged member of the Council of Europe, Romania stands firmly in promoting democracy and the rule of law as a solid framework for ensuring our security, economic growth and competitiveness.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I take this opportunity to present to you the challenges Romania has been facing and the measures we have taken to address them.

With Russia's war of aggression at our border in Ukraine, we have started to face another war on the European continent — a hybrid one. Through foreign disinformation networks, the objectives were to distort political debates, shape public perceptions, create divisions in society, sow mistrust in institutions, and seek to interfere in and influence elections. This was the case in the 2024 presidential elections when, during the first round, one candidate benefited from direct and indirect support from disinformation campaigns linked to foreign actors, particularly Russia.

The entire electoral process — the presidential elections — was heavily affected by a disinformation and interference campaign conducted through social media, especially TikTok, and by violations of electoral law, including on social media. The Romanian constitutional court's decision to annul the first round was unprecedented, but so were the circumstances.

I want to reassure you that Romania is firmly committed to upholding democratic values and human rights, including individual freedoms, and the fight against antisemitism, xenophobia, and discrimination. In this respect, we have adopted important legislative measures, including the Law on Measures to Prevent and Combat Antisemitism and an amendment to the Criminal Code, which introduced clear sanctions for incitement to violence, hatred or discrimination.

Romania's National Strategy for Preventing and Combating Antisemitism, Xenophobia, Radicalisation and Hate Speech (2024-2027) outlines concrete actions that demonstrate our commitment to upholding human rights and ensuring effective prevention through public education and the promotion of cultural diversity.

Therefore, contrary to certain allegations, our response has always been based on democracy and the rule of law.

This is why adopting legislative measures, protecting vulnerable people, countering antisemitism and xenophobia, and developing democratic mechanisms to achieve our shared objectives must never be challenged or abandoned.

We should involve more our young colleagues. Youth participation and dialogue between political actors and civil society are crucial for democracy. The Senate has launched initiatives such as the Junior Senate Project, the Youth Parliament and the Open Doors Programme, which has been held annually since 2021. Additionally, the Romanian parliament and UNICEF have maintained a long-standing partnership to advance children's rights and legislative reforms.

Dear colleagues,

Romania is ready to stand with all of you to uphold democracy in Europe. To succeed, we must act decisively and, above all, remain united. Unity, co-operation and our commitment to democratic values make our countries stronger, more stable, and more influential on the global stage.

I call upon all our partners to join forces in strengthening European co-operation on media literacy, cybersecurity, and countering disinformation, creating a united front against those who seek to weaken our democratic foundations.

Thank you.

**Ms Verona MURPHY (Ceann Comhairle of Dáil Éireann):** Thank you Mister Abrudean.

I now call on Mr Gerardo FERNÁNDEZ NOROÑA, President of the Senate, Mexico.

And he will be followed by Mr Marcos PERESTRELLO, President of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

**Mr Gerardo FERNÁNDEZ NOROÑA (President of the Senate, Mexico)\*:** Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

It's a great honour for me to be here today to speak to your Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

I listened this morning to the speeches about democracy.

In Mexico, we are going through a very difficult time in our democracy, a great deal of polarisation in the country.

In the recent elections, for the first time in 200 years, a woman became president with almost 60% of the vote.

We also won two-thirds of the House, 60% of the Senate, and we are building qualified majority. This is the opportunity for us to roll out serious reforms for our country.

I think I can say without exaggeration one of the constitutional reforms that we introduced has I think changed life for people in Mexico. For the first time in the history of the world we will be having a secret, direct vote enabling people to join the judiciary.

Much of Latin America remembers Mexico as being a bastion of right wing policies. Over the years there were attacks on democracy and the use of the media to pursue that. On 1 June, for the first time, we will be having a secret, direct vote. We have a valid majority both in the Chamber and the 32 regions around the country. The only thing we don't control is the judiciary. From 1 July we will have full parity from that institution as well.

We are going through a difficult time as well, because we have never had easy relations with the government of the United States. Right now we are bound to the US and Canada with a free trade agreement. There are calls now to overhaul this agreement to impose tariffs on Mexico. This shouldn't happen; 90% of our trade is linked to the United States. Such trade should not be subject to customs duties. So on 1 April there will be a new definition of what's going to happen. And of course, if tariffs are imposed, we are going to have to reciprocate. Not just Mexico has been affected by these tariffs – the whole world is now concerned by the real threat of worldwide trade rules changing.

I'd like to say to this Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe that I find it quite inconceivable that in the 20th century, we are still faced by a scourge of racism, that people can be persecuted based on the colour of their skin, and I think it is even worse to imagine public policies which are coloured and informed by racism, nationalist positions.

In many cases, such policies are not such a violation of human rights, but they also undermine co-operation between different countries. This is also the case between Mexico and the United States. We have heard figures of 30 or 40 million people who have gone to work in the United States, thereby contributing to the wealth of that country, and those people aren't illegal migrants who are causing unrest in the country. They are actually paying their taxes and contributing to the wealth of the country. Despite this, they are being persecuted. I'm not talking here about drug gangs which continue to operate in the United States without being dismantled; in other words, there is a certain degree of hypocrisy in these positions.

This has to come to an end. We have to move back to relationships based on respect between states. We are firmly committed, pending the independence of our home country, while maintaining communication and dialogue. We are deeply convinced that we have to guarantee exchanges and co-ordination, but in no circumstances should our country be subordinate to any other country, however powerful they might be – as is the case with the United States.

This is why I think it is important to pursue a multipolar vision of global relations. This means it is logical for us to try to establish closer relations with Europe and the European Union, so as to promote more trade.

However, I don't want to take a gloomy look at the situation. I heard clear condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but we haven't heard similar condemnations of Israeli attacks on the Palestinian territories. Nor did we hear much about Western attacks on Iran and Iraq. All forms of hate – homophobia, racism, discrimination, violence - should of course be condemned.

War itself should always be condemned.

In the 21st century, we should be finding the way to communicate with other peoples, other governments in the world, with respect, thereby working together to achieve development.

At the very heart of economic development, we have human beings. As the great Mexican revolutionary Mr Manuel MONDRAGON said, the people of the country have the right to live in happiness. Or, as Ms Rosa LUXEMBOURG called for, a society in which we are all equal despite the differences between humans, and all of us should be completely free.

I would like to wish a long life to the people of Europe, a long life to the council of Europe and above all, a long life to international relations based on respect, a lack of racism or classism.

Many thanks for your attention.

[*Applause*]

**Ms Verona MURPHY (Ceann Comhairle of Dáil Éireann):** Thank you, Mister Fernández Noroña.

I now call on Mr Marcos PERESTRELLO, President of the Parliamentary Assembly of NATO and he will be followed by Mr Claude WISELER, President of the Parliamentary of Luxembourg.

**Mr Marcos PERESTRELLO (President of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly):** Thank you, Madam Speaker,

Excellencies,

We meet at a pivotal time for Euro-Atlantic and global security. A time when peace, security and democracy are under attack.

They are under attack in Ukraine, where, for three years now, Moscow, helped by its accomplices in Minsk, Beijing, Pyongyang and Tehran, has sought to crush the aspirations of a free and independent people to determine their democratic future.

They are also under attack in our democracies because every day, Russia, China, Iran, North Korea and their autocratic friends seek to influence our politics and elections, spread disinformation, undermine trust in our democratic institutions and disrupt our critical infrastructures and essential services.

The way democracies respond to this fundamental threat will shape the international system for decades to come.

Safeguarding democracy today starts with ending Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Our Assembly has stood by Ukraine from day one of Russia's unprovoked, illegal war.

As we have said consistently, with this war, Russia attacked not just Ukraine, but democracy itself and the principles of the rules-based international order.

That is why the outcome of this war must not reward the aggressor as doing so could pave the way for even more devastating conflicts in Europe, Asia or the Middle East. Russia would be emboldened. And so would be Beijing, Pyongyang and Tehran.

Therefore, here, in this chamber, in this Palais de l'Europe which stands as a symbol of democracy, I want to reaffirm our NATO Parliamentary Assembly's unwavering support for Ukraine, its sovereignty, territorial integrity, right to self-defence and self-determination.

I also want to reaffirm our support for a fair and lasting peace, a peace through strength, backed by solid security guarantees.

As diplomatic efforts continue, our parliaments must continue to support Ukraine, on the battlefield and at the negotiating table. We must also help ensure that Europe is ready and prepared to play its full part in securing lasting peace.

At the same time, we must face up to the threat that Russia, China and other autocracies pose to our democracies.

As parliamentarians, we are on the frontline of this struggle to defend our democratic way of life. The hybrid attacks conducted by autocracies against our democracies are not isolated acts – they are part of a well-organised campaign of subversion.

This is why our Assembly has called for the establishment of a Centre for Democratic Resilience at NATO headquarters for allies and partners to share best practices and experiences.

During this pivotal year for Euro-Atlantic security, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly celebrates our 70th anniversary.

For 70 years, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly has carried forward the voice of allied legislators and provided an essential link between the alliance and its citizens.

For 70 years, we have stood for the notion that NATO is an alliance of democracies that it is defined not by what it stands against but by what it stands for: democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law.

At this critical moment, multilateralism and parliamentary diplomacy are more important than ever.

As parliamentarians, it is our duty to convince our fellow citizens that investing in defence is investing in peace;

To convince them that supporting Ukraine is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity;

To convince them that what is at stake today is not only our security, but also our economic, social and cultural heritage and welfare, and the foundations of our democratic political systems.

Thank you.

**Ms Verona MURPHY (Ceann Comhairle of Dáil Éireann):** Thank you Mister Perestrello.

I now call on Mr Claude WISELER, President of the Chamber of Deputies, Luxembourg.

And he will be followed by Mr Angelo FARRUGIA, Speaker of the House of Representatives, Malta.

**Mr Claude WISELER (President of the Chamber of Deputies, Luxembourg):** Thank you, Madam President.

Dear friends,

Our democracy, our democracies, are under pressure: pressure from outside – and Ukraine, which we support today and will continue to support tomorrow, is the best example of this – but also pressure from within. Many of you have already said this, and I obviously support all these analyses.

I also note that those who wish to challenge our democracies from within are often very close to those who threaten them from without. The threats converge, which makes them even more dangerous.

But there is also a third threat that is less talked about: internal fatigue, the detachment from politics of a population that no longer feels concerned or represented by representative democracy, and is therefore all the more susceptible to manipulation.

We have tried, as the Secretary General said, to understand this phenomenon, starting from the finding of a survey that 35% of young Luxembourgers, when asked whether democracy was still the best political system, answered "no" or "I don't know". The fact that what, for me, is an obvious question still has a percentage of non-positive answers seems extremely dangerous to me, and gives me pause for thought. But these "no's" and "I don't know's" are nonetheless the expression of different responses, and we've tried to analyse that a little.

Concerning the response, of course, of those who say "no", a certain number don't want democracy, are adept at authoritarian systems and must be fought through political argumentation. But there are also those who doubt the effectiveness of our democracy, who essentially demand effective governance, capable of making decisions quickly and implementing them on the ground, who want political leadership which they don't always find, and who in fact want a courageous and dynamic democracy. For these people, too, we need to find an answer.

And then there are those who feel detached from what they call the political class, and want democracy to be more participatory. Here too, we need to find systems that will enable these people to identify with democracy once again: a democratic system that calls on them to participate.

There are also those who want a different kind of democracy, in particular a model that makes regular use of more direct decision-making models, as the President of the National Assembly said, with possible referendums; we'll have to think about that too.

And then there are those who simply want more direct and regular contact with their elected representatives, who want to be listened to, and who also want to be heard. And that's the role of each and every one of us as politicians, to be close to our electors, to listen to them, to hear what they have to say, and then to manage our policies in line with what we hear on the ground. Exemplarity, the effectiveness of democracy, the presence of parliamentarians and participation are essential elements, which are answers that parliaments can sometimes provide.

But we also see that many young people are worried about democratic institutions being called into question. I've met a lot of young people who have come to see me as President of the Parliament to express their concern, and to suggest that we do a stress test of democracy, to see if our democracies – and how our democracies – were likely to be turned upside down; to turn them into something less democratic and, precisely, to undermine them with action. And we decided, in Parliament, to conduct this analysis, to see how far our institutions were likely to react, how they would react and how checks and balances could be put in place.

We will see how the institutions would react to a refusal to accept the election results; we will see what the effective reactions would be to a refusal to transfer power; what the current responses would be to a refusal by our current institutions, by our Constitution, to comply with judicial decisions. We'll see how to react to attempts to ban, manipulate or put pressure on journalists or the press; what resources the Constitutional Court has to react; what resources we have to react in the event of research credits being cut or freedom of research being called into question; what, in fact, are our means of reacting when people in power seek to

imprison or prevent candidates from taking part in elections; what would be our reaction in the event of administrations being suppressed or put under pressure, or programmes designed to support democracy or protect minorities being abolished. And so on.

In other words, a whole series of possibilities which, even if democracy were not abolished, would lead, step by step, to its diminution and weakening. And we're going to analyse point by point the question of how to react to this, because we're saying that democracy isn't just about elections; it's made up of many elements necessary to make it work. And to take away one of these means is to call the whole thing into question. Preserving them, I believe, is the task of the presidents of parliaments; it's the task of parliaments. It's an arduous task, but I truly believe it's worth it.

Thank you all very much.

**Ms Verona MURPHY (Ceann Comhairle of Dáil Éireann):** "Thank you" [spoken in French] Mister Wiseler.

I now call on Mr Angelo FARRUGIA, Speaker of the House of Representatives, Malta, who will be followed by Mr Oscar MINA, Vice-President of the Great and General Council of San Marino.

**Mr Angelo FARRUGIA (Speaker of the House of Representatives, Malta):** Esteemed colleagues, distinguished guests,

As we gather here today, we must reflect on the fundamental principles that underpin our democracy – a democracy that empowers every citizen's voice, a democracy that is grounded in the principles of equality and non-discrimination, a democracy that fosters dialogue and co-operation, a democracy committed to lasting peace.

So for the past decades, we have witnessed our societies integrate within an increasingly interdependent world. Today, more than ever, economic, political and social crises in one country, or in one region, are having significant global ramifications. Our shared principles are increasingly under pressure due to rising populism, hate speech, disinformation, and external threats to democratic institutions, which have been accelerated through the advent of new technologies.

Within this ever-changing complex environment, it is crucial that we strengthen our synergies both within our continents, but I would say, also beyond to ensure that democracies of today and tomorrow are well equipped to navigate these new realities and respond to the ever-evolving needs of its citizens.

