International Parliamentary Conference:
Securing Europe's Tomorrow

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Welcome address by Petra Bayr
President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

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Mr Deputy Speaker,

dear colleagues, excellencies, dear friends,

Last night, some of you stood in the Warsaw Uprising Museum. In 1944, this city fought for its freedom for 63 days. And it was left alone. That is Warsaw's lesson for Europe: never again leave a democracy to fight alone.

In two days, Poland marks 35 years in the Council of Europe. On 26 November 1991, Poland did not just join an organisation. Poland came home. Home to a community of law.

Poland came as a student of European standards. Today, Poland is one of their authors. From newcomer to co-author in 35 years. That is a European success story. On behalf of the Parliamentary Assembly: congratulations.

I thank the Sejm and the Polish delegation, and especially Agnieszka Pomaska and Daniel Milewski, for bringing us together. And I thank you for hosting our Special Committee on the New Democratic Pact.

Dear colleagues,

Governments sign +treaties. Parliaments make them real. We turn European promises into national law. We give them democratic legitimacy. And we keep talking when diplomats fall silent.

That is why our Assembly keeps its door open to the democratic forces of Belarus and Russia. Regimes can close borders. They cannot close our conversation with the people.

Parliamentary diplomacy is not decoration. It is the democratic backbone of foreign policy.

Dear friends,

Europe lives in a permanent crisis. War on our continent. Hybrid attacks getting more and more robust ones. Disinformation. The climate crisis. A climate COP31 far behind our expectations. Falling trust in our institutions.

The Council of Europe found the answer long ago, by the way in my home city Vienna at its first ever summit: democratic security.

Lasting peace needs more than thanks. It needs independent courts. Free media. Fair elections. You can defend a border with soldiers. You can only defend a democracy with democrats.

That is why we expelled Russia in 2022. It was right. That is why we stand behind the Register of Damage and the Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine. And that is why we fight for a full system of accountability for Ukraine.

Peace without justice is only a pause.

Poland deserves our thanks. From day one, Poland has stood with Ukraine in its fight for freedom and sovereignty. Poland was among the first to see how big the threat to our continent is. And Poland showed others the way. What Poland said from the very start is now Europe's common position: supporting Ukraine is essential for a peaceful and secure

Europe. For our democracies, it is a matter of survival. For this greater goal, all other disagreements must wait.

Nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine. Nothing about Europe without Europe. Europe must sit at the table, together with Ukraine. In the peace talks. And in building Europe's future security. I am glad that Poland, as a member of the European Group of Five, the E5, will join the peace talks with our American and Ukrainian partners.

Dear friends,

Europe's security needs one more thing: strong democratic institutions. Russia and other authoritarian regimes want to destroy trust in them. We must not let them.

That is why I would not be an honest friend if I stayed silent about the regrettable developments around your Constitutional Tribunal here. A constitutional court is not a trophy for the winner of an election. Nor is it a fortress to be taken. It is the referee for all of us.

Disputes about judges are settled by law. Not by force.

Every institution must play its constitutional role. No more. No less.

I welcome every step towards dialogue. Poland is a proven co-author of European standards. I am sure Poland will live by them. And find a reasonable way out of this deadlock.

And the Council of Europe stands ready. With the Venice Commission. With our Assembly. With our experience.

Dear colleagues,

The New Democratic Pact for Europe is our chance to renew our promise. But Europe does not need another beautiful declaration. Europe has enough paper. What Europe lacks is delivery.

What does this mean for the Council of Europe? Three things.

First: commitments we can measure. And parliaments that check them. I call on every national parliament to debate the Pact. A Pact not debated at home will not be lived at home.

Second: judgments of the European Court of Human Rights must be implemented. Fully. On time. An ignored judgment is a promise broken twice. Once to the victim. And once to all of us.

Poland knows the price. In the cases on irregularly appointed judges alone, Poland has already paid around 1.5 million euros. The rule of law is not expensive. Its absence is.

Third: democratic security must be funded. In times of reform, it is tempting to cut what looks soft. Youth work. Democratic resilience. The fight against the climate crisis. Cutting these is like saving on the foundations while building the house.

And what does this mean for my own country? Austria is neutral. Our neutrality is military. It was never neutrality on values.

In 1920, Austria and its great jurist Hans Kelsen gave Europe the model of a constitutional court. We learned one thing: a constitutional court protects every government. And it protects us from every government.

As Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Austrian National Assembly, I will take Warsaw's message home. The Pact belongs on the agenda of every national parliament. Including ours.

Securing Europe's tomorrow starts today. It starts with democracy. And it starts with us, the parliamentarians. And countries like Poland, who today are authors of this tomorrow

Dziękuję bardzo. Thank you for listening and even more: thank you for acting.