World Forum for Democracy

"Democracy Has No Emergency Button"

Strasbourg, 2 November 2026,

Opening address by Petra Bayr

President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

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Dear friends,

Imagine democracy had an emergency button.

A big red button. Behind glass.

With a sign: Break glass in case of emergency.

Would you press it today?

Probably not.

You wake up. You check your phone. You meet your friends.

You can say what you think. You can protest. You can vote your government out.

Democracy seems to be working.

And yet, every week, there is a new warning.

Democracy is in decline. Disinformation is spreading. Trust is disappearing.

We have reports. We have statistics. We have conferences.

We know something is wrong.

But do we feel it?

In Ukraine, nobody needs a report.

People hear the sirens. They know the price of choosing your own future.

And still, after years of headlines, we scroll past.

The most dangerous threats to democracy make no noise at all.

A fake video. A manipulated image. A post, carefully designed to make you angry.

One lie will not change your mind.

Thousands of lies will change something deeper: your ability to trust.

And people who believe nothing are easy to rule.

Then there are the quiet changes.

A law that weakens the courts.

An opposition voice that disappears.

A journalist who is silenced.

No explosion. No siren. No broken windows.

Tomorrow the streets will look the same.

But the rules of the game have changed.

In Russia, a young man, Boris Budanov, was sentenced to six years in prison. For a comment on Telegram about local public spending.

A few words on a screen. Six years of his life.

That is how democracy dies today. Not with a bang. With a click.

Dear young friends,

I am glad to see so many of you in this Hemicycle today. This room belongs to you as much as to us.

You know what is at stake.

You will live longest with the climate crisis we leave behind.

You cannot afford a flat in the cities where you study or work.

You are flooded with hate and lies online, every single day.

And too often, your future is decided in rooms where you have no seat.

That must change.

Young people must not only talk about the future. They must help decide it.

A seat at the table is not enough. You need a voice in the decision.

As President of the Parliamentary Assembly, let me say it clearly:

Cutting youth work to save money is not reform. It is self-sabotage.

A democracy that does not invest in its young people has no future.

In my country, Austria, young people have voted from the age of 16 since 2007.

Democracy did not collapse. It got younger. At least a little bit.

Perhaps you expect me to tell you: relax, our institutions have everything under control.

I will not tell you that.

Institutions are essential. Parliaments, courts, the Council of Europe.

We defend them every day.

But they cannot defend democracy alone.

Democracy does not live in an ivory tower. It begins with us.

Every time we question what we are told.

Every time we resist an easy answer to a complex problem.

Every time we listen to someone we disagree with.

Every time we ask what is good for all of us, not just for me.

That is the purpose of this fourteenth World Forum for Democracy. For two days, democratic foresight will guide us, in the spirit of the New Democratic Pact for Europe.

Two days will not solve everything. But they can turn worry into action.

So let me come back to the red button.

Would you press it today?

Who is in favour? Who is against?

Let me share a secret from many years in politics:

Democracy has no emergency button.

It has us.

So, over these two days: be curious. Challenge ideas. Listen to each other.

And ask yourselves three questions:

- Which moment will stay with me?
- Which idea will I take home?
- And what one concrete step will I take?

Because democracy is not only what we believe. It is what we do.

My sincere thanks to our host country France, the Grand Est Region, the European Collectivity of Alsace and the City of Strasbourg for their strong and continued support.

It is my great honour to declare the World Forum for Democracy 2026 open.