

**Extraordinary Committee against Intolerance, Racism,
Antisemitism and Incitement to Hatred and Violence**

International Day for Countering Hate Speech

Italian Senate, Roma, 18 June 2026

**Exchange of views by Ms Petra Bayr
President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe**

Madam Chair — Senator Liliana Segre —

Honourable Members of this Committee,

Thank you. Not just for the invitation — but for the work you do, every single day, in this chamber.

Today is the International Day for Countering Hate Speech. That is not a coincidence. That is a choice. And I think it tells us everything about what this Committee stands for.

A year ago, my predecessor addressed you on this very same day. I am glad to be here today — because **continuity in the fight against hatred matters**.

I have spent much of my political life on this topic — I have written my human rights studies master thesis on hate speech in the Austrian penal code, I acted as general rapporteur on combating racism and intolerance for the Parliamentary Assembly, as our representative to ECRI — the European Committee against Racism and Intolerance — and now as President of the Assembly. This is not an abstract agenda for me. It is personal.

◆ 1. THE THREAT IS REAL — AND IT IS GROWING

Let me be direct. **Hatred is not fading away. It is on the rise.** And if we pretend otherwise, we are not being honest with the people we represent.

Racism, antisemitism, anti-Muslim hatred, homophobia — these are not relics of the past. They are present in our streets, in our parliaments, and on our screens.

Three forces are driving this.

First: intolerance has moved from the margins to the mainstream. It is no longer just extremist groups. It has entered everyday political discourse — across the spectrum.

Second: what happens far away lands at home. Geopolitical tensions — conflicts, wars, crises — do not stay abroad. They reverberate inside our societies. They fracture communities. They fuel suspicion.

Third: external forces — hostile state and non-state actors — are deliberately working to divide us. Disinformation. Online manipulation. The weaponisation of prejudice. This is not paranoia. This is documented. This is strategy.

◆ 2. HOW HATRED GROWS — AND WHY WE MUST RECOGNISE THE PATTERN

I want to describe something I have observed closely over many years. Hatred does not arrive all at once. It creeps in.

It starts with stereotypes — small, dismissive, almost casual. A comment here. A post there. Then comes stigmatisation. Then scapegoating. Then dehumanisation. And if we let that go unchallenged — violence follows.

We have seen this pattern before in European history. We said **never again**. But 'never again' is not a one-time declaration. It is a daily commitment.

Today's hatred does not always arrive in old uniforms. Today's racists do not speak of racial hierarchies or biology. They speak of 'incompatible cultures'. Of civilisational threats. Of groups that allegedly **do not belong** in European societies.

The vocabulary has changed. **The harm has not.**

And there is one group that suffers disproportionately — **women**. Women in public life. Women politicians. Women who dare to speak. Two weeks ago, I was in Belgrade at the IPU Global Conference of Women Parliamentarians. The theme was breaking the barriers of gender stereotypes and negative social norms.

The vitriol women face online is not just offensive. It is **by design**. It is meant to silence. And when half our population fears entering the public arena — our democracy bleeds.

◆ 3. OUR RESPONSIBILITY AS POLITICIANS

We who sit in this room are in a unique — and frankly uncomfortable — position.

On one hand — we experience hate speech ourselves. Many of us have received threats. Abuse. Intimidation.

On the other hand — every word we speak shapes what is considered normal. Every tweet, every statement, every moment of silence when hatred goes unchallenged — **these are political acts.**

If we allow stereotypes to go unchallenged — even by our silence — we normalise them.

But the opposite is also true. When we speak with clarity and courage against prejudice — we set the boundaries of what is acceptable. We model what democracy looks like at its best.

This is not just an ethical obligation. It is — frankly — **in our self-interest**. Because hatred, if unchecked, will eventually devour democratic institutions themselves.

◆ 4. WHAT PACE AND THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE ARE DOING

So let me turn to what the Council of Europe — and the Parliamentary Assembly in particular — is actually doing.

The Assembly has built, over many years, a body of work on racism and intolerance that is second to none in any inter-parliamentary forum. We have adopted strong resolutions — not as political gestures, but as living standards backed by broad majorities and a shared legal framework.

Our foundation is the **European Convention on Human Rights**. But we build on that foundation with specific instruments — on antisemitism, on anti-Black racism, on anti-Muslim hatred, on Antigypsyism — each one grounded in evidence, each one pointing member states toward concrete action.

In 2019, the Assembly stated clearly that hate speech has entered mainstream political discourse — not just from the extremes, but across the spectrum. We called on member states to monitor it. To adopt codes of conduct. To implement ECRI's General Policy Recommendation number 15 on hate speech — providing a clear legal framework: administrative, civil, and where necessary, criminal measures.

That recommendation remains as relevant today as the day it was written.

And then there is the **No Hate Parliamentary Alliance**. Currently chaired by your own Senator Francesco Verducci — who is also our General Rapporteur on Combating Racism and Intolerance.

I want to take a moment to thank Senator Verducci publicly and sincerely. His commitment, his rigour, his dedication — they are genuinely exemplary.

The No Hate Alliance meets regularly in Strasbourg. It holds conferences in national parliaments — including here in Italy. It brings together parliamentarians, experts and civil society to turn values into practice.

Our Assembly works hand in hand with **ECRI — the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance**. ECRI is composed of independent experts. It provides analyses and country reports of remarkable depth and rigour.

ECRI gives us the evidence. We, as legislators, turn that evidence into political priorities. That division of labour works — when we let it.

One concept ECRI has helped clarify is **racialisation** — the process by which a group is treated as if its members all share certain characteristics. This is the same intellectual mechanism that was used to justify the persecution of Jewish people in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. Presenting a community as a distinct and dangerous 'race'. We know where that leads.

◆ 5. THE PLATFORM PROBLEM — AND THE EDUCATION SOLUTION

I cannot stand before you today without addressing the **digital dimension**.

Platforms like TikTok and X have become arenas where racism, homophobia and discrimination are not treated as violations — they are treated as **content that drives engagement**. More clicks. More profit. More hatred.

This is not a technical problem. It is a political one. These platforms make choices. Algorithms are not neutral. They are designed. And we must hold their designers accountable.

The answer, in part, is **education**. The Council of Europe's programmes in democratic citizenship and human rights education are among our most valuable — and most underused — tools.

Last year was the European Year of Digital Citizenship Education. That initiative gave new momentum to programmes tackling disinformation, cyberbullying and online hate speech across all member states.

But education is not just for children. It is for all of us. It is for the algorithms. It is for the platforms. It is for the politicians who sometimes forget that words have consequences.

◆ CLOSING — TOGETHER, WITH THE RIGHT TOOLS

Dear colleagues —

We are not fighting this battle alone. And we are not fighting it without weapons. The Council of Europe has built an arsenal over more than seventy years — legal standards, monitoring bodies, parliamentary networks, educational programmes.

But weapons are only as powerful as the will to use them.

We must speak when others are silent.

We must act when others hesitate.

We must stand together — because hatred grows fastest in the space between us when we stand apart.

This Committee — **your** Committee — is proof that the Italian Parliament takes this seriously. This is the kind of institutional courage that inspires the rest of Europe.

I look forward to working alongside you — as partners, as equals, as people who share a conviction that a Europe without hatred is worth fighting for.

Thank you. Grazie.

¹ Assembly Resolution 2275 (2019) — The role and responsibilities of political leaders in combating hate speech and intolerance.