So in this endeavour, the role of national parliaments and, of course, inter-parliamentary assemblies, as we are here, is paramount, as they serve not only as platforms for representation but also as guardians of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

Distinguished guests, our institutions flourish when they are inclusive, when they are accountable, when they embrace diversity, when they ensure that every voice is valued when shaping the future. So to uphold the rule of law we must maintain checks and balances among the three branches of the government. Our constitutional frameworks need to ensure avenues for readiness and citizens must have confidence that when the rights are violated, justice is accessible and impartial.

Equally important are media freedom and education, both essential components and civic engagement and the backbone for a free and fair society. Journalists must be able to conduct their work on a safe and enabling environment and to provide accurate information. On the other hand, citizens must be equipped with the required skills to critically analyse the endless information available online. All this, more than ever today, I would say, where we are facing a growing wave of emerging digital threats from disinformation campaigns to cyberattacks and AI-generated deepfakes, just to name a few, that have the potential to distort public perception and undermine trust in the institutions.

We, as legislators, must ensure that our legislative frameworks and education systems evolve to save our democratic integrity for current and future generations.

Nationally, this has been evident through significant judicial and institutional reforms undertaken by the Maltese parliament, which I preside over, where we remain firmly committed to continue building on this progress.

Internationally, parliamentary diplomacy plays a crucial role in reform using the principles of the Council of Europe and today's conference is a testament to this. So allow me to express my gratitude to the Parliamentary Assembly for hosting this important and timely discussion.

Distinguished guests, as you know, Malta has been entrusted with important international roles over the past years from our term as elected member of the United Nations Security Council to the chairman of the OSCE at a very critical time. But now, next May, in a few weeks' time, we will also embark another important mission when we will have the Presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe and this is coinciding also with our 60th anniversary as proud members of this organisation.

Our priorities will be empowering youth, protecting children, combating violence and discrimination and safeguarding the European Convention of Human Rights, and of course, while keeping support for Ukraine high on the agenda, and deeply moved and rooted to our shared commitment to safeguarding democracy and promoting peace, solidarity and multilateralism.

Malta intends, once again, to rise to the occasion, as it always did, and prove to be a credible genuine and dedicated partner. As we look ahead, let us now together embrace the opportunity to build a society, rooted in dialogue but in mutual understanding, a society that has to be fair, inclusive and resilient.

A society that not only upholds these values but also serves as a foundation for citizen-centred policies and actions.

So, esteemed colleagues, this is our collective responsibility, so I beg you, let us make sure that we act together.

Thank you very much.

**Ms Verona MURPHY (Ceann Comhairle of Dáil Éireann):** Thank you Mister Farrugia.

I now call on Mr Oscar MINA, Vice-President of the Great and General Council of San Marino, who will be followed by Ms Pia KAUMA, President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.

**Mr Oscar MINA (Vice-President of the Great and General Council, San Marino):** Thank you President, Secretary General,

Dear colleagues,

The concept of safeguarding democracy, in our view, is an imperative concept that the European Union must have as a fixed point, however, in the collective imagination of its way of acting.

In more general terms, the idea of democracy is often limited to the exercise of the right to vote, and too often it is taken for granted. However, it must be said that the same right to vote in free and fair elections, freedom of the press, regulatory bodies, guarantee of law and a system of justice are all or fundamental pillars of a true democracy. They have never been and will never be easy achievements for anyone.

In Europe, where the basic principles of the rule of law are being curtailed by autocrats and despots who deal blows to every basic pillar of democracy, undermining public trust in institutions, and consequently threatening the entire democratic society. In fact, therefore, democracy means more than just elections.

The point is that the pillars of democracy are now under attack. The question to be debated is how to protect European democracies in the face of the onslaught of populism, of authoritarianism that is present and, more importantly, on the rise. Safeguarding democracy is a fundamental responsibility to ensure respect for rights, active participation of citizens, and the proper functioning of institutions. It therefore becomes a priority to shelter democracies and especially authoritarian drives.

Concrete actions are needed, strengthening our democracies and developing antibodies against authoritarianism. They absolutely must be maintained to form the basis of a true democracy. Economic progress for example, and not just an increase in gross domestic product, but actual prosperity for the majority of citizens. For example civic education: promoting political awareness through education allow citizens to understand their rights, but also their duties of conscious participation in democratic institutions.

Strengthening precisely the institutions themselves, their independence and protecting them, above all, from political interference. Therefore, an active participation of citizens in electoral processes, referenda and other forms of democratic involvement to strengthen the bond between rulers and ruled. Ensuring, therefore, also a fair and transparent electoral system, such as to ensure that elections as I said are free, accessible and transparent, avoiding manipulation and, of course, even fraud.

The protection then of fundamental freedoms, another point to ensure respect for freedom of expression, we'll talk about that, of press, of association and it's essential precisely for a free and open public debate.

So above all, in our view, control and separation of powers is essential. That is, it means maintaining the separation between the legislative, executive and judicial powers, with mechanisms, certainly, of balancing, of mutual control to prevent encroachment and abuse of power. So fighting corruption for example, strengthening citizens' trust in institutions, also fostering inclusion and equal opportunities to work so all citizens are treated equally. Dialogue, tolerance are other points that relate precisely to the interest of democracy.

So I think it is necessary that Europe can think about being precisely the decisive stronghold of democracy. But this position is neither taken for granted nor guaranteed forever. We are seeing that. The European Union, the Council of Europe, the European Court of Human Rights are pillars that defend democracy and liberal values. However, in recent years Europe has faced growing challenges: the rise of populist movements for example and especially authoritarian, aggressive ones. The crisis of political representation, disinformation and outside interference.

So I will conclude briefly by saying this: preserving democracy means that Europe absolutely must strengthen its institutions, ensure the application of the rule of law in all member states and beyond, and promote a political culture that values participation, transparency, and especially human rights.

Safeguarding democracy therefore requires an ongoing collective effort, where institutions, civil society and citizens work together to protect democratic principles and ensure a stable and inclusive future for future generations.

The Republic of San Marino, a small mention I want to make here, has chosen a representative democracy. It has long continued its thousand-year history and I think it is one of the oldest examples of freedom, of democracy in this world, let's face it.

So we will stand by the democratic institutions of the Council of Europe and all the international bodies that will try to absolutely guarantee the concepts of democracy.

Thank you for your attention.

**Ms Verona MURPHY (Ceann Comhairle of Dáil Éireann):** Thank you Mister Mina.

And now I call on Ms Pia KAUMA, President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.

And she will be followed by Mr Gian Marco CENTINAIO, Vice Speaker of the Senate, Italy.

**Ms Pia KAUMA (President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly):** Honourable colleagues,

Democracy is under pressure, challenged both from within and from external threats.

The Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine has made it undeniably clear: peace and security in our region depend on strong, resilient democracies that uphold the rule of law and fundamental rights.

The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly is uniquely positioned to address these challenges.

As a transatlantic forum, we bring together democracies from Europe, North America, and beyond, united by our commitment to the principles of the Helsinki Final Act.

This transatlantic dimension is a strength, reminding us that the fight for democracy does not stop at regional borders. It is a global effort.

The Russian Federation remains part of the OSCE, yet its actions blatantly violate the commitments it made half a century ago.

As parliamentarians, we must persist in holding it accountable while standing in solidarity with those within its society who continue to fight for democracy.

Dear colleagues,

Accountability for crimes may not necessarily be on the agenda for all those negotiating peace for Ukraine at the moment, so it must be strong on our agendas.

Our engagement with the states of Central Asia is equally important.

These countries face distinct challenges in democratic governance, but their participation in the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly offers an opportunity for dialogue, exchange, and progress.

We must support their democratic aspirations while reinforcing the principles that unite us.

At the heart of these efforts is the role of parliaments in safeguarding democracy.

In particular, we must ensure that strong executives remain accountable to the people's representatives.

Across our region, we see a growing concentration of power in the hands of the executive, often at the expense of parliamentary oversight.

Left unchecked, this trend can lead to policies driven by short-term political calculations rather than long-term democratic stability.

It is our collective responsibility to push back.

Policies, especially those with global consequences, must be subject to rigorous scrutiny and open debate.

The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly remains committed to supporting your parliaments in defending and strengthening democratic institutions.

Through our election observation work, our commitment to political dialogue, and our promotion of democratic norms, we will continue to uphold the principles that bind us together.

Dear colleagues,

Safeguarding democracy is a shared duty — one that demands vigilance, engagement, and a commitment to action.

Thank you.

*(Light applause)*

**Ms Verona MURPHY (Ceann Comhairle of Dáil Éireann):** Thank you Miss Kauma.

I now call Mr Gian Marco CENTINAIO, Vice Speaker of the Senate, Italy, who will be followed by Mr Jānis VUCĀNS, President of the Baltic Assembly.

**Mr Gian Marco CENTINAIO (Vice-President of the Senate, Italy):** Thank you President,

Dear colleagues,

I am pleased to be here with you representing the Italian Senate, and I would first like to convey to you the greetings of President Ignazio LA RUSSA.

I very much share the need to confront today on how to safeguard democracy, in a historical period of great complexity. In fact, after decades of continuous expansion, the number of states calling themselves democratic is beginning to decline in different areas of the world. Even in Europe, where democracy was born and developed, this indispensable model is undergoing dangerous attacks from outside, but also heavy criticism from within.

To investigate the reasons for the challenges to *kratos*, that is, to this form of power management, we must try, however, to put ourselves in the shoes of the *demos*, the people, who are the protagonists. We might understand then that today's democracy is in trouble, partly because in recent years it has not been able to fulfill to the full its promises of peace, freedom and prosperity.

There are many examples we can bring, I will simply mention a few: the social unrest caused by the austerity measures that have affected Greece in particular, but not only; the perception of insecurity in the face of phenomena such as international terrorism and illegal immigration; the effects of climate change and the economic and social consequences that are likely to be exacerbated by unreasonable counter measures; the Russian invasion war in Ukraine with the resulting increase in energy and raw material costs is a serious military threat to Europe's borders.

We may consider it unfair, but we must come to terms with the fact that the people of Europe are faced with these problems and see our institutions unable to provide effective responses. Moreover, citizens see election results being annulled, they see *cordons sanitaires* being raised to isolate parties that received millions of votes, they see decisions being made by technocrats who seem to have more power than those who were democratically elected.

I won't go into these things, I don't want to say that they are right or wrong although I have my own idea about them, but we can agree that all this makes democracy even weaker and more uncertain in the eyes of the citizens.

Added to these internal factors are the attacks brought by third countries through the hybrid weapons of corruption, which have reached all the way into the European Parliament, disinformation and computer hacking. With this in mind, we are here today questioning how we can defend and reinvigorate democracy. Of course, I do not pretend to give an exhaustive answer to this question, but I want to try to suggest three paths.

The first is that of participation: citizens must feel more involved in decisions, and to do this they must first be sure that their vote really counts. This is primarily a task for the elected assemblies that we have the honour and burden of presiding over, because it is within them that plurality is ensured and a reconciliation between different opinions is sought. To do this, our parliaments must be able to look forward without taking refuge in old balances of convenience and without fearing the consensus and innovative scope of ideas and movements as long as they respect democratic values.

The second element is transparency: it is crucial that citizens are aware of how decisions come about, who made them, who influenced them, and who takes responsibility for them. This is easier if those decisions come from institutions that are not distant and abstract, but close to their territory and daily experience.

It is equally important that the same transparency be provided by private companies that can influence public opinion from lobbying agencies, media and social media.

Finally, education. I quote the words of Piero Calamandrei, one of the Constituent Fathers of the Italian Republic, a liberal federalist, anti-fascist: "If democracy is to be made first and then maintained and perfected, schooling in the long run is more important than parliament, the judiciary and the Constitutional Court".

Today we can say that building an informed, engaged public opinion educated in respect and compromise is essential to safeguard democracy from external conditioning and internal weaknesses is a work that must begin in schools, but it must involve all of us.

In conclusion, we can say that only conscious citizens and institutions willing to renew themselves will be in a position to forge a new, more solid democratic covenant.

Thank you.

**Ms Verona MURPHY (Ceann Comhairle of Dáil Éireann):** Thank you Mister Centinaio.

I now call Mr Jānis VUCĀNS, President of the Baltic Assembly.

He will be followed by Mr Jan Anthonie BRUIJN, President of the Senate, Netherlands.

**Mr Jānis VUCĀNS (President of the Baltic Assembly):** Honourable Chairperson, your excellencies, dear colleagues,

We are meeting here today at a critical moment in history which will lead to significant transformations because as a global order, as we used to know and which is based on our shared values, is under severe pressure now due to Russia's aggression.

Today I am addressing you on behalf of the Baltic Assembly. We are a regional organisation that promotes co-operation between the parliament of three Baltic states: Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia.

Democracy and its safeguarding are the values that lie at the heart of the identity of our Baltic nations.

Based on our dramatic history during the 20th century we know that democracy is worth defending because we have seen what happens when it's taken away.

We understand perhaps better than most the importance of Ukraine's fight for sovereignty and democracy.

As a result, the Baltic Assembly has remained strong in its support for Ukraine against Russia's brutal aggression.

This war is a fundamental threat to the democratic principles we support.

The Baltic states all agree that there is a need to bring a just, comprehensive and lasting peace for Ukraine that is rooted in the principles of international law.

Ukraine must be a sovereign independent country that has both preserved its territorial integrity and has a freedom to choose the alliances it joins.

At the same time Russia must be held accountable for its aggression against Ukraine.

It is the duty and responsibility of all of us to cut all business and diplomatic ties with Russia and Belarus, and strengthen the existing sanctions even further.

A weak Russia is a stronger security guarantee for its neighbouring countries, especially those outside NATO and EU.

This would also contribute to a greater peace in other regions of the world.

If we take decisive actions now, we can preserve greater threats in the future.

That being said, the main question is how can we safeguard our democracies in this time?

Firstly, there is a need to help the democratic Ukraine in its fight, as it is also fighting for the democratic values that we share.

The Baltic states are one of the strongest military supporters of Ukraine.

Our nations continue to contribute a significant portion of our GDP to military aid for Ukraine.

Therefore I encourage our Western allies to do the same.

We must support Ukraine more and do it faster, including through its European integration process.

At the same time, as there is a need for all European countries to rapidly strengthen their defence capabilities and military industry, security and defence are the backbone of democracy, as they ensure stability, protect fundamental freedoms and foster the well-being of our people.

Secondly, we must raise the price of aggression for Russia with bold actions. Some of the ways to achieve this are to make it significantly more difficult for Russia to earn income from its main source, energy exports.

