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.

Allow me to refer briefly to the European Union because I believe that its policies are of interest to all European countries, including those who are not members.

Our aged continent no longer suffers from the scourges that led to two world wars, but it still finds itself in the midst of events that continue to cause considerable pressure. Especially during the last five years, the European Union was often called on to make important decisions on the present and future of Europe. This led to European Union policies that were sometimes successful, as with German unification and the adjustment of the North Atlantic Alliance to the new realities of the European security, but which were sometimes awkward and hasty, as in the case of former Yugoslavia.

The Maastricht Treaty created a European Union that oscillates between completion of its economic integration and the less accepted intergovernmental cooperation in foreign, defence and security policy. The latter has been severely criticised - for example, the stance taken in relation to the Yugoslav problem.

We all know that the political union of Europe is far from being a reality. However I believe that the European ideal, based on the consciousness of a common destiny and a shared culture, will finally prevail. Despite the difficulties, the European Union is, in the long run, a non-reversible reality. Now that the euphoria created by the end of the cold war yields to new anxieties, there is an urgent need for the development of a stable and effective foreign and defence policy for the European Union.

On the direction that we have to take in order to reinforce the Union's external action, our view is, as one might expect, that the intergovernmental function of the European Union has probably reached its limits. Its inherent weaknesses have resulted in the Union’s limited presence and influence at crucial international developments over the past few years. Its political union can be completed successful only if it transcends the ethnic state while fully respecting all the particular ethnic, religious and cultural characteristics of each member state. Of course, it is not easy to describe this course of action in detail. In any case, it would not be necessary as we still have a long way to go. Yet from now on we have to intensify our efforts to consolidate stability throughout Europe and guarantee the protection of the territorial integrity of the Union as well as of its member states through the adoption of a clause and the relevant mechanisms of mutual assistance.
With reference to individual rights, I would like to remind you that in the past we meant by that term the political rights of the individual as they were codified in various constitutional laws dating back to the time of the American and French revolutions. Nowadays the concept of individual rights has broadened and has been linked to the concept of social rights, meaning the rights of the citizen to claim that the state takes care of the problems with which they are preoccupied – for example, the securing of jobs, working conditions, unemployment benefits, free education, housing, the protection of people with special needs, public health and, of course, environmental issues.

Today, social problems are no longer examined on the basis of expediency, and nobody disputes the need for a social policy on the part of the state. The problem lies in the subsequent economic cost and the inability of the state to meet it. A number of states which had managed to achieve considerable progress in this sphere by obtaining the necessary funds through high taxation of higher incomes are now compelled, in the face of newly emerging economic difficulties, to reduce social benefits. Others are simply unable to reach their social objectives. Unemployment and the failure to deal with it effectively, continuing economic hardship, the duty of the member states of the European Union to meet certain economic criteria accepted in the form of legal conventional obligations, progress in technology and much else besides no doubt cause difficulty and obstruct the achievement of acceptable solutions. The prolongation of this situation gives rise to intense social pressure, often resulting in social unrest. Ideological diversities may have lost steam, yet social pressure continues to exist – that is precisely the situation that confronts us.