Fortunately most of the problems to which I referred have been overcome, which is confirmed by our membership of the Council of Europe, an association that has been of exceptional help to the Republic of Macedonia on its path to international recognition. For that reason I want to elaborate the views of my country on the situation in the region where it is situated - the Balkans.

I am convinced that I will not be making an overstatement if I say that the Balkans is one of the key issues that will test not only the future of our common European security architecture and defence policy but the strategy of the common European home.

Mr GLIGOROV (President of the Former Republic of Macedonia) (Translation).- Madam President, ladies and gentlemen, it is a special honour for me today to address the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and to address the representatives of one of the oldest and most numerous European families. My country, the Republic of Macedonia, is the thirty-ninth member of this association that has played a very important and historic role in building the general European awareness of peace and understanding, for co-operation and prosperity of the European countries and nations. The Council of Europe is a place where horizons of human rights and freedoms are conquered and broadened, where the strategy of pan-European understanding, and the future of the common European home is being constructed.

This is the reason why, on this occasion, I wish to underscore the significance of the membership of the Republic of Macedonia of the Council of Europe, as a place where my country and my people can realise and defend their aspirations and goals and where they can give their contribution to the well-being and development of the continent.
The Republic of Macedonia gained independence in 1991, following the dissolution of the former socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. It did so in a peaceful and legitimate manner, by way of a referendum and a new constitution, thus showing that, at the threshold of the twenty-first century, it is possible to gain one's own independent state without bloodshed.

This act was possibly primarily due to the fact that the Republic of Macedonia refused to take part in the senseless war that was waged in the region of the former Yugoslavia and the fact that the Republic of Macedonia proclaimed independence within her present borders, as internationally established borders. Thus, not only did we opt against the policies of territorial aspirations, forcible changing of borders and ethnic cleansing, but we showed that such policies are the cause for conflicts and wars in the ethnically inter-mixed Balkans. Bearing this in mind, as well as our own personal history in such typically Balkan surroundings, the Republic of Macedonia wrote down in her constitution that she has no territorial claims towards any neighbour. Just the opposite is the case; the Republic of Macedonia opted to affirm the European principles of cooperation and friendship, with formal borders open for a free flow of people, goods and ideas. Today, the Republic of Macedonia has established full diplomatic relations with all countries in the region, and we have practically no border dispute with any of our neighbours.

In establishing overall domestic and foreign policy, the Republic of Macedonia offered itself as a factor of peace and stability in the region. This is confirmed by our ceasing to be what was historically a bone of contention and becoming a key to peace in the south of the Balkans. This was possible because an independent and sovereign Republic of Macedonia put an end to the historical aspirations of her neighbours towards the republic's territory and people.

We opted for an active policy of good neighbourliness on the principles of equidistance - in other words, equal friendship with all our neighbours. We opted for political dialogue and peaceful means for resolving outstanding issues with all of our neighbours. As a country in transition, we opted for speedy and radical reforms leading towards a market economy. We opted for and started building a modern European legal state and civil society. Inter-ethnic understanding and tolerance and the realisation of the rights of national minorities represent the foundations of our internal stability and democratic development, which have singled us out as an atypical example of Balkan behaviour. Our foreign policy is firmly oriented towards the European-Atlantic option. Lastly, we promoted the option for Europeanisation of the Balkans and its speedier attachment to the European integration.

The painstaking five years that the Republic of Macedonia needed to gain the rightful and natural place that it and its people deserved in international organisations and in the international community is now behind us. It was painstaking due to the many obstacles and restrictions placed in our way, which disregarded our will and political preference. They were the result of the disturbed situation in the region of the Balkans, the war, great mistrust and misunderstandings, sanctions and embargoes, as well as the lack of a consistent policy on the part of the international community for quite some time. There were, of course, the residues of European bi-polarity and the major problems of the post-communist period.