As well, to reallocate the frozen assets of Russia to finance Ukraine's military needs.

Thirdly, we have to strengthen the relations with our friends and allies who are like-minded countries that are interested in safeguarding democracy, both in their countries and in Europe as a whole.

Only by strengthening our partnership can we deter authoritarian regimes.

Last but not least, we should also focus on ensuring that the institutions and societies in our own countries are strong and resilient, as there is a need to not only invest in the media literacy of our societies, to compound the spread of fake news and disinformation, but also to protect our digital infrastructure from hybrid threats and cyber attacks that target democratic institutions and public trust.

Dear colleagues,

Safeguarding democracy and ensuring security across Europe cannot be the responsibility of a single country or organisation.

To safeguard our freedom, we need to realise strong support to Ukraine leading to its victory, and at the same time we need the long term deterrence of an aggressive Russia and a stronger alliance of European countries.

Thank you, glory to victory, to Ukraine.

Thank you.

**Ms Verona MURPHY (Ceann Comhairle of Dáil Éireann):** Thank you.

Thank you Mister Vucāns.

I now call Mr Jan Anthonie BRUIJN, President of the Senate, Netherlands.

He will be followed by Ms Tulia ACKSON, President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

**Mr Jan Anthonie BRUIJN (President of the Senate, Netherlands):** Dear Chair, dear colleagues,

As always, it is good to meet as presidents of the parliaments of the member states of the Council of Europe.

And also it is very good to have been able to listen to our esteemed colleague Mr Ruslan STEFANCHUK.

Dear colleagues,

Let me first express my strong adherence to what previous speakers have expressed regarding the geopolitical situation in the world in general, and in the Netherlands and Europe in particular.

Although external threats to our democracies are on top of our heads these days, I believe we need to keep an eye on the internal threats at the same time.

Therefore in my contribution I would like to focus on internal national threats to democracy and the rule of law and building trust among our citizens, specifically, as one cannot exist without the other two.

Let me start with building or even regaining trust.

I would like therefore to draw your attention to a long-standing Dutch tradition – *door rekenen*, as it's called. This literally translates into "calculating through". It happens when party manifestos, fundamental to policy as they are, are screened by independent planning officers. The planning officers screen the manifestos and the financial paragraphs for inconsistencies and their consequences. Is a political party capable of delivering what they are promising? Is the financial paragraph lacking means? What are the effects of the proposed policies on nature, environment and spatial planning? Is it clear and to the point?

This practice is not mandatory, rather voluntary, but during the past decades it has become a tradition that most political parties adhere to, and is regarded as fundamental.

In the Netherlands we now also hear pleas to have election manifestos tested for the rule of law and admissibility in the light of the constitution and international treaties such as the European Convention on Human Rights.

Along those lines I have previously argued – and I would like to repeat that here today – for the foundation of an independent scientific planning office for the rule of law in our country. Such a service can be offered to political parties and during the formation of coalition government, with the aim of contributing to trust in government and politics.

As you and I are aware, trust is the foundation of our democratic legal order, of peace, security and prosperity.

It is an essential counterpoint in today's world where humans increasingly struggle to get along with their peers; where trust is eroding; where frustration and shame lead to aggression, violence and terrorism; where government and citizens drift away from each other; where powerful but not unbreakable democracy is threatened from outside, but also from within.

In the carelessness of freedom and security lies the danger of its neglect and loss. And that touches on geopolitical security; to war and peace.

Liberal freedoms are under threat. Indifference and open hatred are rearing their heads, in the Netherlands too. The rule of law is based on principles such as freedom, equality and autonomy.

In the rule of law, justice prevails and citizens and minorities are protected from the improper use of government power and also from improper influences of other organisations.

In the Netherlands, the foundation of an independent planning office for the rule of law could contribute to strengthening the rule of law and safeguarding democracy, the theme of our meeting here today.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts and I thank you for giving me the floor.

Thank you.

[Light applause]

**Ms Verona MURPHY (Ceann Comhairle of Dáil Éireann):** Colleagues, we would normally take a coffee break at 4:15 p.m., however, I propose that we continue with our debate and those who wish to have a coffee can do so in the foyer. Thank you.

Now I call on Ms Tulia ACKSON, President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and she will be followed by Mr Thomas BREZZO, President of the Conseil National de Monaco.

**Ms Tulia ACKSON (President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union):** Esteemed Presidents of Parliament,

Distinguished colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

We gather at a moment that demands clear-eyed reflection on the state of our democratic institutions.

As the global organisation of 181 national parliaments, the Inter-Parliamentary Union recognises both the challenges and the enduring potential of democratic governance.

Our 1997 Universal Declaration on Democracy remains a crucial touchstone – reminding us that democracy is more than just a political system. It is a commitment to human dignity, fundamental rights and the capacity for societal self-correction. To translate this principle into practice, we've developed the IPU's Indicators for Democratic Parliaments: a rigorous tool that enables parliaments to assess and systematically strengthen their democratic foundations.

Two critical areas require our immediate and sustained attention. First, representation. Since 1995, women's representation in parliaments has grown from 11.3% to just over 27.2%. At this pace, achieving gender parity would take 76 years – an unacceptably slow progression. The evidence is clear: countries implementing gender quotas elect twice as many women. Six nations have already achieved full gender parity, demonstrating that meaningful change is possible. Youth representation presents an equally significant challenge. Globally, only 2.8% of parliamentarians are under 30, despite young people comprising half the world's population. Our "I Say Yes to Youth in Parliament!" campaign, which calls for actions such as promoting youth quotas and aligning the age to run for office with the voting age, is not just an initiative, but a necessary response to this democratic deficit.

Second, we must confront the technological challenges threatening democratic processes. Our recent resolution on AI's impact on democracy highlights critical risks. Artificial intelligence presents a complex landscape of opportunities but also potential threats to public discourse and democratic institutions. These challenges demand more than recognition. They require co-ordinated, strategic action. This work necessarily extends beyond national boundaries. For over 25 years, the IPU has worked to bridge the democracy gap in international relations, defending international law and the rules-based global system centred on the United Nations. The UN Pact for the Future signals a growing recognition of parliaments' critical role in global governance.

Yet the multilateral system remains imperfect.

As Winston Churchill observed, there is no viable alternative to multilateralism. We must continue to push for reforms that make international institutions more responsive and effective. Our collaboration with the European Parliament at the World Trade Organization exemplifies how parliamentary diplomacy can enhance transparency and promote inclusive global trade. These efforts are essential in ensuring that international systems serve the broader interests of our global community.

In July, we will convene the Sixth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament in Geneva. This summit represents an opportunity to exercise collective leadership, focusing on delivering peace, democracy and sustainable development, and I look forward to seeing all of you colleagues.

The road ahead is challenging, but not insurmountable – by sharing insights, maintaining rigorous democratic standards, and working collaboratively, we can reinforce the institutions that represent our people's aspirations. Our guiding principle remains straightforward yet profound: For Democracy. For Everyone.

I thank you for listening.

**Ms Verona MURPHY (Ceann Comhairle of Dáil Éireann):** Thank you Miss Ackson.

I now call Mr Thomas BREZZO, President of the *Conseil national* of Monaco.

He will be followed by Ms Heléne BJÖRKLUND, President of the Nordic Council.

Mister Brezzo.

**Mr Thomas BREZZO (President of the Conseil national, Monaco):** Thank you, Madam President.

Fellow Presidents of Parliaments,

Dear members of delegations,

Ladies and gentlemen,

The very wording of the theme of our speeches, "Safeguarding democracy", might have made us smile just a few years ago, so much so that we took it for granted.

Today, it only makes tyrants smile.

For today, the map of countries that truly conform to the three fundamental values of our Assembly is shrinking dangerously, whether in terms of respect for the rule of law or human rights; and thus, what today looks like the very survival of democracy is being reduced to a worrying number of nations.

The attacks are multiple, and to use a word that is unfortunately topical today, "hybrid". Even in those countries where democracy is most firmly entrenched, we are today witnessing a questioning of certain fundamental values.

Populism, disinformation and attacks on the independence of the various branches of power are challenges facing our democratic systems. These threats are not just external: they often feed on the internal fragilities of our societies, distrust of institutions, isolation, polarisation of public opinion and the rise of the sometimes – often even – malicious social media, which are profoundly transforming even the way we look at democracy.

In the past, people would make a choice on the political spectrum throughout their lives; today, we react emotionally to the latest trends on social media, even if they are conspiracy theories, with no particular respect for democratically elected representatives. Worse still, certain commitments made on the strength of election platforms or referendum results are forgotten and sometimes contradicted by the actual actions of elected representatives. So it's hardly surprising that voter turnout figures are eroding, election after election, in a large number of democracies, despite their reputation for stability.

Against this backdrop, safeguarding democracy in Europe means first and foremost unreservedly supporting those who are fighting for its very survival. In this respect, allow me to reiterate the solidarity of the *Conseil national de Monaco* with our colleagues fighting for their freedom, and in particular our Ukrainian colleagues who are relentlessly defending their fundamental values in these times of war, a hybrid war in which the aggressor is attacking not only their territory but also – and he's making no secret of it – the very foundations of their democratic values.

Make no mistake: safeguarding democracy means above all safeguarding it in each and every one of our countries. Our democracies are not necessarily weak in the face of attacks, given our history and the solidity of our institutions, but they are vulnerable because of their very nature, which is based on, among other things, freedom of expression and the theoretically inalienable right to choose our representatives on the basis of our individual interest in public life.

Let's not be content with lamenting the disengagement – or even disinterest – of young people in the workings of our democracies. Disenchantment, the crisis of confidence in traditional parties, misinformation and even the conspiracy mirage are fuelling a feeling of cynicism among young people. What are we waiting for?

Others may wonder what role such a small state as Monaco can play. Well, I don't think it's size that counts; and as Jean de la Fontaine so aptly put it, you always need someone smaller than you. So it's certainly not the power of our demographic weight, we agree, and it's certainly not the role of lesson-giver that we want to play: we simply owe it to ourselves to be an example of secular stability and peaceful governance. Our total absence of strategic stakes guarantees an expression without ulterior motives. In short, we have no ambition other than to act as a disinterested mediator, with faith in the future of democracy, particularly through our younger generations.

The younger generations, from school onwards, are the driver of our nations' future. It is they who hold the safeguard of democracy in their hands. In the Principality of Monaco, young people are one of our primary concerns. We must show them the way: not only is this our mission, to design a better future for them, but also to help them grow up seeing democracy in action. In fact, one of our commissions is dedicated to them.

We've even changed the way we communicate with them, targeting them via social media. We are constantly welcoming them and their teachers to our hemicycle. We have created and developed what we call the National Youth Council, where, under the guidance of elected representatives, these young men and women aged 14 to 18 are already learning about democratic debate.

In the words of MANDELA, democracy means not only elections, but also the opportunity for every citizen to participate in public life. By starting with this young public and infusing its efforts for the benefit of the whole population, it is in this spirit that we must strengthen civic education, promote respectful public debate and encourage participation in the democratic life of our countries.

Safeguarding democracy requires vigilance, commitment and solidarity between all our nations, through our active involvement in the Council of Europe. Together, by remaining true to our founding principles, we can – I would even say we "must" – face up to today's challenges and ensure that democracy remains a living model of hope and progress. This is not an objective: it is an obligation we owe to our peoples, to history and to future generations.

Thank you very much.

**Ms Verona MURPHY (Ceann Comhairle of Dáil Éireann):** Thank you, Mister Brezzo.

I now call on Ms Heléne BJÖRKLUND, President of the Nordic Council, and you will be followed by Mr Csaba HENDE, Vice Speaker of the National Assembly of Hungary.

**Ms Heléne BJÖRKLUND (President of the Nordic Council):** Thank you,

Honourable Presidents, dear colleagues,

I think a lot of us need a cup of coffee, but I am glad that you are still here and listening.

Thank you for the opportunity to let me address this important issue. My name is Heléne Björklund and I am the president of the Nordic Council. The Nordic Council is the inter-parliamentary co-operation between the Nordic countries which was founded in 1952.

As members of our nations' parliaments, we carry a responsibility not only to uphold democratic principles, but to strengthen them in the face of rising challenges.

The Nordic Council has continuously put the war in Ukraine high on the agenda and it was an honour for us to have President Volodymyr ZELENSKYY as a guest speaker at our session in Reykjavík in November. Ukraine must have our unwavering support. Mr Ruslan STEFANCHUK, the Chairman of Ukraine, asked earlier today for continued support. In the Nordic Council, Ukraine has full support, as long as it is needed.

Democracy is not a given.

It is a system that demands constant care, resilience and adaptation. Across Europe, we see increasing threats, external and internal, testing the very foundations of our democratic institutions. Russia's war against Ukraine is a strong reminder that democracy and freedom must be defended.

And yet, beyond military aggression, we face more insidious threats: the spread of disinformation, attempts to erode judicial independence, and growing polarisation. These forces do not attack democracy in one bold move; they weaken it gradually, making institutions brittle and public trust fragile.

Technology and digital platforms hold great potential to enhance democratic participation, yet they also present risks. We must ensure that the digital space does not become a tool for manipulation but a platform for informed debate. Fact-based journalism, critical thinking and media literacy are essential to countering disinformation.

Engaging young people in democracy is particularly vital. That is why we in the Nordic Council strongly support the Nordic Youth Council. Their representatives take part in all our meetings, both formal and informal, and help shape the future of our region.

Safeguarding democracy is not a task for one nation alone. It is a collective responsibility, requiring co-operation between parliaments, civil society and international institutions. The Nordic Council stands ready to work with all of you to reinforce the structures that protect our democratic way of life.

Democracy, as we know it, is facing unprecedented pressure. But if we act together, if we stand by our principles, and if we lead with integrity, I know that democracy will not just survive — it will thrive!

In the Nordic countries, we have long worked to strengthen the pillars of democracy — transparency, the rule of law, and an active civil society. But democracy is not just about institutions; it is a culture, built on trust, dialogue, and a shared commitment to human rights and equality. That is why both the Nordic Council's international strategy and the Swedish presidency programme puts a strong emphasis on co-operation, within our own region and beyond.

In our presidency programme we enhance the importance of working together and co-operating with international partners as we continually try to promote democratic values, the rule of law and the protection of human rights.

In my own country Sweden, as in many of your countries, we are now re-arming our military defence.

But we also have to build our civil defence.

The best thing you can do to prepare yourself is to know your neighbour. Get to know your neighbour, for different reasons. That also applies to the countries.

So thank you again for the opportunity to come here – and get to know each other, our best neighbours.

