

Countering Hate Speech in Public Discourse

International Day for Countering Hate Speech

Italian Senate, Roma, 18 June 2026

Speech by Ms Petra Bayr

President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

Senator Segre,

President Cartabia,

President Gardini,

General Rapporteur Verducci,

Dear colleagues, dear friends,

There are days in political life when the date on the calendar and the work in the room are perfectly aligned. Today is one of those days.

We are gathered here, in the Italian Senate, on the International Day for Countering Hate Speech — to do exactly that. To speak honestly about a threat that is growing, and to ask ourselves what we, as legislators, are prepared to do about it?

I want to begin by expressing something I genuinely feel. Senator Segre — your presence in this room, your life's work, your refusal to let memory fade — is not just an inspiration. It is a reminder of what is at stake when hatred is allowed to go unchallenged. Thank you.

The Council of Europe was founded on the ashes of the Second World War. Our motto: **Never again**. But 'never again' only holds if each generation understands **how** it happened — not just **that** it happened. That is why Holocaust memory and education are woven into the institutional DNA of the Council of Europe. And that is why what Senator Segre does matters so profoundly.

◆ 1. THIS IS PERSONAL — AND IT IS PROFESSIONAL

I want to be clear about where I stand — not just as President of the Parliamentary Assembly, but as someone who has spent years working on this topic from the inside.

I wrote my master thesis in human rights studies on hate speech in the austrian penal code. In 2022, I authored the Assembly's report on **Preventing and Combating Antisemitism in Europe**. The conclusion was uncomfortable but unavoidable: antisemitism is not a threat from the past. It is a daily reality. It lives online. It lives in our streets. It lives in our parliaments — sometimes in plain sight.

In that report, I called for action plans with real funding. For criminalising Holocaust denial and distortion where that has not yet happened. For investing in remembrance education — in schools, in sport clubs, in media; not just in museums.

I also served as the Assembly's representative to ECRI — the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance — and as General Rapporteur on Combating Racism and Intolerance. I have seen the evidence, country by country, year by year.

The picture is not improving. **It is getting worse.** And we need to say that plainly.

◆ 2. HATE SPEECH IS NOT ONE PROBLEM — IT IS MANY

Let me say what hate speech actually is — because it matters how we define it.

Hate speech is any expression that spreads, incites, promotes or justifies hatred based on race, religion, ethnicity, national origin, gender, sexual orientation — the list goes on. It targets minorities. It targets migrants. It targets LGBTI people. It targets women.

At its core, hate speech does one thing: it **dehumanises**. It tells a person — or a group of people — that they are worth less. That they do not belong. That they are a threat. And once that message takes hold, discrimination follows. And after discrimination, if we are not careful, violence follows.

This is not theory. This is a pattern we can observe. This is a pattern Europe has lived through before.

And I want to underline something President Gardini made clear in her April report — a report I want to commend wholeheartedly. When politicians are targeted by hate and intimidation, it is not the politicians who lose most. It is the citizens. Because pluralism is impoverished. Democratic confrontation is distorted. And participation is chilled.

Hate speech, in other words, is not just a human rights issue. It is a **democracy issue**.

◆ 3. THE DIGITAL FRONTLINE

We cannot talk about hate speech today without talking about what is happening online. The digital space is not a separate world. It is the world — and it has become the primary arena where hatred is produced, amplified and weaponised.

Bot networks. Disinformation campaigns. Deepfakes. Coordinated harassment. These are not random. They are **strategies**. Deployed with precision. Scaled with technology. And increasingly powered by artificial intelligence.

Algorithms on major platforms do not treat hatred as a violation. They treat it as **engagement**. More clicks. More profit. More hatred. This is the business model we are up against.

And the evidence on who bears the brunt is unambiguous. Research analysing 23 million tweets across Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom found that women politicians receive significantly more abusive and uncivil messages than their male counterparts — regardless of profile, party, or policy position.

