Mr VOLLEBAEK (Minister of Foreign Affairs of Norway and Chairman-in-Office of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe). Mr President, thank you for your kind introductory remarks. Allow me to congratulate you upon your election as President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. I will try to answer at least some of the questions that you have raised and, if I do not, perhaps I shall address them during question time later.

Speaking as Chairman-in-Office of an organisation that is considerably younger than the Council of Europe, I pay tribute to the Council’s impressive achievements in its 50 years of existence. I am pleased to have this opportunity to address this important forum at the very beginning of my chairmanship of the OSCE, and I look forward to attending the celebrations of the Council’s 50th anniversary in London and in Budapest.

The Council of Europe is a major partner of the OSCE - a partnership that will only increase in importance in the future as the human dimension of security becomes more and more evident. I am glad to say that the co-operation between us is close. As Assembly members know, I have just come from a meeting between our two organisations at the level of the chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers, with my colleague the Hungarian Foreign Minister, Janos Martonyi, and Secretary General, Daniel Tarschys. The long agenda that we have covered is an indication of the extensive co-operation between our two organisations.

I think these meetings are important because they make possible a frank exchange of views which, in turn, can stimulate co-operation between our two organisations at all levels. Ideally, I believe such meetings should be held with each chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers - that is, twice a year - and I have therefore proposed to hold a second meeting later this year after Iceland takes over the chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers.

We are living at a time when both the OSCE and the Council of Europe are facing new challenges as a result of the historic events in Europe at the end of this century. How do we adapt, together, to the new responsibilities and opportunities that are placed upon us as a result of the emergence of the new democracies in Europe?
The very aptly named Committee of Wise Persons, to which the President referred, has submitted a report with thought-provoking suggestions for an answer to this question on the part of the Council of Europe. The report also includes proposals for co-operation with the OSCE. I assure the Assembly that the OSCE also places great emphasis on its co-operation with the Council of Europe, and that we give any proposals from the Council of Europe careful consideration. We will have an opportunity to discuss our co-operation further at senior official level at the forthcoming meeting of experts between the Council of Europe and the OSCE in Vienna on 29 March. We have suggested expanding the agenda to include not only procedures for monitoring commitments but a broader scope for co-operation between our two organisations.

In the OSCE, we have chosen to address the issue of adaptation to the new challenges of the 21st century through the ongoing negotiations on a security document-charter, which will it is hoped, be adopted by the OSCE summit in Istanbul in November this year. An important part of the document-charter is the platform for common security, which seeks to define how security-related international organisations in Europe can work together to build security, stability and prosperity in Europe. The Council of Europe, as a major partner of the OSCE, has been asked to give its opinion on the ongoing work on the document-charter and has provided valuable input to the process.

The close relationship between the OSCE and the Council of Europe in that endeavour has expanded dramatically over the past few years, and so has the inter-organisational co-operation between both our organisations and the United Nations and its agencies, and with the European Union. There is more than enough work for everyone. If we do not co-operate, we will fail. Getting that co-operation right must remain a high priority. Let us also devote more time to praising each other. If we do not give each other credit, we will all be discredited.

While addressing the Assembly today, I would like to take the opportunity to brief you on recent developments regarding Kosovo. After that, I shall say a few words about the goals and priorities of the Norwegian chairmanship, before turning to regional issues. Finally, I will be happy to answer any questions that Assembly members may have.

As members are aware, the situation in Kosovo has taken up much of my first few weeks as Chairman-in-Office. On my visit to the region at the beginning of this month, we were able to help secure an agreement which led to the release of the eight Serb soldiers held by the Kosovo Liberation Army. However, our relief at having reached a solution to a possibly dangerous situation was short-lived. Only a few days after my return to Norway, the tragic events in Racak occurred, leaving 45 Kosovo Albanians dead. The OSCE has condemned that killing of ethnic Albanian civilians and demanded that the International War Crimes Tribunal be allowed full access both to the scene of the violence and to the suspects, and that those guilty of this atrocity be held responsible.

On 18 January, we were notified by the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia of its decision to declare the head of the Kosovo verification mission, Ambassador Walker, *persona non grata* - allowing him only 48 hours to leave the country. That created a very serious situation, which placed the whole continued presence of the verification mission in jeopardy. After consultations with our OSCE colleagues, I decided to travel once again to Belgrade and Pristina, for talks with President Milosevic and Foreign Minister Jovanovic, and the Yugoslav authorities subsequently “froze” the implementation of their decision.