Thank you.

[Applause]

**Ms Verona MURPHY (Ceann Comhairle of Dáil Éireann):** Thank you, Madam Björklund.

I now call on Mr Csaba HENDE, Vice Speaker of the National Assembly of Hungary. He will be followed by Ms Elvira KOVÁCS, Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly of Serbia.

**Mr Csaba HENDE (Vice-Speaker of the National Assembly, Hungary):** Honourable conference,

Please allow me to briefly highlight the practice and interpretation in Hungary of the fundamental concepts raised in our agenda item, democracy, the will of the people, the populus and consultation of the electorate.

I am sure that all of us here agree that the basis for the protection of constitutional guarantees is mutual respect and peace in healthy democracies. There is also no doubt that one of the measures of democracy is confidence in the democratic institutions, one of the expressions of which is participation in elections. Another measure is the acceptance of the result. In that logic, ignoring the will of the electorate is a sign of a disease of democracy.

Ideologically-bound concepts of democracy also lead to the distortion of democracy: branding government according to the will of the electorate as populism or not allowing the party that actually won the election in the electoral system to govern lead to a distortion of democratic legitimacy.

Take the example of Hungary, where voters not only have the opportunity to express their opinion every four years, but national consultations and referenda also channel the opinion of the people. Through national consultations, people are able to express their opinions on specific issues, thereby influencing government decisions. Giving effect to the will of the people enhances the integrity of democratic systems and increases a country's sense of cohesion, as well as its sovereignty.

Honourable conference,

It has been suggested many times that populism is a political tendency to be persecuted. But what is populism and why does it have a negative connotation? Is it really the will of the people that poses a threat to democracy? Democracy, my dear friends, is not threatened by populism or by respecting the will of the electorate, but by spreading a climate of war, by conducting political, economic and cultural warfare against peace-loving states that have economic neutrality, development and competitiveness as their objectives. Democracy is lost when tolerance is used as an ideological weapon against the set of Christian values, when the culture of acceptance is reduced to an ideological action, a provocation. The monopoly of egalitarianism creates a uniform man and leads the world towards global governance.

If man is deprived of the foundations of identity, of the importance of the family, of the evidence of biological gender, if their patriotism and patriotic feelings are replaced by the stigma of nationalism, if they are deprived of the sense of belonging to a nation and of their language and culture, in other words of everything that has so far determined the man-homeland-family relationship, then man is reduced to a mere consumer.

Honourable colleagues, political apathy is inherent in a society based on the lies of an autocratic ideology. Instead of that, what is the essence of the Hungarian model? Honesty and integrity, straight talking and clarity in politics. And everyone in Hungary would be happy with all their hearts to serve as an example to other nations wishing to renew democracy. Consistent representation of the will of the people can bring more active civic engagement, especially among the younger generations.

All for the people, and all by the people. Nothing about the people without the people. That is democracy.

Thank you for your kind attention.

**Ms Verona MURPHY (Ceann Comhairle of Dáil Éireann):** Thank you Mister Hende.

And now I call on Ms Elvira KOVÁCS, Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly, Serbia, who will be followed by Mr Abdelkader EL KIHAL, Vice-Speaker of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean.

**Ms Elvira KOVÁCS (Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly, Serbia):** Thank you, honourable colleagues, distinguished speakers, esteemed guests.

It is an honour to stand before you today to discuss safeguarding democracy, an issue that is not just fundamental to our institutions but to the very stability of our societies.

I extend my sincere appreciation to our hosts for convening this timely discussion, particularly at the moment when democracies across Europe are being tested in new and unprecedented ways.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has long been a guardian, and the Council of Europe in general, has long been a guardian of democratic principles and Serbia deeply values its engagement with this institution.

Democracy is not a passive achievement. It is an ongoing commitment, for the opposition and civil society organisations as well. It must be nurtured, defended and sometimes recalibrated to reflect the involving needs of our citizens. In Serbia, we fully understand that safeguarding democracy requires more than just institutional reforms, it demands a political culture built on trust, accountability and inclusion. It also requires us, as elected leaders, to ensure that democratic principles are not just upheld in law but lived in practice.

The past year has demonstrated that Serbia's democracy is engaged and evolving. We have witnessed a high degree of civic participation, robust public debates and strong expectations for institutional integrity. We embrace these developments recognising that democracy is only as strong as the voices it empowers.

At the same time, we acknowledge that challenges exist and it is our responsibility to address them through constructive and transparent engagement. A key priority for Serbia has been implementing audit recommendations on electoral integrity. Strengthening electoral processes is not merely a procedural necessity, it is a fundamental pillar of public trust in democracy. Strengthening the judicial system's independence remains a top priority for Serbia's democratic progress. A strong judicial system underpins citizens' confidence that we all play by the same rules, no matter what our station in life might be. This is what gives us confidence in institutions, politicians, the economy and everyday activities. Ongoing reforms include improving whistle-blowers' protection, expanding public access to governmental data, strengthening anti-corruption frameworks, etc.

Equally pressing is the challenge of disinformation and external influence on democratic processes. Serbia, like many nations, is confronted with the reality that disinformation does not just distort facts, it erodes confidence in institutions and weakens the fabric of democracy itself.

Our approach includes improving media literacy, increasing transparency in political communication and working with European partners to reinforce safeguards against malign influence. We recognise that this is not a challenge we can tackle alone. It requires co-ordinated European response and Serbia is ready to contribute actively to this effort. Whether through legislative exchanges or joint monitoring initiatives on greater alignment with European democratic frameworks, Serbia is committed to ensuring that its institutions reflect the best of European government standards.

In practical terms, Serbia has been actively involved in European initiatives aimed at strengthening parliamentary oversight and legislative transparency. As part of our commitment to democratic progress, we welcome continued collaboration with the Council of Europe and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of

Europe to refine these processes and ensure their effective implementation. Safeguarding democracy requires more than legislation, it requires leadership, it requires the commitment to dialogue, to institutional fairness and to ensuring that democracy is not just an aspiration but a lived reality for all our citizens.

Serbia remains committed to deepening its engagement with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, learning from best practices and ensuring that our democratic evolution is aligned with the values that unite us as Europeans.

Thank you for your attention.

**Ms Verona MURPHY (Ceann Comhairle of Dáil Éireann):** Thank you Madam Kovács.

I now call Mr Abdelkader EL KIHAL, Vice-Speaker of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean.

He will be followed by our final speaker Mr Carles ENSENYAT REIG, Síndic general of the Consell General, Andorra.

**Mr Abdelkader EL KIHAL (Vice-Speaker of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean):** Your Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have the honour of addressing this conference on behalf of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM), on such an important issue as safeguarding democracy.

We live in a time of fast-moving events and challenges from all sides. We need to recover and forcefully reaffirm our values of unity, mutual understanding, respect for justice, international law and the rule of law.

The PAM represents a privileged platform for exchange and dialogue on strategic issues between parliamentarians from the Euro-Mediterranean and Gulf regions. Most of the national and international parliaments represented here today are members and partners of the PAM, and we are all well aware of the risks facing democratic institutions in this historic period of great uncertainty for our common future.

Dear colleagues,

PAM countries are following with great concern the relentless attacks on democracy and the degradation of human rights, stimulated by ongoing conflicts and the malicious use of artificial intelligence and emerging technologies. Moreover, at regional and international level, we are witnessing growing mistrust, a lack of solidarity between states, a return to threats and the use of force against the most fragile countries.

In this context, the PAM regions continue to face a series of profound crises, especially Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine. This conflict can only be resolved by condemning the aggressor, respecting the democratically elected government and restoring Ukraine's sovereignty over its entire territory.

The resumption of Israeli air strikes in Gaza, during which a significant number of civilians have been killed: the APM launches an urgent appeal for the ceasefire to be respected, humanitarian aid to be restored without hindrance, the remaining prisoners and hostages to be released unconditionally, and the rapid restoration of the strip.

Distinguished delegates,

Over the past year, APM has also devoted much effort to the use of AI and new technologies by terrorist organisations and state actors. I'd also like to mention the increase in online violence against women. According to the United Nations, these attacks are getting worse, causing lasting damage that can be reflected in real-world violence. The deterioration in respect for women's rights and freedoms corresponds to the recession of democracy itself.

To meet these challenges, APM, with its Center for Global Studies, works in partnership with the United Nations Security Council.

Excellencies,

Through collective action, sustained political commitment and coherent, concerted legislative work, we are still in a position to safeguard our democratic systems. In order to continue our conversations, I am pleased to inform you that the next meeting of the Secretaries General of the PAM regions will be held on May 22 in Marrakech, hosted by the Moroccan Chamber of Councillors.

In addition, on May 6, 2026, the first Summit of PAM Regional Presidents will be held in Montenegro, hosted by the President of the Montenegrin Parliament.

Thank you for your attention.

**Ms Verona MURPHY (Ceann Comhairle of Dáil Éireann):** Thank you Mister El Kihal.

I now last but not least I now invite our final speaker, Mr Carles ENSENYAT REIG, *Síndic general del Consell General*, Andorra.

"Thank you" [*spoken in French*].

**Mr Carles ENSENYAT REIG (Síndic general of the Consell General, Andorra):** Thank you ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

Andorra holds a prominent place in the history of European democracies.

As Mr Václav HAVEL, a figure who inspired this Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, said once: democracy is not just a system of governance, it's an attitude towards life.

And this attitude has been present in Andorra from the very beginning.

Despite our size, Andorrans have managed to balance the dual mandate of consolidating and preserving what we have while also opening the doors to evolution, progress and the future.

Since the 1981 decree of the reform of the institutions, Andorra has made significant strides to consolidate and protect our democracy.

The *Consell General* – the highest representative body of the Andorran people – has gained weight in important decision-making, thus achieving a more plural and inclusive democracy.

In this context, Resolution 946 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in 1990 emphasises the need to reform our institutions, to ensure a strong and resilient democracy.

At that time, the Co-princes, our head of state, under the General Council, were encouraged to consider the opportunity to adopt the written constitution that will set forth the rights and freedoms of citizens undefined in the international human rights treaties.

This process led to the referendum of 14 March 1993, a decisive moment for consolidating the sovereignty of our people. The constitution that resulted from this process recognised the people's right to determine their future.

Since then, Andorra has opened up to the world, gaining international recognition as a state, establishing its own diplomacy and joining major multilateral organisations such as the Council of Europe.

Today, however, democracy in Europe, also in Andorra, also in the world, is at a defining moment.

Social tensions, the crisis of trust in institutions and global threats are testing our democracy's structures.

In this context parliaments, key places of popular representation, have an essential role in defending and safeguarding democracy.

We must preserve democratic institutions, ensuring the separation of powers and guaranteeing the independence of the judiciary.

At the same time it is crucial to promote an open and transparent democracy, providing our parliamentarians with the necessary means to legislate with full knowledge in an environment of responsibility, ensuring that the decision derives from a well considered, fair and will benefit society as a whole.

Parliament must also foster active citizen participation. Democracy is not limited to a voting system. It goes beyond that. It is an ongoing process of reflection, dialogue and debate. We must ensure that the rights of all people are respected and promote constructive debates. These ones will contribute to social cohesion with the aim of competing with decisive speech which threatens our institutions. Public trust is the axis upon which all democracy pivots. Parliaments must be steadfast in protecting human rights, avoiding any attempt to limit them from political but also from economic interests.

One of the most important assets we have in Andorra is social cohesion.

We are a small, great country where everyone knows each other.

From this closeness we have found our strength and from this unity we have made our motto, *virtus unita fortior*.

As politicians, we have the responsibility to build consensus.

And in international meetings like today, we must set aside unnecessary differences, be generous and look forward to charting a path of future prosperity for all, while safeguarding our democracies at all times.

Thank you so much.

[*Light applause*]

**Ms Verona MURPHY (Ceann Comhairle of Dáil Éireann):** Thank you Mister Ensenyat Reig.

And that completes our list of speakers.

I now invite president Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS to take the chair.

Thank you.

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

We are going on now.

I would like to ask the Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine, dear Ruslan, would you like to respond to the debate that.. no?

Okay, thank you so much.

I want to thank you all for participating in this first round in a general issue which is always on our daily agenda as parliamentarians.

We are going now to theme number two: "Guaranteeing freedom of expression in times of polarisation and uncertainty".

I refer you to the background papers that have been prepared for this topic, because it is important to recall the commitments made by our member states at the Fourth Summit of head of state and governments of the Council of Europe to guarantee the right to freedom of expression, to hold opinions, the right to receive and disseminate information from free independent pluralistic and diversified media, and the commitment to combat the threat to democracy posed by disinformation or misinformation.

To introduce our debate I have the pleasure to give the floor to Ms Małgorzata KIDAWA-BŁOŃSKA, Marshal of the Senate of Poland.

She will be followed by our Spanish colleague Mr Pedro ROLLÁN, Speaker of the Senate, Spain, and by Ms Þórunn SVEINBJARNARDÓTTIR...

I am really sorry but I have to try again – Ms Þórunn SVEINBJARNARDÓTTIR, Speaker of Alþingi, Iceland.

(*Laughs*)

We have met many times but I have never asked you how to pronounce your name. I'm sure that it is equally difficult to you to pronounce Greek names.

So I ask now the Marshal of the Senate, Poland, to take the floor.

## **Theme 2: Guaranteeing freedom of expression in times of polarisation and uncertainty**

**Ms Małgorzata KIDAWA-BŁOŃSKA (Marshal of the Senate, Poland)\*:** Dear colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour to speak today at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on the topic of freedom of expression – a topic which lies at the heart of democracy and civil society.

It is freedom of expression that enables the free exchange of ideas, thoughts and information; it allows you to make informed decisions about your future and that of your country.

Freedom of expression is the guarantee of democracy. Time and again, as an international community, we must speak up about freedom of expression in countries where it is violated and trampled upon, in the literal sense. Many journalists are killed in armed conflicts and assassinations and are brutally persecuted by the authorities.

More than 500 journalists and media workers, including about 60 of them in our close neighbourhood, are currently detained around the world, including Russia and Belarus. Many of them have been imprisoned for years in conditions that degrade human dignity, including Andrzej POCZOBUT, a journalist and activist of the Polish minority in Grodno. In just a few days, on 25 March, it will be four years since his unlawful imprisonment. The Senate of Poland has constantly demanded his release, as well as that of all persons unlawfully imprisoned in Belarus. Today, I also call for the release of Andrzej POCZOBUT.

Over the last decade, the situation in the world has changed drastically – geopolitically, economically and technologically. As we know, this has had a negative impact on freedom of expression. Today, this fundamental freedom is under threat, regardless of the state of democracy in each and every country.

