

Ms Anne BRASSEUR, President of the Parliament Assembly of the Council of Europe

It is an honour for me, on behalf of the Council of Europe, to open this conference, held in this stunning Scandinavian capital of Oslo and this magnificent hemicycle. Like all our cities, Oslo changes, becoming increasingly multicultural and vibrant, with new buildings such as the Opera House showcasing the importance of culture.

It is an honour, too, to be in Oslo, the home of the Nobel Peace Prize and of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Mr Jagland, Chairman of the Nobel Committee and former Speaker of your parliament. The choice of Oslo and Norway for this European Conference of Presidents of Parliament is not by hazard. As we just heard from Mr Thommessen, this year we celebrate the bicentenary of Norway's constitution, the oldest written constitution. I congratulate and thank our hosts and say in Norwegian, "gratulerer med dagen", which of course means "happy birthday".

Birthdays are happy events, but they are also points in time to mark where we are, where we have come from and where we are going. We tend to remember that.

I should like to comment on the three highly pertinent topics chosen for this conference in the light of the current challenges facing parliaments across Europe: Theme 1 concerns fundamental constitutional rights and freedoms, participation, trust and public debate as conditions for democracy. The European Convention on Human Rights is now one of the anchor points of Europe's constitutional framework. The European Union's accession to it will further strengthen its role and place in the constitutional architecture of Europe.

The Convention's role, however, cannot be taken for granted and today's discussion of participation, trust and public debate applies equally to the Convention. Why do I raise this? I see dangers being posed to the Convention by non-implementation of certain, albeit few, judgments of the European Court of Human Rights and some of the very worrying political debates and reports in the media on the Court's case law. We cannot ignore those debates and articles, particularly when they are based on misinformation. Parliamentarians have a responsibility to ensure that in any debate of this nature they speak out and correct misinformation and lead the debate and not succumb to it.

Theme 2 concerns democracy, sovereignty and security in Europe. At our last meeting two years ago in Strasbourg we spoke about democracy in crisis and we had in the backs of our minds the economic crisis affecting us all. Two years on, we face the additional crisis of sovereignty and security in Europe.

I do not underestimate the dangers I see from the developing conflict in Ukraine and the involvement of Russia, including its unacceptable annexation of Crimea. You will be aware of the difficult decision taken by the Parliamentary Assembly to sanction the Russian delegation by suspending certain of its rights, including its voting rights. The Assembly did not, however, close the door to dialogue, and in this context the Presidential Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly held an exchange of views last week with Mr Naryshkin, Speaker of the Russian State Duma, in Paris.

Unfolding events in Ukraine and other parts of Europe are some of the most serious challenges Europe has faced since the Cold War. It is essential that we discuss them during our conference. The dangers are not only military but humanitarian, social and economic and they can and will affect us all unless we stand together to find solutions.

The conflict in Ukraine has a ripple effect, leading to further tensions in areas affected by so-called frozen conflicts, as we see in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. We as political leaders must do everything to ensure that the ripples do not become a Black Sea tsunami.

We have all seen, especially here in Norway, the paintings of "The Scream" by Edvard Munch, the first of which was painted 121 years ago. Let us not view this as a premonition of the future.

Theme 3, "Majority and opposition – striking a balance in democracy" will, I am sure, have particular appeal for all of us. Most of us, if not all, have spent time on the Opposition Benches during our careers. We are thus fully aware of the eagerness of the Opposition to present opinions contrary to those of the Government. This is not only legitimate but part of the rights and duties of the Opposition and is a determinant of the democratic nature of our institutions. Controversial debates, questioning from the Opposition and counter-weights and counter-balances are needed in a lively and healthy democracy. As Presidents of your parliaments you are better placed than anyone to know how delicate the exercise of striking a balance is between majority and opposition. It is your duty to be impartial in running the business of your parliaments.

May I add that it is also your duty to ensure the attendance of your delegations to the Parliamentary Assembly, including that of substitutes? I know that the Norwegians are very good at attending our meeting, for which I thank you very much, Mr President. Members of the Opposition are often substitutes and are not given the opportunity to assist with our meetings. Please ensure that not only members but substitutes attend not only the plenary sittings but the committee meetings.

In our discussions let us not forget that the majority and the opposition have not only rights but responsibilities. Respectful dialogue is the key to constructive discussion, as compromise is often needed to reach agreement.

There is, however, one issue on which the majority and opposition must speak with one voice: combating hate speech. You might be aware that yesterday President Thommessen and I issued a statement: "We as Parliamentarians have the responsibility to stand up and speak out against hatred. The fight against xenophobia, racism and mounting nationalistic extremism requires a resolute response from all democratic parties over and above political divisions."

We invited you as Presidents of Parliaments across Europe to support the idea of a European day of remembrance for victims of hate crime and proposed 22 July to mark the day of the haunting tragedy of the massacre in Utøya and the bombing in Oslo.

I would like to conclude by saying a few words not only about what brings these three themes together but about what brings us together for this conference.

We can debate the issues on the programme and we can come forward with standards and mechanisms for implementation, but all of this will not guarantee success. We must not lose sight of our responsibility, not just to those who elected us but to those who did not vote for us. We need to exercise judgment in all things we do, and an ability to listen to voices we do not want to hear. We have to have large doses of good will and patience, and one thing that I believe to be crucial: intellectual honesty to do the right thing when decisions are difficult.

We are in a world where often we cannot see eye to eye, but we have to face each other. We have to talk, then to listen. We have to understand the other person's point of view. We must be ready to compromise and then hopefully we can reach agreement and see eye to eye.

Let me stress that the corridors of this conference offer a unique opportunity for not just facing each other, but taking all those steps that allow us to see eye to eye. Your presence in large numbers at the conference shows a willingness and commitment to tackle Europe's challenges together – and we must work together. Tusen takk, or Vilmols merci