Ladies and gentlemen members of the Assembly, it is with sincere feelings of high esteem that I appear in front of the Council of Europe, an organisation dedicated to protecting the great ideals of democracy - the individual and social rights, as well as the rights of peaceful co-existence and co-operation among countries. It is an organisation that boasts an impressive record of success in that field. Indeed, for the whole duration of the cold war the Council of Europe was a staunch supporter of democratic principles. Its very existence and action was vindicated in the most manifest way by the collapse of the communist regimes that sealed the final prevalence of those precious values.

The sensitivity to these great principles, to which everyone of you is firmly committed, is expressed both in your national parliaments and in this Assembly, which I have the honour to address. You are the most genuine spokesmen and spokeswomen of democratic ideas and the most sincere advocates of individual rights. Truth, justice and humanistic values are the criteria invoked by your Council when called to decide upon issues that fall under its jurisdiction. However, it happens sometimes that other influences prevail over your decisions - influences that oppose and hinder your manifest will. In fact, the decisions of governments - and let us not forget that those decisions are implemented - are very often dictated by geopolitical or economic interests. I do not want to underplay the importance of those interests, but I firmly believe, as you all do, that the great human values and principles must not give way and lose ground to those interests.

In addressing you, I recall the time when, almost 30 years ago, at the apogee of the cold war, the struggle against the expansion of communist totalitarianism prevailed over any other concern - even over those principles that the free world is meant to protect and serve. Yet during that time, the Council of Europe had the courage to defend its principles by expelling the Greek military regime from this sacred Assembly, which is dedicated to the respect of human rights - the human rights that constitute the basis and foundation of every true democratic form of government.

Such a brave decision must have represented the worst humiliation that the military regime ever suffered and has significantly contributed to strengthening further the will of the Greek people to resist dictatorship. It indeed reassured the Greek people that there are still international organisations firmly committed to honouring their commitments instead of yielding to the cynicism that at that time characterised most of the governments, who were ready to sacrifice respect for democratic principles to service their short-sighted interests.
Having prevailed in once separated worlds and proved its supremacy over opposing ideologies, democracy has no more visible enemies to confront. Nevertheless, our countries' attachment to the ideas of democracy and to freedom must not prevent us from identifying certain deficiencies and shortcomings of democratic institutions. As we all know, ideal democracy is a vision at which we should aim by constantly ameliorating our record. That is why I believe that democratic nations should continuously re-examine their institutions in order to make them more efficient. They should search for new forms of institutions that correspond to rapidly changing social conditions - capable of coping properly with emerging challenges. The existence of independent constitutional or administrative courts undoubtedly significantly enhanced the proper function of the state. I hope that, at this point, the Assembly would allow me to express my deep respect for those courts and their mission.

In referring to the shortcomings of democracy I have in mind the genuine and truly free democratic forms of government which are embarrassed by the deficiencies and difficulties that occur, such as their failing to cope effectively with complex contemporary social relations. I am not referring to the forged or fake regimes, which are democratic in name only. Fortunately, there are few of them, which are tolerated for economic or other reasons. Such nominally democratic regimes make the Council of Europe's mission extremely important. I am aware that the Assembly has never ceased to search for and to point out the shortcomings of such countries, which could benefit greatly by such remarks. I express the wish that the Council of Europe follows every country, with no exception - including, of course, my country - with a vigilant eye. In its whole course of action the Council of Europe should contribute to maintaining Europe's role as an international standard bearer of the great ideals of freedom, democracy, justice and equality, as proclaimed by the French, and before the French revolution, during the American revolution. The ideals originate from Greece and constitute perhaps its most valuable legacy to the modern world.