

“The Place of the Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East in Present-Day and Future Russia”

Washington DC, 17 September 2026

Statement by Ms Petra Bayr

President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

Dear colleagues,

dear friends,

Thank you for receiving me here at the Navajo Nation Washington Office.

You know the history of the Indigenous peoples of Russia. Some of you have lived it. So I will not give you a history lesson. I came here to listen. I will keep this short.

We usually open these conversations with three words. Discrimination. Exclusion. Marginalisation. All three are accurate. But they describe what has been done to people. They do not describe who those people are.

So let me start with who.

Twenty years ago I went on holiday to Kamchatka. Not for the volcanoes and the hot springs. The Indigenous peoples of the North had fascinated me for as long as I can remember. It was summer, and I had the privilege of joining a gathering for the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples. The 9. August was established to protect the rights of indigenous populations and celebrate the unique cultures of

these about over 476 million indigenous people. All six peoples of Kamchatka came together: Koryak, Itelmen, Even, Chukchi, Aleut and Kamchadal.

I was thrilled. The music. The dances. The spirituality. The clothing. Everything made from what the land gives. Fur, bone, grass, wood, skin. Not only their fashion, but their houses, their tools, their everyday life. None of it was decoration. It was knowledge. Worn, danced, thought, and sung.

I did not meet a museum that day. I met a present tense. And I was shocked to learn, that in some of these peoples there were only some dozens left who still spoke the original language. I do not know how many do so still today.

Now an example from this country. In 1988 the Supreme Court decided the Lyng case. It was about a road through an area in northern California sacred to the Yurok, Karuk and Tolowa peoples. The Forest Service's own study warned that the ceremonies there depend on silence. The road was approved anyway. And the Court found no violation of religious freedom.

When we think about religion, we think about beliefs, doctrines, texts. Here the tradition could not be separated from the land. The land was not the place where the practice happened. The relationship with the land was the practice. The expert report warned against forcing Indian concepts into non-Indian categories.

We treat our categories as universal. But a river, a forest, a stretch of tundra can be identity, ancestry, spirituality, community and an obligation towards those not yet born, all at once. Not one of our boxes will hold that.

The same is true of language. A language is not another set of labels for the same world. It carries concepts that exist nowhere else. When a language disappears, we

do not lose vocabulary. We lose one of humanity's ways of understanding itself. And that cannot be reversed.

This is not someone else's problem. Austria, my country, recognises six minority languages, and it still took us more than fifty years to agree on bilingual town signs in Carinthia. Fifty years. For signs.

The Council of Europe has two instruments built for exactly this. The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. And the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. They mark the difference between a language that is merely tolerated and one that can flourish: be taught, broadcast, used in courts, and spoken to a child.

My second point is nature. In Europe we discuss sustainability and the rights of future generations as if we had invented them thirty years ago. An Indigenous friend once told me, with some irony, that the Western world took this idea and never gave credit. I think that is fair. Your communities have been answering for centuries the questions the climate catastrophe is now forcing on all of us. That is why I want a binding Council of Europe convention on the right to live in a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

There is no single Indigenous worldview. These communities are extraordinarily diverse. But some experiences travel. Children taken into boarding schools. Pressure on languages and ways of life. Unequal access to education and health care. And in Russia today: Indigenous men mobilised – or better: forced - in disproportionate numbers for the war of aggression against Ukraine. Hate crimes. Structural discrimination. Growing pressure on Indigenous and environmental rights defenders.

That is why Indigenous representatives belong in our Platform for Dialogue with Russian Democratic Forces. A future democratic Russia cannot be described through

elections and political freedoms alone. We have to ask what place its peoples will hold. And above all, who gets to define that place.

Democracy is not only about giving everyone a seat at the table. It is about being willing to listen when someone at that table understands the people around the table and the whole world differently than you do.

One last word about that road in California. It was never built. Not because the Court changed its mind. Because Congress acted. The area was placed under wilderness protection, and legislation stopped the road. The case was lost. The legislators delivered.

We are parliamentarians. Where the law falls short of people's reality, it is our task to change the law.

The place of Indigenous peoples in a future Russia must not be decided for them. It has to be shaped by them and with them.

And today, above all, I am here to listen. To your experiences. To your concerns. And most of all to your ideas. Because ideas are the basic fabric of all politics. Of our common politics.