Youth shaping Democracy Parliamentary Conference
Budapest, 27 October 2026,

Opening speech by Petra Bayr
President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

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Dear participants,

Madam Speaker of the National Assembly of Hungary, dear Agnes,

Madam Minister of Education and Children's affairs of Hungary, Judith Lannert,

Madam Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe, dear Tania,

Excellencies, dear colleagues, dear representatives of the Council of Europe's youth sector!

It is a real pleasure to be with you in Budapest today. My thanks go to our hosts in the Hungarian Parliament for their warm welcome and excellent cooperation. This conference comes at exactly the right time.

Let me start with a simple truth. Young people in Europe are not apathetic. Far from it.

They march for stopping the climate crisis and for better schools. They organise online. They volunteer. They debate – fiercely. What they lack is not passion. What they lack is a seat at the table.

And when young people feel that taking part changes nothing, trust wears thin. Who could blame them?

Look at the streets in these very weeks. In France, hundreds of thousands of pupils and students are marching. In Belgium, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece and Albania, too.

They ask for teachers in their classrooms. For schools that are not falling apart. For a life they can afford. These are not radical demands. They are the promise democracy makes to every generation.

But peaceful young people have been taken hostage by violent forces. Schools set on fire. Shops looted. Police officers attacked. Those who do this do not speak for this generation. They steal its voice. Every burned school is a lesson stolen.

Let me be very clear. Violence has no place in democratic protest. Neither does excessive force against children. The European Convention on Human Rights protects peaceful assembly. We defend that right – against those who hijack it, and against those who would crush it.

The real answer is not on the street. It is in our parliaments. When young people must block their schools to be heard, we have listened too late.

That is the gap this conference must close.

Democracy across Europe is under pressure. From disinformation. From polarisation. From attacks on the rule of law.

Many citizens feel that politics does not speak for them. Young people feel it most. They are engaged – but underrepresented. We tell them democracy is theirs. Then its doors open slowly.

That is why the Council of Europe launched the New Democratic Pact for Europe. It puts participation and democratic education at the heart of renewal. And that is why our Assembly set up its Special Committee on the New Democratic Pact – bringing national parliaments together on exactly these questions.

Trust cannot be decreed. It cannot be imposed from outside. Trust is built. By institutions that deliver. And by real chances to understand democracy – and to shape it.

Parliaments carry a special responsibility. We make laws. We hold governments to account. But above all, we are the place where a society argues with itself – in public – and finds compromise. If young people do not see themselves in that space, we have failed at our most basic task.

So what has our Assembly done? Let me be concrete.

In 2024, we adopted Resolution 2553 to bring the youth perspective into our own work. We created Youth Rapporteurs in our committees. We built structured cooperation with the Council of Europe's youth sector, above all the Advisory Council on Youth. We asked national parliaments to tear down the barriers that keep young people out. And we asked our political groups to open their doors.

As President of this Assembly, I will see this mechanism fully implemented. That is my commitment to you.

In October 2025, Resolution 2619 on youth movements for democracy called for meaningful youth participation at every level of decision-making.

This January, we went further. Consultation is not enough. Young people need real influence. That is now our standard. Not listening politely – but sharing power.

At our recent Autumn Part-Session, we held a joint debate with young representatives and activists on how to accelerate climate action. Young people were not spectators. They were part of the debate.

The Council of Europe's co-management system remains a model. Young people and governments decide youth policy priorities together. Not as audience and authority – but as partners. I want to see it copied far more widely.

Earlier this year, I visited the European Youth Centre in Strasbourg. Yesterday, I visited the one here in Budapest. Both times I saw the same thing: treat young people as partners, and trust follows.

This work needs more than praise. It needs money. Our Organisation is now in a process to adopt itself to be fit for the challenges ahead. That is right. But as President of this Assembly, one of my priorities is clear: youth engagement at the Council of Europe must be protected from budget cuts.

It would be absurd to cut funding for the very work that shapes a sustainable future – youth work, the fight against the climate catastrophe, democratic resilience. You do not make an Organisation fit for the future by cutting the future.

And let me be honest. Resolutions alone change nothing.

Parliaments must support democracy education – civic learning in every school. We must make our own work open and understandable. We must back young women in politics. And we must give young people a voice where their future is decided – from the climate crisis to artificial intelligence.

In my own country, Austria, young people vote at 16. It works. They are ready – if we let them.

I was a young activist myself. I know how it feels to knock on doors that stay closed. Now I sit on the other side of those doors. And I intend to open them.

Today we ask how parliamentary action can better meet democratic education and youth participation. My request is simple: be concrete. Be demanding.

To the young people here: tell us where we fall short. Do not be polite about it.

To my fellow parliamentarians: listen. Then act. Young people are not a target group. They are citizens – today, not tomorrow.

Democracy is not a finished building we hand over to the next generation. It is a house we are building together. Every day.

And young people are not guests in it. They are co-owners.

I wish us all a productive conference.