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(The sitting, suspended at 3.51 pm was resumed at 4.01 pm with Mr Martínez, President of the Assembly, in the Chair.)

9. STATEMENT BY MR VIDENOV

The PRESIDENT.- We now have the honour of hearing a statement by Mr Videnov, Prime Minister of Bulgaria. After his statement, Mr Videnov has kindly agreed to take questions from the floor.

Dear Prime Minister, I welcome you today in this Chamber with particular pleasure and not only because your country was among the first after the fall of communism to join the Council of Europe, which is proof of the willingness and capability of your people to live in conformity with European standards of democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights.

It is also a pleasure because Bulgaria was the first country among those new members in eastern and central Europe just relieved of the burden of a totalitarian regime to assume the presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, even if it was by the whim of alphabetical order. I must say here that it played this responsible role in a very thorough and dignified way.

I am particularly happy today because I very much respect a country like yours which managed to stay an island of stability in the midst of a region where, unfortunately, the most turbulent and bloody conflict in Europe since World War II has rampaged for more than three years now.

My deep sympathy with your country grew very much when I was the Rapporteur of the Assembly on the matter of Bulgaria's application to the Council of Europe, and my solidarity also has to do with the burden which you had to carry arising from the consequences of sanctions, directed towards the new Yugoslavia at a moment when you badly need the flow of capital, open markets and free roads for exporting and importing your goods.

But at the same time, Prime Minister, I cannot help feel some pain and frustration. This is so because your country, which, I repeat, has proven its ability to live in a democratic way, has nevertheless been torn by internal disputes, by political confrontation, which is still polarised and where many people tend to probe deep into the past instead of building the future. And I can assure you that looking forward is worthwhile, because I am convinced that Bulgaria has its well-merited place in the big, continent-wide Council of Europe we are trying to build.

To switch to a more jocular tone, I was told that a Bulgarian newspaper had recently published the 10 similarities and differences between you and the President of the United States, Bill Clinton. You are both among the youngest to rise to their posts and you both have a bitter cup to drink - to put forward unpopular measures such as higher taxes in the United States and increased prices of electricity and heating in Bulgaria. But Bill Clinton has not been, like you, a fencing champion, and you do not play the trumpet - we are told - as he does.

I am satisfied that you did not blow your own trumpet after you brought back the Socialist Party to power - a party that some may have criticised, again looking back to the past, but in any case a party the majority of the people set their hopes on for their future and that of Bulgaria at the last elections. Anyhow, I am particularly happy that you said in a speech that the most important thing for your country is "the unification of the nation, the consensus, more mutual understanding, tolerance and civilised relations". I know how many Bulgarians are on the brink of losing their patience, hoping at last for more stability, prosperity and welfare. I know how urgent and difficult are the constraints in the fields of economy and social policy.

You have, I dare say, the "privilege" of having lived under a totalitarian regime - not too long to be spoiled by it and to have no new, fresh ideas for the future, but long enough to know what should no longer be done, and I sincerely hope that you will succeed in your extremely difficult task. The Council of Europe and its Parliamentary Assembly will keep on working, together with you, to bring more stability and to consolidate democracy and social progress in your country.

You have stressed on several occasions the European orientation of your country as a must and as a priority in your future policy. I am sure that Bulgaria has an important role to play in the Council of Europe, which will be for the benefit for your country's future and the European future.

As I have said on several occasions, Bulgaria served as a model in preserving stability and tolerance in the field of minorities. We expect your proximity to the countries of the former Yugoslavia and your knowledge of their culture and mentality to help us to bring the bloody conflict there to an end, and I know how badly you need peace on your borders.

We also expect your traditional cultural, linguistic and other links with Russia, to help us to meet the enormous challenge, which is to include that country as a full member of the Council of Europe. Not only will this give a truly pan-European dimension to our Organisation, but it will change the very concept of Europe as a continent which stretches from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean.