Committee on Migration, International Protection and Economic Co-operation

Istanbul, 17 November 2026

Address by Petra Bayr

President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

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Dear Sandra,

dear Tuğrul,

dear colleagues,

ladies and gentlemen,

Günaydın. Good morning. Thank you for welcoming me to Istanbul at your meeting of the migration committee.

I come straight from Antalya, from the parliamentary meeting the IPU organised at the climate COP. We talked about tonnes of CO2. About money. About deadlines. And in every debate, sooner or later, somebody said: and then people will have to leave their homes.

A drought is a migration policy that nobody voted for. The climate crisis already decides who has to leave. So what you discuss here and what we discussed in Antalya is one debate. Two rooms, one question.

I will raise three points this morning. And I will keep each of them short.

First, Türkiye.

For most of the past decade, no country in the world hosted more refugees than Türkiye. At the peak, more than three and a half million Syrians lived here under temporary protection. More than in all countries of the European Union together.

I come from Austria. In 2015, people arrived at our railway stations in great numbers. My country learned what this asks of a society. And how much a society can give when it wants to. Türkiye did not do this for one summer. It has done it for more than ten years.

Hundreds of thousands of Syrian children went to Turkish schools. Refugees were treated in Turkish hospitals and migrant health centres, free of charge. They could get work permits. So they could earn a living instead of waiting for one. With a cash card from the Turkish Red Crescent, well over a million people bought their own bread and paid their own rent. On paper, a small thing. In real life, it is the difference between charity and dignity.

Europe talks a lot about solidarity. Türkiye practised it. Every single day. So, as President of this Assembly, let me say it on the record: thank you, Türkiye. teşekkür ederim.

And let me add one thing. When one country holds the door open for so long, the others cannot simply watch. Solidarity means sharing the load. Otherwise solidarity is only a hollow phrase.

Dear Mr Türkeş, dear Tuğrul, a personal word to you. You have been a true friend to this Assembly and to the Council of Europe. You build bridges, also when burning them would be much easier. You explain Ankara to Strasbourg, and Strasbourg to Ankara. Patiently. Again and again. People like you are not a nice extra for an organisation like ours. You are what holds it together. Thank you for your friendship and your advice. Also personally. I want to share that only because of his efforts it was possible for me to visit five prisoners over the last weekend, who are behind bars for mainly political reasons.

Second, migration and the Convention.

The Council of Europe is once again discussing migration and the European Convention on Human Rights. Not for the first time. And, I dare say, not for the last.

Let us start with facts, not with fear. In the last ten years, only around two per cent of all applications to the Court concerned immigration. The Court found violations in about 310 cases. 310 cases. In ten years. In all our member States together. Whoever tells you that the Court ties the hands of governments should take a close look at these figures.

The Chișinău Declaration of May this year is a political declaration. It does not change a single line of the Convention. In fact, it reaffirms the universality of human rights. The absolute prohibition of torture. The authority and independence of the Court. For me, this is the floor. We can build on it. We must not go below it.

And here I want to thank Türkiye, and Spain. When the Declaration was adopted, both put on record that they did not agree with the reference to “return hubs”. They warned against the risks of externalisation. And they rejected the link between irregular migration and criminality. Two countries that know migration from daily life, not from statistics. When those who carry the most speak up for human rights, the rest of Europe should listen carefully instead of making populist speeches.

They are also right on the substance. Return hubs are expensive. They are legally questionable. And nobody has proven that they work. In Albania, detention cost more than 68,000 euros per person in one year. The British Rwanda scheme cost around 700 million pounds. And not one single person was forcibly removed. I would like to meet the minister who explains these numbers to the taxpayers. And I have seen these houses in Rwanda, maybe fitting for 120 people. That was a populist show, never a realistic solution. And I am totally aware that there is also some political homework to do for me in Austria who has the same questionable idea now together with some other member states.

Sandra, our rapporteur and your Chairperson, is preparing the Assembly's answer to all of this. As I understand it, her message is simple. The Convention is not the problem. It is the framework that makes solutions legitimate. Borders can be managed. Dignity cannot be suspended.

Third, what friends say to each other.

A friendship that asks nothing is not friendship. I said this about Ukraine at our autumn session. It is true here too. So let me be as honest with Türkiye as I would be with any other member State.

Since mid-September, our Assembly has followed with deep concern the arrests, detentions and raids against LGBTI people and those who defend their rights. In October, the Assembly adopted a resolution. It asks for the release of everyone detained for their human rights work, their sexual orientation or their gender identity. It asks for the bans on Pride marches to be lifted. And it asks for the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights to be implemented.

I do not say this against Türkiye. I say it because of what Türkiye has shown the world. A country that opened its schools and hospitals to people fleeing a war knows what protection means. I ask for the same protection for all people in Türkiye. For those who love differently, and for those who stand up for them.

And I ask for the same protection for opponents of the government. Political competition must be a battle of ideas. It must never be decided by detention and persecution. Elections are won with arguments, not with arrests.

Protecting the family never requires arresting anybody. The same Convention that protects a Syrian child in Gaziantep protects a young activist in Istanbul and an elected Kurdish mayor. Human rights are not a menu. You cannot pick only what you like. Türkiye

has demonstrated over decades its ability to protect. Today, I call on Türkiye to extend that protection to everyone, without exception

Dear colleagues, this Committee works where it hurts. At borders. In camps. In courts. With people who have no vote, and very often no voice. That is why your work matters so much.

I want to end with the words of a great son of this country, the poet Nâzım Hikmet. I will read them first in Turkish – please forgive my pronunciation – and then in English:

> *“Yaşamak bir ağaç gibi tek ve hür ve bir orman gibi kardeşçesine.”*
> *“To live like a tree, single and free, and like a forest, in brotherhood.”*

And sisterhood, I would add. Single and free. And together, like a forest. I cannot think of a better description of what the Council of Europe should be.

Thank you, teşekkür ederim. I wish you a good and productive day.