3. Address by Mr Zhvania, President of the Parliament of Georgia

THE PRESIDENT.- It is an enormous pleasure for me, Mr Zhvania, to receive you in the Assembly following what you have just heard, a unanimous vote in favour of Georgia's accession to the Council of Europe. We give you every welcome and every congratulation.

On behalf of the Assembly, I pay tribute to the work and demeanour over the past years of your special guest delegation of your parliament, led by Lana Gogoberidze. In Lana you have an envoy who is not only charming and persuasive, but clear thinking, incisive and self-evidently democratic. That is the heart of the matter.

Our rapporteur on Georgia's entry, Terry Davis is a conscientious, thorough man who is well schooled in democratic principle and not easily satisfied. You would not be here, Mr President, were it not for the determination and political will of your authorities to embody the values and principles of the Council of Europe in Georgia's governance. Your country is the first in the Caucasus is the first to receive the Assembly's endorsement for Council of Europe membership. It is a moment of hope for a region that is still scarred by bitter conflicts.

Mr President, you have the floor.

Mr ZHVANIA (President of the Parliament of Georgia).- Thank you, Mr President and distinguished colleagues. I am very excited at this moment and full of emotions. It is my privilege to address you on this historic day for my country. Without any exaggeration I want to tell you that every Georgian - all people in my country - are waiting today for news from this chamber, from the hemicycle of the Palais de l'Europe.

I express our sincere gratitude to all those who were guiding Georgia’s admission to the Council of Europe. I pay tribute to them. We are so thankful to the former President of the Assembly, Mrs Leni Fischer, who did a tremendous job by inviting Georgia's cooperation with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. I want to express our wholehearted welcome to the election of Lord Russell-Johnston as President of this Assembly. We are grateful for your assistance Mr President.

We must all compliment the rapporteurs, Mr Terry Davis and Mr Andras Kelemen. They were tough and strict rapporteurs when they first arrived in Georgia. They expended enormous energy in investigating the smallest details of the processes that are under way in Georgia. We now have real friends of our country who understand so clearly what is going on in Georgia and around it.

I want to thank you all for voting for Georgia's admission - the representatives of all political groups and of national delegations. All of you did your best to learn of our problems, to understand our realities and to share our hopes. I thank even those representatives in the Parliamentary Assembly who are still considering processes on the verge of the new millennium in our part of the world - in terms of the political geography of the Russian empire in the middle of the 19th century. I am so thankful that they did not object to the Assembly's vote. They, too, welcomed Georgia’s entry to the Council of Europe.

The Assembly will be aware that during the first years of independence Georgia found itself in such disorder and chaos that hardly anyone could believe in the future of the
country. We experienced all the hardships of civil war. We witnessed the total collapse of our economy and an enormous social crisis. Nowadays, Georgia is a different country. In August 1995, a new constitution was adopted on the basis of broad political consensus. That is why the new constitution has become the starting point for the reconciliation of our nation. The results of parliamentary and presidential elections, held on the basis of the new constitution, have opened the way to radical reforms in all spheres of our life. Over the past three years we have adopted more than 500 highly principled pieces of legislation. We have begun ambitious judicial reform. We have held our first local elections. At present, Georgia’s political life is determined by pluralistic political polyphony. A strong and vibrant civic sector is emerging with the secure foundation of a vocal, influential and independent mass media. We have also a strong and influential non-governmental sector.

Most important and interesting is that Georgia plays a key role in the creation of new regional architecture in our part of the world. Our vision for the future of the region is based on the belief that the vast natural resources of the Caspian and Black Sea area allow, and, indeed, invite all countries of the region to benefit from co-operation rather than suffer from endless confrontation.

The concept of the new silk road will lead us to new regional arrangements, which will bring stability and prosperity to that part of the world. That will be our contribution to the European security architecture. No country should be isolated from that exciting prospect.

I take this opportunity to appeal to distinguished colleagues for the rapid admission to the Council of Europe of our closest neighbours - of our brothers - the Armenians and Adjarsis. I am sure that that will promote deepening regional co-operation and will create a warmer and more co-operative spirit in the entire region.

There are still many problems, and as a new democracy we face dramatic challenges. I share the concerns expressed by rapporteurs and authors of amendments and members of the Political Affairs Committee. We try to address many of the problems through our domestic political agenda. We accept all the conditions and deadlines, because they are already part of our domestic agenda. I am sure that Georgia will be able to fulfil all the obligations listed by the Parliamentary Assembly. The President of Georgia, Mr Shevardnadze, contributed so much to the building of the new European order, which allows all of us to discuss our vision of a greater Europe without dividing lines. His personal commitment and sacrifice to make Georgia an indispensable part of the new architecture is clear.

Bringing Georgia to Europe is not the priority only of its president or its political establishment. It is the priority of the grass roots, because it reflects the vision, desire and commitment of all the people of Georgia. We believe in the future of Georgia, which is about to find its natural destiny and its natural homeland in the European family of free nations.

Joining the Council of Europe is our political choice to ensure that the values on which Georgian society is based - pluralism, respect for diversity, traditional tolerance, human dignity and the supremacy of the rights of every individual - are upheld. We have striven throughout the centuries to preserve our independence and our national identity, and we have dreamt of the moment when we would be back in our home here in Europe.