Opening European Conference of Presidents of Parliament
Rome, 15-16 October 2026

Opening speech by Petra Bayr

President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

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Excellencies,

Distinguished guests,

Dear colleagues,

Dear President Fontana,

Dear President La Russa,

Thank you for welcoming us to Rome, and for giving parliaments from Europe and beyond a place to meet, to listen and to find common answers.

There is no better place for this conference. Some 50 years ago, the very first European Conference of Presidents of Parliaments met here, in Rome. Its host, Sandro Pertini, then President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies, said:

“This meeting here in Rome (…) presents us with the first opportunity to affirm at the highest level of European parliamentary representation that, if we wish to move beyond mere declarations of intent, it must be the legislative assemblies of our respective nations that can and must make the free choices required for the political and democratic construction of Europe”.

Fifty years later, his words are more relevant than ever. Democracy, human rights and the rule of law are under pressure. In our member States. In our observer States. Among our partners for democracy.

The Europe we dream of is never finished. It is always work in progress, and every one of us helps to build it. Look around this room. Big parliaments and small ones. Long-standing democracies and young ones. Members of the Council of Europe, and friends from beyond our continent.

As President of the Parliamentary Assembly, let me say it clearly: every parliament in this room counts. A small parliament is not a small voice. A young democracy is not a junior partner. We do not always agree. But we have chosen to sit in the same room and look for common ground. Because in the end, we all serve the same people: our citizens.

Over these two days, we will discuss three themes. They are more closely linked than they appear.

First, resilient democracies and the fight against hybrid threats.

Disinformation. Cyberattacks. Foreign interference in elections. Manipulation of our open debate. The aim is always the same: to make citizens doubt their institutions, and finally democracy itself.

Our answer cannot be to become less free. It must be to become more resilient: strong institutions, free and pluralistic media, transparency and trust.

Hybrid threats ignore borders. And by the way: also, robust ones. Our answers must cross borders too. So let us share our tools and our experience.

And in our debates we might go further: when we decided on the conference topics in spring this year, nobody expected that these hybrid attacks might become more targeted and more robust. Might intend to provoke military alliances. Might to create a realistic fear among our citizens of a war that threatens to shift from Ukraine westwards. We must deal with this risk that becomes more realistic every day.

Second, artificial intelligence and the labour market.

AI brings real opportunities: more productivity, new professions. But it also raises hard questions about job-security, discrimination and the dignity of workers.

The Council of Europe has answered with its Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence. It is the first legally binding international treaty in this field. Its principle is simple: technology must serve people.

Now it is up to you. Ratify it. Implement it. The sooner it enters into force, the fairer this transition will be. Machines calculate. Humans decide. We define the values, and only we can be held to account. No algorithm has ever stood before a court and answered for what it did.

And this debate cannot stop at the Atlantic. Europe and North America write these rules together, or we both live under rules written by someone nobody ever elected.

Third, renewing the rules-based international order and the role of parliaments in responding to contemporary crises.

War continues on our continent. International law is openly challenged. Many citizens ask: do rules still protect the weak against the strong?

Our answer must be yes. The rules-based order is not a luxury for peaceful times. It is our shield in times of crisis.

But it must be renewed, and parliaments must be at the centre of that renewal. We ratify treaties. We finance international commitments. And through parliamentary diplomacy, we keep doors open when others are closed.

Dear colleagues,

If you take one message home from Rome, let it be this: **dialogue between parliaments is not a formality. It is a necessity.**

Hybrid attacks, artificial intelligence, the erosion of international law: none of these can be solved within the walls of a single parliament. Each of us holds only part of the answer.

One parliament has pioneered a law on election security. Another has built a framework for algorithmic transparency. A third knows conflict, reconciliation and reconstruction from its own history. Size does not decide who has the best idea. Sometimes the boldest reform comes from the smallest parliament.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe is living proof that this works. For more than 75 years, it has united parliamentarians around one conviction: human rights, democracy and the rule of law are our common heritage, best protected together.

As President, I will keep building these bridges. With every parliament, big or small, in Europe and beyond. Our democracies are only as strong as the connections between them.

Dear colleagues,

Let me be honest. Every conference produces good ideas. Few of them survive the journey home. Back at our desks, the urgent pushes aside the important.

Rome should not end in Rome.

So, we have prepared something small, but personal. At the end of and if you prefer also during this conference, I invite each of you to write a letter. Not to me. Not to your parliament. To yourself.

Three questions can guide you. What moment in Rome stayed with me? What idea do I want to bring home? And what one step will I have taken by the time this letter reaches me?

You seal the letter. We keep it. A few weeks from now, it will land on your desk. A message from you to you.

Nobody else reads it. Nobody analyzes it. Nobody publishes it. It is not a report. It is simply a promise to yourself.

I will write mine too. And I look forward to opening it and saying: I did at least one thing and will start on another one today.

Five minutes of writing. One idea kept alive. Imagine one such idea, put into practice in every parliament in this room. That is how Rome continues.

Let me conclude. Democracy has always been shaped by the courage of those who defend it. Today, that courage takes a particular form.

It means listening to those with whom we disagree.

Seeking compromise without giving up our principles.

Staying at the table when it would be easier to leave it.

Let us use these two days in Rome to do exactly that. And then, let us take Rome home with us.

Thank you very much. I wish us all a fruitful and inspiring conference.