Mr FRICK (Head of Government of the Principality of Liechtenstein).
Mr President, Mr Secretary General, ladies and gentlemen. It is a great honour for me to be able to take the floor in this venerable Chamber. As the Head of Government of one of the Council of Europe’s smallest member states, I am particularly pleased to share a few thoughts with this Assembly, which in the past has achieved some fine pioneering work in European construction and is still today at the forefront of efforts to extend European integration to the entire continent.

In 1977, when, after a long period of rapprochement, Liechtenstein applied for membership of this organisation, it soon became clear that, in accepting our application, the Council of Europe would also have to consider its policy as regards Europe’s small states. It had to decide whether membership would be open to any democratic state in Europe or whether the smallest states were to be denied membership. Fears had been expressed in various quarters that a state as small as Liechtenstein hardly commanded the necessary sovereignty and capacity sufficiently to guarantee the rights and obligations incumbent upon a member state. The positive decision of the Council of Europe at that time signalled its democratic conviction and its commitment to equality between states, even the smallest. Its action was certainly in keeping with the thoughts of its founding fathers, whose aim was to prevent discrimination between big and small states and to treat all countries equally, whatever their size.

For Liechtenstein, accession to the Council of Europe was decisive in a different respect. For one thing, membership of a large European organisation has made it possible for a small state such as Liechtenstein to enjoy the protection of the international order championed by that organisation. This is a substantial boost both to the survival of a small state and to its efforts to guarantee its independence and the self-determination of its people. Secondly, Liechtenstein’s accession to the Council of Europe, following our participation in the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, was further confirmation and consolidation of our own sovereignty.

Thirdly, the foreign policy of a small state, owing to its specific situation, is also founded on a complementary strategy of international solidarity. However, small states must not be mere spectators in the international arena but make their modest contribution towards ensuring that states feel bound by common principles of law through their co-operation in international organisations. In particular, they will advocate peaceful settlements to conflicts. Small states are predestined by their weaker position to favour solidarity and joint responsibility in the building of an international order.

Since individual views naturally come more readily to the fore in a small democratic state of law, a land the size of Liechtenstein can identify particularly strongly with the Council of Europe’s objectives, such as the guarantee of human rights and fundamental freedoms for the sake of the well-being, protection and dignity of the individual. In contrast to large states, small states are dominated by an extremely close relationship between citizen and state almost as a matter of course. Whereas direct contact with citizens must be carefully fostered in the larger states, particularly in municipalities or federal entities, the small state of Liechtenstein can dispense with such intermediate levels. Our citizens either know “their” parliamentary representative and the members of government personally, or at least know that they may have direct and personal contact with these people. Attachment to one’s homeland and civic awareness are particularly favoured in small states.
At the same time, territorial exiguity, a small population and the closeness of the neighbouring countries' borders, oblige the small state to adopt a policy of openness in regard to other states and international organisations. The difference between large and small states is summed up in the following comparison: large states look for "scaling-down" forms of organisation to make the advantages of the small state a little more accessible, whereas the small state joins large institutional structures, regional or international organisation, for example, in order to grow a little "larger".

In general, the small states which exist at present are well able to fit into a forward-looking European organisational structure. They are not what used to be described, in the Nazi era for example, as "passing phenomena" of world history, but represent by reason of their special historical development a part of the cultural heritage of humanity. Since Luxembourg joined the Council of Europe, the admission of further small states attests and reinforces the recognition of their existence and efficiency as part of the international order. Since it became a member, Luxembourg has endeavoured, by dint of a credible policy whose watchwords are constancy and continuity, and by concentrating its foreign policy resources on the most important areas of co-operation, to justify the confidence that others place in it.

For Liechtenstein in recent years, the issues of European economic integration have been the main focus of interest. It became clear at quite an early stage that for reasons of size, Liechtenstein could not compete on equal terms with the EC - now the EU. When the opportunity came in the context of a contractual relationship between the EFTA countries and the EC/EU to create a European Economic Area, responsible politicians in Liechtenstein resolved to engage in these efforts, no simple matter for such a small country. In April of this year our population voted in favour of Liechtenstein's entry into the EEA, and since 1 May 1995 our country has been a party to this important economic treaty.

Since it was founded in 1949, the Council of Europe has worked successfully for the creation of a European area within which human rights and the constitutional principles of the rule of law and democracy are upheld. With the breakdown of the communist system, this task has acquired a new dimension. For our neighbours in central and eastern Europe, it has become an extremely important matter to co-operate within the Council of Europe with a view to consolidating their democratic reforms. The Council of Europe has accepted the challenge of its expansion with energy and commitment. It will be of decisive importance to ensure that expansion does not cause the institution to undermine its credibility by watering down its high standards.