Threats to freedom of expression come from at least two directions, they come from the outside, as we see constant interference from authoritarian states that sponsor disinformation campaigns aimed at sowing fear and dividing societies in democratic states. We saw an example of this during the migration crisis and then during the pandemic when conspiracy theories about the coronavirus being harmless or medicines and vaccines being ineffective were rampant in social media.

The same instruments were used by Russian propaganda after the aggression against Ukraine. Russia is spreading lies around the world about the need for the denazification of Ukraine, the genocide of ethnic Russians or US biological weapon laboratories in Ukraine. All the interference and disinformation attacks by Russia, which intensify during election periods, are now a tool of hybrid warfare and an outright assault on the freedom of expression.

The second threat is perhaps more serious as it comes from within. It is a new and different type of politics in democratic states in which truth is no longer a value and all that matters is the defeat of the opponent by enemies above all by falsifying the message.

In this model of politics, lying becomes a tool for gaining and maintaining power. Lies become part and parcel of public life. This trend is furthered by fake news campaigns launched by authoritarian regimes outside Europe. It is impossible not to see the algorithms used by communication platforms, which have become a kind of digital censorship. People do not want to listen to other opinions and they lock themselves in bubbles. Technology companies benefit a lot from such polarisation.

All of this makes the formally guaranteed freedom of expression irrelevant, as superficial, non-objective but loud messages predominate. The messages that resemble the Orwellian truth imposed on society regardless of the facts, in which history can be rewritten and lies are presented as truth. This leads to the disappearance of democratic values. Truth and objectivity are no longer relevant and the advent of artificial intelligence may even reinforce this process.

Ladies and gentlemen, after the end of the Cold War, everybody thought that democracy was the future of the world. Today, unfortunately, we can see that the democratic space around the world is shrinking and democracy itself is not a given once and for all. We must actively fight for it. Therefore, one of the most important challenges for European societies is to defend the freedom of speech because it is, at the same time, a defence of truth and democracy against lies and authoritarianism.

Firstly, we must respond firmly to lies because if we do not, lies repeated a thousand times may appear to be true. We need to strengthen the institutions and laws that protect freedom of expression. After all, we often hear of investigative journalists being harassed by unjustified lawsuits for writing the truth or sometimes merely for asking questions.

Influential clients are often behind these lawsuits: transnational companies, organisations, individuals and foreign authoritarian states hostile to democracy. In such cases, the objective is to silence the critics and prevent public debate. Such actions are a slap in the face of democracy and we have to fight them vigorously.

In addition to the legal framework that is already in place, firm enforcement is extremely important to block the introduction of authoritarian solutions through the back door.

Secondly, we must look after the independent judiciary and civic society organisations, which are essential bastions against tyranny. We have to support them not only with words but also with financial means, and importantly, with political will.

Finally, we need to address the root causes of polarisation. This means that we have to make digital education a priority. Our citizens must know how to distinguish between facts and attractively presented but false messages. We also have to use new technology, including artificial intelligence, despite all the challenges and risks involved in it because artificial intelligence has great potential for fact-checking.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are faced today with the threat of the return of war as a key tool of politics. We are faced with attempts to marginalise Europe and to impose the logic of a new concert of powers upon the world. We will not accept this. We must strengthen European unity and solidarity because we do so in the name of defending our freedom.

In the name of that same freedom, Ukrainian soldiers are fighting today. Freedom of expression, freedom of speech is the foundation of our European identity. In the midst of the geopolitical storm and the clash of arms, wars waged at the gates of Europe, let us stand firmly in defence of free speech in Europe.

Thank you.

**Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (President of the PACE):** I want to thank the speaker of the Poland Senate.

I would like to say to you, Ms Małgorzata KIDAWA-BŁOŃSKA, that while you were referring to the lies that we must firmly and immediately respond to, in my mind came a very famous phrase of one of the founding fathers of this organisation, Mr Winston CHURCHILL.

He said that – I'm sure that you know that – a lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has put on its pants. So we have to consider, as of course well you have mentioned, that today with AI lies are flying faster than ever.

I now call Mr Pedro ROLLÁN, Speaker of the Senate, Spain, for his intervention.

Mister Rollán, you have the floor.

**Mr Pedro ROLLÁN (Speaker of the Senate, Spain)\*:** Your excellencies, good afternoon.

I would like to use my first words to thank the President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and his team for the leadership he has shown, as well as the wise choice of organising today's conference.

Democracies, as we know them, are under threat. This is why it is very important for us in parliaments to ensure that we have debates, designed to create mechanisms which will underpin our liberal democracies.

So this is why I very much welcome today's initiative. This morning, we debated some of these threats. Parliaments are fora in which people can speak and debate. As a result one of the fundamental freedoms which we need to protect and promote is the freedom of expression.

This is a right which is incorporated in the vast majorities of constitutions in countries around the world.

Nevertheless, it's threatened now more than ever.

As democrats, we have a duty to defend this right, so as to ensure that future generations can continue to enjoy this right, at least to the extent that we enjoy it today.

We are living in a world which is becoming more volatile. Change is happening faster and faster. Well established rights are under threat. As history has shown us, rights and freedoms take decades to establish, but just a few moments to disappear. Guaranteeing the fundamental freedoms of our citizens in a globalised and polarised world is becoming increasingly difficult. In addition to this, we face another challenge, which is the growing influence of social media, and the use of technology, in particular, AI, and the famous algorithms which we have just heard about, which establish the way in which information and news appear and are published on social media.

In this Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe you are all too aware of this: the compass of this institution is the European Convention of Human Rights. And you've been able to keep this convention up to date, adapting to ongoing changes, for example via the Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence, Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law, which was adopted last year.

At the same time, however, if we are to tackle the question of an intervention in democracy – something which we also suffered in Spain in 2017 – we also have to face up to that.

We see today how our democracies are being interfered with from outside. Candidates with the singular objective of destabilising the system from the outside. This leads us to a new world order which is based on the law of the strongest, rather than on the law of which is most fair and just. Moreover, we see that there are some who are trying to make the most of these circumstances to limit our rights.

Some countries are trying to pass legislation so as to ensure that only those who support their governments will be able to speak out. In these states we have also seen methods being used such as denouncing non-partisan journalists, eliminating critical media, or using, allowing pseudo media to pass for real media. This is a new type of modern censorship.

What we have to remember is that democracy can only be defended with more freedom, rather than less; more pluralism, rather than less and more rights rather than fewer rights.

All of this is taking place at a time when the world has gone flat, flat like a telephone or computer screen, in which we see a real jumble of ideas and reflections.

Moreover, some social media owners are now at the centre of government decision-making. Some social media owners do not hesitate to censor newspaper editors who are bothersome for power.

The head of a Spanish newspaper drafted an editorial this week, which was also published in The Times, saying it would be unacceptable in these difficult times for somebody to try and take control of an independent media from a position of power, either directly or by using some kind of state enterprise as a tool.

For these reasons, we have to constantly reiterate that free and independent media are of fundamental importance in democracy. They are one of the main bulwarks that we have against manipulation of the news and information.

Polarisation, which some people in society are promoting to pursue their own interests, either to achieve or to remain in power, and to win elections, are another threat which we have to defend ourselves against, despite upholding the freedom of expression.

Various different extremist parties and movements hope to come out victorious in this showdown. Defending the freedom of speech and expression doesn't just involve the individual's right to speak. It also involves creating an environment where people listen to each other, where everybody can speak out, and where we can accept positions which we are not in agreement with.

It's also essential that we promote education and encourage critical thinking, while providing the tools which our people, our citizens need, to ensure that they can be properly informed via different sources of information, reliable, truthful sources. So as to root out disinformation and narratives promoted because of individual interest, it is essential for us to promote a whole wide and plural range of news media. In many cases the efforts to manipulate facts and create a so-called post-truth world where reality changes and in some cases people are even starting to talk about the ethics of scams and swindles.

From here in the Council of Europe, we should encourage the design and adoption initiatives which will enable us to cement our most fundamental rights within democracy. We have to be able to work with broad and qualified majorities. Only in this way can we protect fundamental freedoms, like the freedom of expression. The freedom of expression in a world which is polarised and marked by uncertainty is a challenge, but it's also an opportunity for us to strengthen our democracy.

The Reykjavík Declaration is a document which sets out a road map which countries that are committed to strengthening the freedom of expression should follow. This is a necessary antidote to the poison of polarisation, disinformation and uncertainty. I would also refer to the European regulation on freedom of the media adopted recently by the EU. Our responsibility involves protecting freedom of expression and promoting this freedom.

Only with respect, education, critical thinking, free, strong and independent media and dialogue can we hope to overcome the divisions in society and work towards the building of fairer, more modern, more respectful societies. I am winding up:

Freedom of expression is one of the main pillars in which our democracies are rooted, as they are for the future of our societies. Without freedom of expression, we might have something else, but we will no longer have real democracies. This is why it is essential for us to use all of the tools available to defend democracy.

We must use these tools to defend our freedom of expression and our democracies and freedoms.

This is what has enabled us to allow our countries to become examples of tolerance, prosperity, freedom, equality and modernity in the world.

I would like to wind up by repeating what I said to the president of the Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada this morning: we are committed to defending peace. We need peace, but that peace has to be fair and durable.

We have to do everything possible to achieve that.

Many thanks.

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

I really pointed out, out of the interesting speech that you have just given to us, the distinction you [made] between the freedom of expression and the danger of polarisation. Two different things which might be related in the mouths or in the minds of the populists.

Thank you so much.

And I now call Ms Þórunn SVEINBJARNARDÓTTIR. And I hope that I pronounced it well (*laughs*), who is the Speaker of Alþingi, Iceland.

**Ms Þórunn SVEINBJARNARDÓTTIR (Speaker of Alþingi, Iceland):** Mister President, distinguished colleagues,

The Chinese Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Mr Liu XIAOBO, once said:

"Freedom of expression is the foundation of human rights, the source of humanity, and the mother of truth. To strangle freedom of speech is to trample on human rights, stifle humanity, and suppress truth."

Dear colleagues,

Today we address an important topic: guaranteeing freedom of expression in times of polarisation and uncertainty.

In an era marked by digital transformation and rising societal divisions, safeguarding this fundamental right is crucial for the preservation of democracy, and indeed for human dignity.

The Council of Europe has played a pivotal role in setting international standards on freedom of expression, media freedom, and access to information. The Reykjavík Declaration reaffirms our collective commitment to protecting these rights while combating hate speech and disinformation. Principle 7 of the Reykjavík Principles for Democracy underlines the need to ensure freedom of expression, both online and offline, and to protect journalists from threats and violence. It also underlines the importance of academic freedom and artistic freedom.

While upholding freedom of expression, penal codes should prohibit the dissemination of hateful or derogatory remarks against individuals or groups based on nationality, race, religion, or sexual orientation. This balance ensures that free speech does not infringe upon the dignity and safety of others. Something that women in politics know only too well from personal experience.

However, the current socio-political climate is marred by polarisation and uncertainty. The proliferation of toxic information and harmful propaganda impairs informed public debate. The dominance of digital platforms through algorithmic filtering creates echo chambers that deepen societal divides and lead to the radicalisation of discourse. Furthermore, increasing threats to journalists and public restrictions on free assembly pose significant challenges to free expression.

To counter these challenges, we must first prioritise quality information. Governments and civil society must work together to ensure that reliable and unbiased news is accessible to all. Media literacy is key in equipping citizens with critical thinking skills to discern between fact and misinformation, or should I say fiction.

The guidance note by the Steering Committee on Media and Information Society on countering the spread of online mis- and disinformation through fact checking and platform design solutions is a very useful tool in this context.

Moreover, the protection of journalists is paramount. The growing threats, from intimidation to violence and strategic lawsuits against public participation (or SLAPPs, that have been mentioned here), must be addressed. The Council of Europe's Safety of Journalists Platform provides vital alerts on these threats, and national parliaments must establish effective response mechanisms.

15 years ago, the Icelandic parliament (Alþingi) unanimously adopted the Icelandic Modern Media Initiative (IMMI). This initiative sought to strengthen protections for sources, whistleblowers, and journalists, enhancing transparency and accountability.

Independent news media also require support to withstand the financial pressures brought about by digital advertising monopolies. Public service media need adequate funding and protection from political interference to provide diverse perspectives and uphold editorial independence.

Furthermore, member states must refrain from censorship, except in extreme circumstances in line with Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. The misuse of public order exceptions to stifle dissent must be curtailed to protect the democratic right to free assembly and expression.

Lastly, we need to address the phenomenon of cancel culture, which silences voices and limits diversity of thought. A pluralistic society thrives on debate and dialogue, not exclusion and suppression. Freedom of expression requires that people are listened to, also those we disagree with. Let us not become prisoners of our own echo chambers.

In conclusion, guaranteeing freedom of expression in times of polarisation and uncertainty requires a multifaceted approach: promoting media literacy, protecting journalists, supporting independent media, and upholding international legal standards.

Let us stand united in safeguarding this cornerstone of democracy for the betterment of our societies and for future generations.

Thank you for your attention.

*[Light applause]*

**Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (President of the PACE):** Madam President, dear Þórunn, thank you so much for your interesting insights.

Thank you for pointing out not only journalists and the freedom of speech in journalism, but also the academic freedom, the academic freedom of speech, which is equally important, if not of more importance.

And on this occasion I would like to thank you and your country for initiating a very important award, the Vigdís Prize award. Ms Vigdís FINNBOGADOTTIR was the first woman to be elected as president globally. And since last year, the Icelandic government decided, with the co-operation of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, to initiate an award which is given to those who are struggling for equality or to help those who are in need.

Now we will open our debate.

I just want to kindly remind you that speakers have 5 minutes.

Depending on the time available, and once the list of speakers is concluded, I may also allow spontaneous comments from the floor in response to what it said during the debate.

And the first in my list is the deputy Speaker of the House of Lords, Lord John GARDINER OF KIMBLE.

Lord Gardiner, please take the floor.

**Lord John GARDINER OF KIMBLE (Vice-Speaker of the House of Lords, United Kingdom):** Mister President,

"Dear colleagues" [spoken in French]

It is a great honour to attend this conference, representing the Lord Speaker of the House of Lords. Freedom of expression is at the very heart of our democratic values, and never more important than now.

May I first of all recognise the bravery and determination of the Ukrainian people. You have our unwavering solidarity and support, as you stand for democracy and freedom.

In February this year, the Lord Speaker invited Mr President to give a lecture to mark the 75th Anniversary of the founding of the Council of Europe, with the signing of the Treaty of London in 1949. Those founders had a vision that "peace based upon justice and international co-operation is vital for the preservation of human society and civilisation".

