

PACE Platform for Dialogue with the Russian Democratic Forces

29 January 2026, Strasbourg

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

Dear colleagues,

Dear members of the Parliamentary Assembly,

Distinguished participants of the Platform for Russian democratic forces,

Dear guests,

It is my privilege to open today the first meeting of the Platform for Dialogue with Russian democratic forces, established by this Assembly in October 2025.

This moment matters.

It matters because this Platform is no longer an abstract idea or a resolution on paper. Today, it becomes a political reality — with faces, voices and shared responsibility: members of this Assembly and participants from Russian democratic forces united by one goal.

The Parliamentary Assembly made a deliberate choice: to invest political trust and institutional credibility in dialogue with Russian democrats at a time when Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine continues, repression inside the country deepens, and the prospects for democracy appear distant.

In March 2022, the Russian Federation was expelled from the Council of Europe, upon the proposal of the Parliamentary Assembly. This was not only a legal act — it was a political statement of moral significance. Putin's regime cannot belong to a Europe built on democracy, human rights, the rule of law and peaceful conflict resolution.

And yet — geography remains. Russia is part of our continent. What happens in Russia affects Europe's security, stability and future. Most importantly, Russia is not only its regime.

There are people inside and outside the country who reject the war, who condemn the crimes committed in their name, who want their country not to be an aggressor, but a partner. They keep alive the hope of a different Russia.

This Platform sends them a clear message: Europe has not forgotten you. We support those Russians who oppose the war of aggression, who respect Ukraine's territorial integrity, and – let me underline that – who accept responsibility for the harm inflicted by their state.

We support you, practically, politically and morally.

One day, a different Russia can return to Europe — not by rhetoric, but by transformation.

A Russia that holds power accountable. A Russia that learns from its history rather than repeating it. That respect borders and sovereignty of its neighbors. A Russia that protects the rights of all its citizens, including ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples.

As someone coming from a minority background myself, I am particularly pleased that representatives of indigenous peoples are part of this Platform. And I want to reaffirm our Assembly's commitment to addressing Russia's colonial legacy — including through dedicated dialogue formats.

But we must be honest: such a Russia will not fall from the sky.

It will be built — through institutional reform, political responsibility and profound change in public consciousness. This will take time, courage and preparation.

It will be for the citizens of Russia to lead this transformation. But it is our responsibility to be ready to support it when the window of opportunity opens.

That is the purpose of this Platform.

It must become a space for serious reflection on a common European vision of a future democratic Russia — a Russia without imperial agenda, without revanchism, without violence as a political tool. And let me recall, in this respect, that the Assembly set very precise and strict conditions for the Russian Participants to sit at this table, including that each of them has signed the Berlin Declaration.

This vision matters not only for Russia. It matters for European governments shaping long-term policy. It matters for Ukraine, which deserves security, justice and a future

free from threat. And it matters for Europe as a whole, which cannot afford permanent instability on its continent.

Today, we are not only launching a new mechanism.

We are laying the groundwork for the future — brick by brick, idea by idea, responsibility by responsibility.

This is ambitious. But history rarely moves forward without ambition.

So let us begin our work — with realism, with courage, and with the conviction that democracy does not disappear forever, even when it is violently suppressed.

Because authoritarian power can silence voices — but it cannot silence our convictions.

Today, at this first meeting, I would like to hear from the Russian Participants what are their expectations for the work of the Platform, and what will be their contribution.

Thank you.