Deepfake technology has been deployed almost exclusively against women — fabricated sexualised imagery, false scandal narratives, targeted to destroy reputations and intimidate. This is not a side issue. This is **gendered electoral interference**. And it deserves to be named as such — and prosecuted as such.

The result is a chilling effect. Women who might run for office — do not. Women who are in office — consider leaving. When that happens, our democracies are smaller and weaker than they should be. They are simply incomplete.

◆ 4. WHAT THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE IS DOING — AND WHAT MUST COME NEXT

The Council of Europe is not a bystander in this fight. Let me tell you what we are actually doing.

Through the **No Hate Parliamentary Alliance** — chaired by Senator Verducci, to whom I am genuinely grateful — we have built a network of parliamentarians across Europe who commit publicly and explicitly to standing against racism, hatred and intolerance in all its forms. The Alliance meets regularly. It produces concrete tools. It exports good practices to national parliaments. This room, today, is an example of what that cooperation looks like.

Through our close partnership with **ECRI**, we translate independent expert analysis into political priorities. ECRI's General Policy Recommendation Number 15 on hate speech gives legislators a clear framework — administrative, civil and where necessary criminal measures. It is a ready-made toolkit. What we need is the will to implement and use it.

And we now have a landmark new instrument: the **Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence** — the first legally binding international treaty on AI, human rights, democracy and the rule of law. This is directly relevant to the platforms, the algorithms and the AI-generated content that drive so much of the hatred we are discussing today. It is a tool. But tools only work when governments pick them up.

On gender parity — because it is inseparable from this discussion — I am proud to announce that in 2026, for the first time, the Parliamentary Assembly has achieved parity between its male and female members. This did not happen by accident. It happened because we changed our rules, monitored compliance, and held ourselves accountable. It can be done. We do not count women anymore. We make women count. They are half of our chairs of committees and national delegations, half of our authors of reports and general rapporteurs.

◆ 5. WHAT WE MUST DO — TOGETHER

So what does action look like? Let me be specific.

Platforms like TikTok, X and Co must be held accountable. Transparency, regulation, liability — these are not radical demands. They are what any responsible industry accepts. We must demand no less from digital platforms.

Parliaments and parliamentarians must set the example. Codes of conduct that foster respect. Zero tolerance for inflammatory rhetoric. Political parties that actively combat hate speech in their own ranks — not just in opposition.

Justice systems must be accessible. Women and minorities who are targeted must have meaningful recourse. Standards like the Istanbul Convention exist. They must be implemented — fully, not selectively.

Education must be a priority. Human rights education. Media literacy. Digital citizenship. These are not extras. They are the foundations of a society that can recognise and resist hatred.

And **allyship matters**. Men and women, together. Majority and minority communities, together. When we build coalitions across difference, we make hatred harder to take root.

◆ CLOSING

I want to close with something forward-looking.

In October this year — right here in Rome, on 14 to 16 October — the Conference of Speakers of Parliaments will gather. One of the central themes will be exactly this: how resilient democracies respond to hybrid threats, including organised online hate speech.

Rome will be, again, a place where Europe takes stock of what it values and what it is willing to defend.

What we say and do in rooms like this one matters. Not because it trends on social media. But because legislation shapes reality. Because words spoken from positions of power set the boundaries of what is acceptable in a society.

If we speak clearly against hatred — we make it harder for hatred to spread.

If we legislate seriously — we make platforms pay a price for amplifying it.

If we stand together across our differences — we model the pluralism that hatred exists to destroy.

That is what I came here to say. And that is what I will keep working for — as President of the Parliamentary Assembly, as a parliamentarian, and as someone who believes that a Europe without hatred is not a utopia. It is a choice.

Thank you. Grazie.

¹ PACE Report 'Preventing and combating antisemitism in Europe' (2022) — Rapporteur: Petra Bayr

² ECRI General Policy Recommendation No. 15 on Combating Hate Speech

³ PACE Resolution on 'Violence and hate speech against politicians: a threat to democracy' (April 2026) — Rapporteur: Elisabetta Gardini