I want to express gratitude to all at the Council of Europe who have worked to deliver that vision. Many parliamentarians, including members of the House of Lords, have helped build this strong and vibrant institution. It is more important than ever that all delegations work together to protect our fundamental values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The work undertaken here matters profoundly.

While guaranteeing freedom of expression is one of the common principles that unites us here today, this unquestionable freedom also brings – in my view – responsibilities. As well as countering increased polarisation, we should value a diversity of views. Freedom of expression should not be a tool to spread hate, misinformation or intolerance. Instead, it should be a beacon for fostering understanding and indeed "disagreeing agreeably". Only then can we truly benefit from this essential freedom.

As public servants, we must be particularly mindful – I believe – of how we conduct business in our own legislatures and how that shapes public discourse. A balance of freedom of expression and responsibility is, I believe, exemplified in the House of Lords. We are protected by Parliamentary Privilege. This means that members' debates and proceedings in Parliament cannot be questioned by the courts, and we indeed have the freedom to say whatever we want.

Responsible conduct is reliant on personal honour and collective adherence to customs and conventions to enable all members to express themselves freely and respectfully. Likewise, members must recognise that parliamentary privilege is just that - a privilege. It should be used judiciously, not to insult or antagonise, but rather to ensure that all opinions can be heard. We try in the House of Lords to demonstrate how this freedom can be exercised with restraint and respect for others – thereby protecting the true meaning of freedom of expression.

Our debates and recent legislation have included many of the complex issues that protect freedom of expression including online safety, public order and pluralism of media ownership. Like many second chambers our contribution is to take time to scrutinise legislation and to debate issues. How do we protect children, safeguard democracy and prevent misinformation and fraud and maintain freedom of expression? In listening to their electorates, parliamentarians must build understanding through careful and considered debate.

The ethos of the Council of Europe is to enhance the standards and principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, through the freedom of expression. Fostering a respectful environment as we seek to enhance the public good is essential. If we do not attend to this, polarisation becomes more potent.

The election observation missions by the Council of Europe have highlighted some worrying examples of restrictions on the free speech of politicians. We have heard earlier about democracy being under threat. At a time when full-scale war is happening on our continent, it is more important than ever to remember and deliver the Council of Europe's values so that future generations can enjoy freedom, peace and stability. Freedom of expression is essential for democracy. We must protect it robustly.

Thank you, Mister President, for putting this essential issue on the Agenda.

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

And I will now call the Vice-Speaker of the Consiglio Grande e Generale, San Marino, Mr Oscar MINA.

**Mr Oscar MINA (Vice-Speaker of the Consiglio Grande e Generale, San Marino):** Thank you President, Secretary,

Dear colleagues,

freedom of expression is an aspect that should not be underestimated as is, in equal measure, the same disinformation and its widespread propaganda that is producing, in public opinion, enormous damage with devastating effects in a context of social polarisation; and I would add in this period of conflict.

If we start from this concept, that is, that any media outlet in a country can afford to propagandise, for example, an aggressor regime while maintaining a suboptimal level of journalism, behind an apparent, *par condicio*, freedom of expression, it allows a dissemination of information without encountering any fact-checking even when it is blatant: this is called disinformation and propaganda detrimental to the common interest of states.

In fact, if we start, for example, from the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, false narratives, many of them promoted by Russian propaganda apparatuses that were already circulating before February 24, 2022, were used to try to justify the invasion of Ukraine. I think at this point we are prompted to ask ourselves a question, which is: do they really serve the public to know, or are they tools of manipulation in the hands of people to whom freedom of expression would suit, i.e., disinformation?

We ask this question because the danger of disinformation and widespread propaganda has become a real weapon of war in that conflict. Fake news is really the integral part of the war strategy, able to subvert that political balance and even create a state consciousness and reduce the concept of freedom of expression of media and information and obviously obfuscate the truth.

Plurality and free information at all levels starting from social media to print media is a challenge that all European parliaments face, which they must address concretely. The issue of freedom of expression and equally, I repeat, disinformation has no boundary, it is not given by the importance of a country, its size. But it is certainly capable of producing such damaging effects, projecting them into a vortex of transnational propaganda, capable of undermining the geopolitical stability of states and beyond.

The pillar freedom of expression on which public dialogue is based, transparency, the ability to deal with differences through social and political confrontation and polarisation, obviously tends to fuel phenomena such as intolerance, censorship, and the threat of repression against those who express contrary views.

So countering disinformation, as I mentioned in my preamble, I think is one of the aspects that could absolutely alter public debate. Therefore, it is important that media literacy be promoted so that all citizens can distinguish true information from false information.

I will conclude this short speech of mine by saying that the responsibility for ensuring freedom of expression is not only the task of politics and institutions, but also requires a strong commitment from individual citizens, the media, digital platforms, and social organisations. Freedom of expression, including academic freedom, artistic freedom, the right to hold opinions, the right to receive and transmit information and ideas, both online and offline, in an independent and pluralistic manner, should be one of the pillars of a democratic society, in which journalists, media workers should also enjoy full protection. Under the law even and that it is respected, protected and valued, especially by states.

So I believe that the issue that has been introduced in this conference is one of the aspects, as I always repeat, one of the aspects that goes to characterise the pillars of democracy. I with this I think I have not gone too far, but still I think freedom of information should be more respected.

Thank you for your attention

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

I call now the Vice-Speaker of the National Assembly, Hungary, Mr Csaba HENDE.

You have the floor.

**Mr Csaba HENDE (Vice-Speaker of the National Assembly, Hungary):** Honourable colleagues,

Everyone present agrees that freedom of speech and expression is at the heart of the democratic world, and that a free, independent, pluralistic and diverse media is one of the pillars of a democratic society.

In modern interpretations, that means not only the right to express an opinion, which in the age of social media is much less restricted than in the age of the printed press, but also the right of access to differing opinions. It is the right of voters interested in public affairs to have access to the news, to different opinions and views in the widest possible range and form.

In an extreme libertarian interpretation, that could also mean that freedom of expression is completely unrestricted. But that freedom leads to anarchy and dictatorship. By the 21st century, it has become accepted and widespread that freedom of expression and speech can be restricted in the interests of certain higher values and rights, whether for reasons of hate speech or public order.

But what happens to the opinion and protection of the majority?

By giving constitutional status to the values accepted and taken for granted by the majority of society, Hungary is opening up the possibility of protecting not only the interests of the minority, but also the opinion of the majority. An example is the Hungarian law which banned authoritarian symbols and which considered it important to include not only Nazi symbols, which were clearly restricted in the international context, but also symbols of the Communist dictatorship, which caused suffering to Hungarian society at least at that time.

Honourable Conference,

Our main objection to the idea of fact-checking is, however, a substantive one. Those who claim the right to fact-check for themselves have a decisive influence over access to information, over the 'market' of opinions. This raises the eternal platonic question [*quis custodiet ipsos custodes*], of who guards the guardians?

The real fact-checkers are not editorial staff or government officials, but the news consumers themselves, if they have the opportunity to learn about the balanced media market and, where appropriate, to learn about the various views and opinions. The best defence against misinformation or poisonous news is not to create a kind of new-age censorship, but to ensure a truly plural media market and real competition. That is as much the duty of the state as in any other segment of the economy because, just as competition law requires state intervention, public law intervention, so does the media world, *ad absurdum*, with the same legal means.

Thank you for your kind attention.

[*Light applause*]

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

I now call the Speaker of the National Council of Austria, Mr Walter ROSENKRANZ.

**Mr Walter ROSENKRANZ (Speaker of Nationalrat, Austria):** Dear Mister President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

Madam Secretary General,

Colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank you for the excellent background information on our topic today: the situation is described very aptly. The drastic developments of recent years - the pandemic, inflation, wars in and around Europe, right through to the current upheavals in transatlantic relations - have unsettled and polarised our societies. On the political side, we need to counter this uncertainty with discourse and confidence-building. However, we are often overtaken by debates on social media and platforms, which are often characterised by conscious and unconscious disinformation.

How can we deal with this and at the same time guarantee the right to freedom of expression? In the past - in traditional media - it was simple: a medium would make a false claim and you could even go all the way to court, and then you would be proven right - and the medium would have to retract it. Regardless of that, freedom of expression was never put to the test or questioned anywhere. Now it's more complicated because in social media worldwide, the perpetrators of false information are either not known to be taken to account, or

they are known - but you have no recourse because they live in another country and so are beyond domestic jurisdiction. Therefore, it is a complex but necessary balancing act of freedom of expression, but also the ability to have a truth-based media without the intervention of a Ministry of Truth.

Artificial intelligence further intensifies the phenomenon of disinformation on the internet. I would like to emphasise two aspects of this. Firstly, we must provide our citizens with tools and technologies that are in line with European standards and fundamental rights. Secondly, we must invest in the public's ability to be mature and critical. This means education - especially democratic education - and digital literacy.

On the first point - promoting technologies in line with European standards - especially fundamental rights and freedoms: we could probably create the most secure framework with a European social media platform. However, that would probably go beyond the scope of today's debate and take us too far afield. However, AI technologies are already available that can also be used to identify and regulate disinformation. National parliaments have a central role to play here as legislative and supervisory bodies. They must strike a balance between using effective tools to combat disinformation and giving citizens the right to freedom of expression. At the same time, we must provide more opportunities and space in parliamentary work to support research initiatives.

The second aspect is equally important: namely measures for democracy education and digital literacy. These must go hand in hand. The preservation of our democratic systems presupposes that our societies are aware of the value of our fundamental rights and democratic principles in the first place. The same applies to the limits of our fundamental rights: namely, where, for example, peaceful co-existence or security are endangered or the fundamental rights of other people are violated. In Austria, the current debate is unfortunately being held in this context: how to put a stop to the radicalisation of young people on the internet, primarily on the TikTok platform. Irrespective of technical measures, we need to start with young people themselves in order to strengthen their resilience to radicalisation and teach them democratic values.

The Austrian Parliament is taking a variety of measures to strengthen citizens' understanding of democracy and their media and information skills. Democracy education must start as early as possible and be age-appropriate, it must be continued with young people, and there must also be offers for adults - especially for senior citizens.

With this in mind, the Austrian Parliament's Democracy Workshop has been interactively teaching young people aged 8 to 19 about democracy, parliamentarianism and the constitution in face-to-face and online workshops since 2007. Parliament also goes on tour through Austria's schools and even kindergartens with various workshops under the title "Parliament comes to you". The so-called "Parliament on Tour" also traveled through all nine federal states and the regions in 2023 to provide information about the work of parliamentarians - especially about the value of living in a democratically constituted state with protected fundamental rights and freedoms. Equally relevant is the provision of facts about the parliamentary process, which is provided in the Austrian parliament by an information team, the website and through the official communication channels - including social media channels: Instagram, Facebook, X, LinkedIn, YouTube and TikTok.

It is essential for the parliament to have accounts on these various platforms. This is the only way we can reach new target groups today and win them over to democratic processes. In this context, I think it would be important for us to step up our exchange on comparable initiatives in the parliaments in order to learn even more from each other. The parliamentary administration of the Austrian parliament would be happy to provide an in-depth exchange of experiences.

Finally, I would like to thank our host, President ROUSSOPOULOS, for his hospitality, and the entire team of the Secretariat of the Parliamentary Assembly for organising this conference.

**Mr Theodoros ROUSSOPOULOS (President of the PACE):** Thank you, Mister Rosenkranz.

I call now the Speaker of the National Assembly of Slovenia, Ms Urška KLAKOČAR ZUPANČIČ.

**Ms Urška KLAKOČAR ZUPANČIČ (Speaker of the Državni zbor, Slovenia):** Freedom of expression is a cornerstone of any democratic society.

Allowing us to voice opinions, seek truth, engage in meaningful debates and hold also power accountable. Without it, we would live in a world of censorship and silence where progress is stalled, human rights are easily violated and positive societal change becomes difficult to achieve. Yet, as the world grows more

polarised, marked by rapid change, global crises and rising authoritarianism, this fundamental right is increasingly under threat. It is more and more often being used to spread misinformation, hatred and division, causing harm to individuals and eroding the social fabric of our communities.

At the same time, ensuring access to accurate information, which is vital for healthy public discourse, has become even more complex than ever.

Around the world, conflicts intensify, tensions between countries rise and internal political divisions deepen and we are seeing a surge in attacks on media freedom and journalists.

At the same time, restrictions on access to information are becoming more widespread across the world.

Professional journalism, however, has been facing another significant challenge: the growing influence of online personalities operating without proper regulation. Influencers on social media can easily spread both true and false information, creating confusion among the public and intensifying social divides. Within their large audiences, their influence is not just visible but can actually shape public opinion further eroding the credibility of the traditional media outlets.

So how do we protect freedom of speech while ensuring it is not misused or spread hate speech, fake news and manipulation? Of course, it is crucial to promote media literacy, which plays a key role in understanding the quality and credibility of information. Citizens must be able to recognise this information, distinguish between real and fake news and critically evaluate the information they receive. Only by doing so, we can protect the freedom of speech and ensure it remains a tool for our progress not a means of division. We can achieve these by integrating media literacy into the school curriculum, organising public awareness campaigns and supporting organisations dedicated to educating and training journalists.

Parliaments have a crucial role and responsibility in ensuring that the commitments made at the 2023 summit in Reykjavík are fulfilled. These commitments focus on safeguarding core diplomatic values, including freedom of speech. One of the key responsibilities of parliaments should be to support the development of a legislative framework that provides stronger protection for journalists and media freedom, promotes transparency in media operations and reduces the risks of spreading disinformation.

At the same time, as parliamentarians, we must support new initiatives aimed at better aligning national legislation with global standards, for protecting journalists such as those put forward by the safety of journalists platform. Reducing polarisation in our societies must remain one of our top priorities. This requires strategic initiatives aimed at fostering mutual dialogue, an openness to diverse viewpoints, and above all, a commitment to upholding the dignity of every individual. And with the dignity of every individual, I really mean the dignity of every individual, regardless of their race, nationality, ethnicity, sex, age, sexual orientation, religion and so on.

Here, I am addressing hate speech. Did you know that there is so much hate speech in our society and it's growing rapidly? And what are we doing against it? Are we allowing it in the name of freedom of speech? Yes, in most cases, we are.

