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Mr AHTISAARI (*President of the Republic of Finland*).- Madam President, distinguished members of parliament, I thank you and your predecessors for your invitation to come here to the parliament of the Council of Europe. I consider it a great honour to be able to appear before this body, the first Parliamentary Assembly in the process of European integration.

The charter accords the Parliamentary Assembly an advisory role only. Yet I have noticed that, with the ability characteristic of parliamentarians, you have assumed a considerably more important role, which has manifested itself above all in the skill with which you have piloted the Council towards true pan-Europeanism.

More than 50 years ago, with the second world war still in progress, Winston Churchill spoke of a council that should be created once the war had ended and which, as he put it, "must eventually embrace the whole of Europe, and all the main branches of the European family must some day be partners in it." Today, we are already close to that goal.

When Finland joined the Council of Europe just over six years ago, after nearly three decades of close co-operation with it, we became its twenty-third member country. Today the membership is already thirty-eight, and by the time this session ends I hope that it will de facto be up to thirty-nine.

That enormous change in the membership has naturally meant new challenges for the Council. It has stretched resources to the limit, but it has also given the Council the opportunity to perform its original task - that of spreading the European values of democracy, the rule of law and human rights to every part of our continent.

Tomorrow, when the Council deals with Russia's application for membership, I am certain that it will be conscious of the historic significance of the decision.

We know that Russia's civic societies were to a large extent destroyed during the communist era. It is evident that the democratic process needs time to take root. Russia is undergoing a wrenching change. The recent elections (attracted a fair participation) and reinforced the democratic process.

In its post-cold war form the Council of Europe has become an important part of ^{the} European security structure. Russia's membership of the Council of Europe will advance democracy in Russia and stability in Europe. Exclusion of Russia will not advance those aims.

I welcome the interest that the United States has shown towards the Council of Europe. It is important that it has become an observer here, and we expect a lot of that arrangement.

Europe has changed, and change continues. The traditional perception of security emphasised military factors. Today we should consider security in broad terms, including democratic aspects and the dimension of individual rights. First, security should be based on co-operation not on confrontation.

The revolutionary political development in Europe has opened a new channel for preventive action. No longer must we necessarily be confined to solving crises after they have erupted; instead, we can consciously try to prevent them from happening.

The concept of democratic security, adopted at the Vienna Summit as the Council's guiding principle, is not an empty phrase but a reality that should be given more content. The Council's programmes, by means of which democracy, the principle of the rule of law and the implementation of human rights are supported in member countries, are the best possible form of preventive diplomacy. By creating an area where the values represented by the Council prevail, we shall build a stable and predictable Europe.

We now have a unique opportunity to build a European area of common values and we may not be offered that opportunity a second time. By that, I do not mean that we should create a single common culture, but that we should create an area where democracy and human rights prevail, and where we respect difference and understand each other - an area that all people, both minorities and majorities, find a good place to live in.

In the work of the Council, the Human Rights Commission and the Court of Human Rights are of central importance by virtue of their defence and promotion of citizens' rights. However, enlargement of the membership is posing completely new challenges for the Council. The development of the system - that is, merging the Commission and the Court to create a new court - will indisputably add to the efficiency of the system. Nevertheless, one can ask whether this will be sufficient in the face of the new challenges.

Just over five years ago, as we were entering a new decade, the combined population of the member countries of the Council of Europe was just over 400 million. With Russia's accession, the total will reach almost double that figure - more than 750 million. I find it quite understandable that there is concern in the Commission and in the Court. Can one really assume that the system will cope with such a large expansion without special measures? Should, after all, new means and alternatives be given fresh consideration? Might it be time to revive the question of a Council ombudsman, an ombudsman who would work in close co-operation, especially with the ombudsmen in the new member countries? I know that this matter has been discussed by the Parliamentary Assembly on several earlier occasions.