Although we know that hate speech is the origin of bigger conflicts, wars, war crimes, genocides and other tragedies. I am asking you why are we still not able to put a stop to this? Why are we, again and again, turning a blind eye to hate speech or the obvious abuse of the freedom of speech? With all the knowledge, all our experience, and all the tragedies Europe has endured, we still allow the spread of hatred against minorities, women, and members of different groups that do not fit into the traditional patterns of our way of thinking. It seems as if we have not learned from our history.

Yet, it is a sad truth that the ones who disseminate hate speech are also the ones who limit the freedom of speech. And they are called autocrats. They threaten serious and critical journalists, promote populism, prohibit public gatherings, discredit academics and viciously pursue their political opponents.

Autocracy goes hand in hand with hate speech and limiting the freedom of speech. What about democracy? Well, with democracy, the freedom of speech is invaluable but it must be exercised with caution, responsibility and an awareness of its impact on ourselves and the world around us. And it is our large responsibility too.

And allow me one last question regarding the previous topic, safeguarding democracy. I heard a lot of nice words from politicians from different countries, each country with its own specific internal problems, and I'm asking all of us, having in mind all the problems that we have in Europe and around the world. Are we only talking about democracy or are we really implementing it?

Thank you for your attention.

**Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS (President of the PACE):** Thank you, Madam Klakočar Zupančič and I call now Mr Loïc HERVÉ, Vice President of the Senate of France.

**Mr Loïc HERVÉ (Vice-Speaker of the Sénat, France):** Thank you, Mister Chairman.

Dear colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let's recall the principles: "The free communication of thoughts and opinions is one of man's most precious rights: every citizen may therefore speak, write and print freely, subject to liability for the abuse of this freedom in the cases determined by law". This is how the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen affirmed, simply and clearly, freedom of expression as one of the fundamental rights.

Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, shared by the member states of the Council of Europe, states that "everyone has the right to freedom of expression". It also specifies that this right includes "freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers". This right is not without limits, however, as the Convention sets out the responsibilities associated with freedom of expression, and allows for the establishment of certain formalities, conditions or restrictions where necessary for the proper functioning of a democratic society.

Freedom of expression is thus a "two-sided principle", since the freedom of the sender is matched by the right of the recipient to benefit from it, so that "both must be defended". What's more, it is all the more important in that it guarantees the exercise of other fundamental freedoms, since there can be no democracy without genuine freedom of expression.

This balance is always precarious, and is now being challenged by certain non-European players who use their freedom of expression to weaken our democracies. This is what led the European Union, following the sanctions adopted against the Russian Federation, to ban the broadcasting of RT News in the Union.

More recently, at the Munich Security Conference, the new American Vice-President, Mr J. D. VANCE, criticised the way in which we conceive freedom of expression in Europe, such criticism being in reality an attack on the regulatory framework for digital platforms applicable in the European Union. At a time when social media have become antisocial, against a backdrop of fake news and information manipulation, and the proliferation of conspiracy theorists, racism, antisemitism and discriminatory content of all kinds, the cohesion of our societies is being called into question, and even undermined.

I'm telling you, I'm very worried by what I'm seeing. How many of us parliamentarians have witnessed, or even been victims of, some of these excesses? It's part of our daily lives. In this context, I believe in the essential role of journalists, as I said earlier, but I also believe in education and the virtue of learning history.

I therefore welcome the role played by the Council of Europe in setting up the Observatory on History Teaching in Europe, chaired by Alain LAMASSOURE, not to define an official history, but to better understand what our children are being taught. The best guarantee for preserving freedom of expression is to educate our children, but it also means defending the principles of democracy, allowing citizens to intervene in an enlightened and respectful manner.

I would also like to highlight the commitment of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to the protection of journalists, who play an essential role in deciphering and shedding light on public debate, preventing them from becoming trapped in what we might call "information bubbles". The freedom and independence of the press are also the foundation of our democracies, and as parliamentarians, we have a duty to ensure this.

Thank you for your attention.

**Ms Maria Byrne (Leas Cathaoirleach of the Seanad Éireann):** Ioannis PLAKIOTAKIS, Vice President of the Hellenic Parliament. Thank you.

**Mr Ioannis PLAKIOTAKIS (Vice-Speaker of the Vouli ton Ellínon, Greece)\*:** Thank you, Chair.

Honourable presidents,

Distinguished colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour to address this important conference today at a time when the freedom of expression, one of the cornerstones of democracy, is faced with unprecedented challenges. Political and social polarisation, the spread of misinformation, the shrinking of a public debate and threats against journalists are shaping a landscape that requires us, parliaments, to act decisively.

Today, more than ever, national parliaments have a crucial role to protect and enhance freedom of expression. Not only as a national and institutional obligation but also as a prerequisite for democratic stability, social cohesion and the protection of fundamental rights.

Public dialogue, public debate, colleagues, is becoming more and more toxic. Social media through algorithms that reinforce the repetition of opinions, echo chambers, contribute to strengthening extreme positions and weakening rational political debate. In this context, it is the responsibility of parliaments to act as spaces for meaningful democratic debate and to promote legislative initiatives that combat hate speech without unduly restricting the freedom of expression.

We also need to strengthen the role of parliaments as institutional guarantors, guardians, of pluralism by establishing a legal framework that ensures that no one is silenced because of their views, either by the governments or by society itself through phenomena such as the so-called cancel culture. There can be no free public debate without free and independent journalism. It is true that even today, journalists are increasingly under threat from censorship laws and strategic lawsuits against public participation – SLAPPS – up to physical attacks.

So what should parliaments do? Parliaments must take concrete action. First of all, legislative protection of journalists through stricter sanctions for attacks against journalists. Second, the parliaments must ensure the financial viability of independent media because it is true that the digital age has overturned traditional media models. It is even legitimate to consider forms of public funding for independent media provided of course that the independence of the media is not compromised. The third way is to regulate the activity of major online platforms to promote high-quality information and not reinforce mechanisms for spreading false news.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues, one of the most powerful tools against misinformation and polarisation is education. Parliaments can promote national strategies to strengthen media literacy so that citizens can develop critical thinking, which is very important, and are able to recognise propaganda and fake news.

Ladies and gentlemen, freedom of expression is not an abstract concept, it is a daily struggle, a daily battle that all of us have to fight. Our parliaments have the responsibility to ensure that citizens can express themselves freely, and be informed by independent media and also participate in a fruitful, constructive and democratic public dialogue so let's commit ourselves to safeguarding the freedom of expression as the foundation of democracy and as a guarantee for a more tolerant and pluralistic future for all.

Thank you.

**Ms Maria Byrne (Leas Cathaoirleach of the Seanad Éireann):** Thank you very much Mister Plakiotakis.

I now call Mr Pierre-André PAGE, Vice-President of the National Council, Switzerland.

Mister Page. Thank you.

**Mr Pierre-André PAGE (Vice-President of the National Council, Switzerland):** Madam Chairwoman,

Presidents of Parliaments,

Ladies and gentlemen,

In the 2000s, the rise of the Internet was seen as an extraordinary opportunity to strengthen freedom of expression and democratise access to information. We believed it would pave the way for more informed, more inclusive debate. But did we underestimate the risks?

Today, disinformation is spreading like never before on the web. Hate speech is finding a growing echo, and the polarisation of debate is intensifying. Against this backdrop, how can we guarantee a space for free and respectful debate? How can we preserve access to reliable information, essential to our democracies? And how can we protect those who inform us?

In Switzerland, freedom of expression is a fundamental right, enshrined in our Constitution and at the heart of our direct democracy. Swiss citizens regularly vote on a wide variety of subjects, some of which have major political and social implications, while others directly influence our daily lives.

In a country where citizens vote several times a year on complex issues, access to reliable and diverse information is essential. Independent opinion-forming is the very essence of the Swiss democratic model. Aware of this challenge, Swiss case law on freedom of expression has also been strengthened by the European Convention on Human Rights.

But at the end of the day, there is one question we all need to address: can we really speak of freedom of expression when citizens are drowning under a flood of false information, when independent media are weakening and diversity of viewpoints is being eroded? Disinformation threatens the quality of public debate and risks misleading citizens about crucial social choices.

In addition to facing up to disinformation, traditional media that respect the ethical principles of journalism must today not only fight for their economic survival, but also defend the integrity of their work and ensure the protection of their journalists. For can there be freedom of expression without protection for those who inform us?

The situation is alarming: attacks on media professionals are multiplying. Online harassment, economic pressure, abusive legal proceedings – journalists are on the front line, even though they guarantee our right to quality information.

In response to this scourge, in 2023 Switzerland launched a National Action Plan for the Safety of Media Professionals. It is based on three priorities: raising awareness and preventing risks, strengthening the protection of journalists, and improving the legal framework so that they can carry out their work without fear. This plan sends out a clear message: a free and protected journalist is the sine qua non of a robust democracy.

Our parliaments, meeting today under the banner of the Council of Europe, know that freedom of expression knows no borders. We cannot act alone. It is in this spirit that Switzerland actively supports the Council of Europe's initiatives to better protect freedom of expression on social media, to defend press freedom and counter disinformation.

Let me give you an example: recently, the Swiss justice system condemned a member of parliament for using artificial intelligence to create a manipulated video of a political opponent during the 2023 legislative elections. This abuse highlights the need to adapt the legal framework to new technologies. In a polarised political climate, the risk of such abuses is high and, in this respect, we must decide whether to lift the MP's immunity so that the courts can pursue the case.

This example shows us, ladies and gentlemen, that we need to go further in this area.

Digital platforms must assume their responsibilities to prevent their spaces from becoming hotbeds of disinformation and uncontrolled hate speech. States must strengthen citizenship education to enable young people to better decipher information and exercise their critical faculties. This is why I welcome the adoption by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe of a resolution to integrate education for democratic citizenship into school curricula.

In a world where the truth is increasingly contested, how can we prevent polarisation from further weakening our democracies? The answer is clear: we have a collective responsibility. Freedom of expression is not an immutable achievement, but a daily struggle. Switzerland will continue to defend the principles that underpin our democracies.

But we cannot fight this battle alone. As European nations committed to democratic values, we must ensure that information remains a public good and not a weapon of division. We must also ensure that freedom of expression is not used to destroy the cohesion of our democratic societies, nor to deny the diversity that defines us as human beings, under the guise of imposing a single truth.

Thank you for your attention.

**Ms Maria Byrne (Leas Cathaoirleach of the Seanad Éireann):** Thank you very much Mister Page.

I now call Mr Vincent BLONDEL, President of the Senate, Belgium.

You're very welcome.

**Mr Vincent BLONDEL (President of the Senate, Belgium):** Thank you, Madam President.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today we are debating an issue which, as we know, is a cornerstone of any healthy and prosperous democracy: freedom of expression.

This fundamental right is not just a privilege: it is the foundation of an open society, enabling individuals to express their opinions, to participate in public debate, to exchange ideas, to question their government or members of our parliaments, or to question ourselves. Freedom of expression is also a fundamental human right, enshrined in several international declarations on human rights and many - also - national Constitutions, as the President of the Spanish Senate, Mr Pedro ROLLÁN, pointed out a moment ago. However, this freedom is not absolute.

In order to maintain social harmony, protect individuals and safeguard national security, certain limits must be imposed on this freedom, notably when it comes to combating hate speech, defamation, incitement to violence or when national security must be protected. A balanced approach that respects both individual freedoms and the proper functioning of our democratic societies is crucial to fostering an open yet respectful discourse, and we all know, having already been confronted with it in our assemblies, that this subtle balance is not always easy to strike.

Today, moreover, this delicate balance is more complex than ever to achieve, particularly by the major technology companies that control social networks and digital platforms, and which have unprecedented power to shape public discourse through algorithms, as has been said several times, that control the dissemination of content by amplifying or sometimes even deleting it. *Fake news*, hybrid warfare and foreign interference are also major threats to freedom of expression.

Disinformation and foreign interference are closely linked - disinformation, foreign interference - and often go hand in hand in a context of global politics, where their effects can be considerable, leading to heightened tensions between countries - we've had a few examples of this - influencing public perceptions on issues that are essential to our democracies, and also shaping electoral results; we heard this in the speech made a few minutes ago, at this rostrum, by the President of the Senate of Romania, a country that has experienced it in a very concrete way.

Dear colleagues,

Today, the delicate balance between protecting individual freedoms and preserving our democracies is more complex than ever.

I'm a mathematician: in physical mathematics, difficult balances can be stable or unstable; unstable balances are such that when you deviate from them, you leave them for good. That's not what we want. We don't want to curb freedom of expression or weaken our democracies. To preserve the stable equilibrium of our democratic societies, we need our political action.

While it is essential to combat attempts at interference and threats to freedom of expression, the measures we take to combat these threats must not themselves undermine the freedoms they are designed to protect. So let's reaffirm our commitment to preserving this elusive balance, and help make it a stable one. In physics, when you try to leave a stable equilibrium, the forces at work bring you back.

Let's ensure that our children inherit a society where ideas are exchanged freely, where debate is welcome, and where truth emerges not through coercion or manipulation, but through open discussion - but open, educated and respectful discussion.

Thank you for your attention.

**Ms Maria Byrne (Leas Cathaoirleach of the Seanad Éireann):** Thank you Mister Blondel.

I now call on Mr Marcos PERESTRELLO, Vice-Speaker of the Assembleia da República, Portugal.

Thank you. You're welcome.

**Mr Marcos PERESTRELLO (Vice-Speaker of the Assembleia da República, Portugal):** Thank you Madam Speaker, Excellencies,

We live in an era marked by political and social polarisation, characterised by a sharp divide between different ideologies, opinions, convictions, and groups. Such polarisation is the result of various causes, including, on the one hand, social network and digital media algorithms that promote content that reinforces users' pre-existing opinions, and on the other hand, the dissemination of fake news and disinformation, fomenting radicalisation, fragmenting society, boosting conflicts and ultimately undermining dialogue.

The perfect environment for this to flourish is the popular conviction that the social and economic ditches are deepening – the richest are becoming richer – the poorest are becoming poorer and many of the ones in between cannot provide a decent life for their children. As a result, social co-existence is deeply affected, co-operation is replaced by conflict and democracy and its institutions are weakened.

In this context, freedom of expression, a cornerstone of the democratic values that have underpinned our post-war societies, faces unprecedented challenges. Primarily because under the guise of freedom of expression, opinions that incite violence, discrimination or hatred against individuals or groups based on race, religion, sexual orientation, among others, are publicly voiced.

In this regard, Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights is clear: "The exercise of these freedoms carries with it duties and responsibilities".

In a conflict of rights, freedom of expression should be balanced with issues of national security and public safety, prevention of crime, the protection of the rights of others, and the guarantee that the authority and impartiality of the judiciary are guaranteed.

Freedom of expression, however, both as an individual freedom and as a means of ensuring that issues of public interest can be debated openly and in an informed manner is an indispensable condition for democracy.

This growing polarisation of society reinforces the need to guarantee access to quality information.

In a context where different social groups are increasingly distant in their views of the world, it is essential that people have clear, well-founded information at their disposal, capable of providing accurate data and complete context. Without this information, the risk of spreading disinformation and manipulating public opinion by state and non-state actors increases, deepening divisions and aggravating social tensions. Thus, ensuring a flow of quality information not only combats polarisation, but also strengthens democracy by enabling citizens to make informed decisions.

An important first step has already been taken in Portugal, with the approval of the Portuguese Charter of Human Rights in the Digital Age. As legislators, we must certify that our governments push social networks to implement effective mechanisms to comply with the laws in force to limit the spread of hate speech, incitement to violence or the promotion of terrorism. In this regard, ensuring that national governments guarantee the independence and security of the judiciary, as well as providing technical means and financial resources to do so, is also essential.

And in the truly digital age in which we live, legislators should do more to promote citizens' information literacy, but also the responsible use of cyberspace.

Dear colleagues,

As we work together in search of solutions, it is crucial that we stay rooted in the founding principles that have guided us and reaffirm our common commitment to democratic values. If we fail to provide a strong social safety net, we fuel the rise of radicalisation. If the wealth gap continues to widen, year after year, it deepens the divisions in society.

When social media companies operate without democratic oversight, they prioritise their own interests and, when it serves their profit, align with the agendas of autocrats. It's the public interest, the welfare of all, that must be at the forefront of policymakers. The future of our democracies depends on it.

Thank you.

[Applause]

**Ms Maria Byrne (Leas Cathaoirleach of the Seanad Éireann):** Thank you Mister Perestrello.

And I now call on Mr Martin HOJSÍK, Vice-President of the European Parliament.

You're welcome.

**Mr Martin HOJSÍK (Vice-President of the European Parliament):** Thank you Madam Chair,

Dear esteemed guests,

My freedom ends where the freedom of all of you begins.

Freedom of expression is not just the principle, it's actually one of the cornerstones of democracy.

But while the freedom of expression is essential, it is equally essential to protect it from being used as a weapon to destroy our very democratic values.

In Europe, we do not wish to silence anyone, but we want to protect our citizens from the forces that seek to undermine democracy.

This is why we must regulate, not suppress it.

It is easy to call for total freedom of expression without regulation, but we must ask, should we let hate speech, extremism, disinformation run rampant in the name of this freedom?

Now, we heard this criticism for example from the Trump administration, the very same one where we now see the news that a scientist from Europe are being stopped, detained and turned back because he had critical comments of President Donald TRUMP on his mobile phone and notebook. This is freedom? Almost charged with terrorism... And yet we are those who are blamed for suppressing freedom of expression.

I think this is what we have to always take into account. We should guard the freedom of expression, including the freedom of gathering for sexual minorities, because this is one of our constants.

However we must ask what happens when the freedom of speech is completely unregulated? When it's used to divide? When it's used to incite violence? When it's used to radicalise the society, radicalise the vulnerable?

We don't have to look far. It's our own history. 100 years ago, we saw first hand what the dangers on unchecked freedom of speech turning into hate speech means. It led to World War 2: fascism, extremism all over Europe fuelled by anonymous unregulated hate speech. We know where this path led. This is why we must regulate speech – to defend the freedom, to defend the very freedom of speech because in the name of the freedom of speech the very same freedom was suppressed, and those wanting to practise it were jailed, executed.

We also have to support the freedom of speech in places where it's out of reach. And in this case it's really concerning to see the funding for Radio Free Europe and the Voice of America suddenly disappearing.

I grew up behind the Iron Wall. I remember what it meant to be able to listen to independent news, not the propaganda that we're fed. And I hope that we will be able to step in to provide the freedom that now sadly the American government is depriving of those which don't have the freedom of speech and freedom of free media.

But in today's world the risks are even more pressing. Social media, which once was seen as a tool for democratising information, is now the breeding ground for extremism, radicalisation and disinformation. False narratives, conspiracies and divisive rhetoric spread faster than ever before with catastrophic consequences.

The Christchurch shooting, the 6 January resurrection in the US, the hate speech against Rohingya in Myanmar, Buffalo racially motivated mass shooting, the online recruitment of jihadists of Syria – countless other tragic events show us the deadly consequences of unchecked hate speech. This is where we even saw the algorithms promoting and giving more prominence, because it keeps people longer, it shows them more advertising, leads to more profit.

Is this what we want to support?

Disinformation also undermines the trust in our institutions, poisons the public discourse. Russian operatives have amplified conspiracy theories and false narratives using fake social media accounts to spread divisive and polarising content in order to destabilise democratic cohesion.

We must not let these platforms become tools of destruction. We must ensure they are responsible and held accountable.

In Europe we have acted, at least in terms of the legislative framework, with the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act, we have stepped forward to regulate the digital landscape, ensuring that platforms take responsibility for the content they host. The DSA requires these platforms to act against harmful content, while maintaining a balance between freedom of expression and protection against hate speech and disinformation.

It's not about censorship. It's about ensuring that speech doesn't become a weapon to destroy the very democratic freedoms we cherish.

But we have must be diligent. It's not only about having legislation on paper. It's about enforcing it. It's about making sure that actually it's turned into practice. And this is where it's the role of the European Union to ensure that these regulations are not only there, but that they are enforced, but also that they evolve, that we look at what's happening – AI for example is something that is looked at and taken into account, in this very problem.

There is another important point here. As you move forward in the digital world, we must ask what would a European digital space look like? Could we develop our own platforms grounded in European values, to counter balance the dominance of American tech giants? A space where freedom of expression really thrives, but where the users are protected from hate speech, radicalisation and disinformation. A space for online civic discourse. I believe that we must create platforms. Let's say platforms – but maybe looking for the right conditions for the businesses to thrive in this area, that these platforms that reconstruct our democratic values, not just for the profit of the few – we must protect our own values and our citizens and ensure that the digital space reflects the very principles that made us strong.

But as with the strong laws, the regulations and the norms are not enough. The role of parliamentarians is essential in protecting the freedom of expression. We must not just pass laws. We have to make sure that the government and other institutions properly enforce them and that they keep it up.

I mentioned it already but we often feel that we pass laws and the job is done – no, the job is just starting. We must oversee these laws. We make sure that they are balanced, transparent and we make the players accountable.

It is our duty to protect the freedom of expression and the democracy that actually allows for this freedom.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We must be clear. We have no lessons to learn from the government that claims to be a champion of free speech while denying press room access to a news agency that refuses to comply with a decree changing the geographical name of the Gulf of Mexico.

Europe is different from the liberal classes.

Here, freedom of expression is not a free pass to those who wish to destroy our democracy.

Here, freedom of expression is protected and responsibly regulated to ensure that it remains a cornerstone of democracy, not a weapon against it.

We do not want to suppress the freedom of expression. We want to protect it.

Europe stands for free speech, but freedom of expression is not just a privilege, it's a responsibility.

As we have seen through history, unchecked freedom can lead to chaos and destruction, and destruction of the freedom itself.

This is why Europe has acted, and this is why we must continue to act to protect our democracy and to ensure that freedom of expression thrives in spaces where hate and extremism do not.

Thank you.

**Ms Maria Byrne (Leas Cathaoirleach of the Seanad Éireann):** Thank you, Mister Hojsik.

I now invite our final speaker Mr Martin BOSMA, President of the House of Representatives in the Netherlands to take the floor. Thank you.

**Mr Martin BOSMA (Speaker of the House of Representatives, Netherlands):** Madam President,

The subject of this part of the conference is polarisation and I want to use my precious time for a short plea in favour of polarisation.

Let me explain.

Parliaments are the highest elected body in a democracy. As such they should constantly defend their rights and their rightful place in a modern state. Most parliaments are deeply rooted in history. The Dutch Parliament, for example, the States General, goes back to the year 1464. In all those years, all those centuries, we shaped the destiny of our country and we were shaped by it.

Like every parliament, we had to conquer our place in the constitutional order. From an unelected advisory board to the King we developed into the highest body in our democracy. All parliaments have a similar background. With all this, with this tremendous history, comes the historical and even moral obligation to live up to the true principles of our parliamentary democracy.

As leaders of our parliaments we are all obliged to be ready constantly to defend the rights of parliaments. Let's first acknowledge that governments have other objectives, other aims, than we do. We play a very different role in our democracy. They rule, we monitor. Governments are not our enemy, but they are not necessarily our friends either.

We have to mark our own territory. Every parliament has its own special relationship to its government, every constitution, every political tradition is different. Every parliament is different.

But some rights are unalienable and need constant defending for every parliament.

First, a parliament always needs to be the master of its own domain, with its own finances, its own independent budget and also the ruler of its own agenda without government interference. These are the important cornerstones of a parliamentary democracy. We should never be dependent on governments, governments ought to be dependent on us. Their popular support is reflected in our parliament and nowhere else. Parliaments should always have the final say on every law, every important government decision, every government measure including its overall budget. And we must have the right to change it, to amend it.

With that comes the unalienable right to be properly informed by our governments. That is not a favour, it is our most fundamental right. In the Dutch Constitution that is enshrined in Article 68 – the right to information.

All of this is the very essence of our parliamentary democracies and we as presidents of Parliament have to be aware of that every single day. And sometimes we have to behave like a lion in order not to become a lamb.

So, Madam President, a permanent call to arms to each and every one of you my fellow presidents of Parliament.

A permanent call to arms.

Let's fight for the rights of our parliaments or as they say in our beautiful host country: *Aux Armes, Citoyens!*

Thank you so much.

**Ms Maria Byrne (Leas Cathaoirleach of the Seanad Éireann):** Thank you very much, indeed, Mister Bosma.

As there are no other speakers on my list, I am going to hand the floor over to the keynote speakers who introduced the debate and I now call on Ms Małgorzata KIDAWA-BŁOŃSKA. You have 3 minutes. The floor is yours.

**Ms Małgorzata KIDAWA-BŁOŃSKA (Marshal of the Senate, Poland)\*:** This important and inspiring debate shows that we are all very good at diagnosing the problem. We know that the freedom of expression is an overriding principle. We have a problem trying to protect it but as I have been listening to the interventions, I realise that we all know one thing: education is something we can do here and now. Educate from a very young age, people of all ages to distinguish between lies and fake news and true information.

In a world of social media and ubiquitous internet, it is very difficult to influence the content that is presented online. If we did that, we would be accused of using censorship. But good education and good preparation would help young people and adults to distinguish between true and false news.

I think what we should be focussing on now is reinforcing education and non-governmental organisations that can support us in educating people on how to distinguish between fake news and true information.

At this time of so many threats, we have to stand in defence of the freedom of expression through education.

Thank you.

**Ms Maria Byrne (Leas Cathaoirleach of the Seanad Éireann):** Thank you very much, Madam Kidawabłońska.

And I now give the floor to Mr Pedro ROLLÁN. Thank you.

**Mr Pedro ROLLÁN (Speaker of the Senate, Spain)\*:** Thank you very much.

I would agree with my colleague from Poland, I think we have identified the diagnostic and we have a snapshot of the situation as it really stands. We are all aware of the fact that we have a fundamental right here, which is the freedom of expression, it does have some limits and that is respect. There comes a point where we have, unfortunately, disinformation, we have hate crimes, or indeed, we have international interferences sometimes and what they are seeking to do is come in from the outside and basically destroy the fundamental pillars of our democracy.

We have all identified that and we are all committed to fighting for truth, for the protection of those who communicate to us, education, we've all agreed on the importance of education, the tools that we require in order to make sure that Europeans really are equipped to make the difference between what is truthful information and what is misinformation or disinformation, distinguish between the two.

We're at a moment in time where we are really facing traumatic moments, difficult moments, these are issues that mean that every single one of us, our institutions, our professionals and every one of us, our operators as well, the social media operators, they too need to be on board.

The right to freedom of expression could become a way to strengthen democracy or a way to weaken it through the back door.

Thank you.

**Ms Maria Byrne (Leas Cathaoirleach of the Seanad Éireann):** Mister Rollán, thank you.

I'm now going to call Ms Þórunn SVEINBJARNARDÓTTIR.

Thank you very much indeed.

**Ms Þórunn SVEINBJARNARDÓTTIR (Speaker of Alþingi, Iceland):** Thank you very much indeed, Madam President.

I have a few comments on the debate that we've had here, a very good one. As we all know we have all spoken of freedom comes with responsibility, and it is that responsibility that we need to discuss in depth. Therefore we need to tackle hate speech and we need to tackle intolerance of all sorts, because we are not free unless everyone is free.

I would like to mention two societal factors that I think are worth repeating and were mentioned here – one of them was mentioned here in the comments.

The first one is the wealth gap that we have in our countries and in the world and between countries. The income inequality that is something that I think we all face in our countries, even if we come from very rich countries. We have to understand the effect of this gap on the political views of groups in society. It's one way to try and understand the rise of extreme right-wing politics and the rise of politicians of that sort.

The second societal factor that I want to mention – and I was actually hoping some of you would mention it as well - is the gender dimension to freedom and the freedom of expression, because we cannot discuss the freedom of expression without discussing the status of women and minorities in all societies. Because our freedom of expression and our democracies are only as strong as the protection of our most vulnerable members of society and our most vulnerable minority groups.

Therefore we also need to face up to the fact that freedom of expression cannot be only for those who are in power or who are rich or who own a media or are oligarchs or whatever you may call them.

Freedom of expression is an inherent component of democracy and it is not always something that makes life comfortable for the rest of us. We should keep in mind that freedom of expression should actually mean that we need to tolerate expressions of ideas that we may not agree with, but we need to be able to discuss them in a democratic way.

Thank you.

*[Light applause]*

**Ms Maria Byrne (Leas Cathaoirleach of the Seanad Éireann):** Dear colleagues,

This closes our second session for today.

I'd like to thank those who have spoken and made a contribution, which has enriched our discussion. We will resume our discussion tomorrow in the third theme of this conference, "Violence against politicians". I look forward to an inspiring debate.

You are now cordially invited to the reception at 7 p.m. offered by Ms Jeanne BARSEGHIAN, mayor of the City of Strasbourg at the Pavillon Joséphine, and the dinner hosted by the president of the Parliamentary Assembly, Mr Theodoros ROUSOPOULOS.

I wish you a very enjoyable evening. I look forward to continuing our fruitful exchanges during tonight's reception.

I'd like you to make your way to reception for 7 o'clock.

Thank you.