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COUNCIL OF EUROPE - April 2002
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HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS THE GRAND DUKE HENRI OF LUXEMBOURG

A few days before the start of Luxembourg's chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, it is a great honour and a special pleasure for me to address this august Assembly of elected representatives of greater Europe, meeting here in the oldest of our European institutions. For more than fifty years, the Council of Europe's activities have played a decisive part in shaking the renewal and development of our continent.

In the beginning was the European idea. It marked the start of a new era, reflecting its founders' finest beliefs. The idea materialised because it was forward-looking, geared to learning from the past, and essentially aimed at ending the violence and horror that had left their imprint on European history. It infused a heart and soul into the old continent.

We have received our unshakeable faith in Europe from those brave and visionary men and women who, after experiencing the unspeakable themselves, decided to endeavour to prevent such horrors from ever taking place again, and undertook first to bring about reconciliation and then to change people's attitudes.

The European idea was one, but not indivisible. It gradually took on many shapes and developed along flexible lines, in several organisations set up in the 1950s which focused their attention on a given sphere of activity or a particular form of dialogue and co-operation. For forty years, the process was confined to the western half of Europe.

A closer look reveals that the values promoted by the Council of Europe are universal, and therefore underpinned the efforts to unify Europe from the outset. The Council of Europe, which grouped the western democracies together for nearly forty years, was leading its own institutional life, without fuss and even – if I may say so – in a somewhat inward-looking manner. Equipped with its precepts, it progressively delineated a wide range of good practices, and drew up legal instruments that proved, and still prove, to be of great relevance to the development of the member countries' societies.

That being said, the Council was living in the shadow of the fantastically dynamic process of economic, then political and institutional, integration in which some of its members were involved as part of the European Community and later the European Union. That, incidentally, is why some people, including some inside the Organisation, wonder about the future of the Council of Europe as its younger sister goes from strength to strength and steadily broadens its membership. In fact, I am convinced that the two institutions are and will remain forceful and original expressions of the ideas initially underlying the renewal of Europe. Both pursue the aim of a European area in which human rights are protected and a common legal system ensures peace, freedom, justice, security and stability. In so doing, they strengthen and complement each other. What distinguishes them is their chosen methods.

The basic standards that inspire the Council of Europe's work are constant and unchanging. Their legitimacy stems directly from the obligation – which is also the primary aim of states governed by the rule of law and pluralist democracies – to give all those countries' populations, and each individual European, the best possible environment in which to lead fulfilling lives, by making their

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societies fairer and more respectful of everyone's rights and freedoms. Thanks to the Council of Europe's tireless and dedicated efforts, those standards have been constantly refined, with a deliberate policy of always carrying the process a step further. That is how the Council's corpus of standard-setting instruments, and consequently the member states' legislation, are gradually developing into a fabric that covers, protects and nurtures countless aspects of life in our modern societies.

Like the European Convention on Human Rights, which from the outset laid down ambitious minimum standards for the protection of human rights, and the activity of the Court, which constantly encourages improvements, the entire Organisation is dedicated to improving the management of public affairs in its member states.

Starting with the basic protection of these fundamental and unchanging rights, the Council of Europe has quite logically become involved in all the most promising areas of our societies, such as social affairs, education, culture, youth, sport and the environment. What I find most attractive in the Council's approach is its faith in the future and its obstinate belief in what is best in human beings. The oldest political organisation on our continent steers clear of the purely spectacular and carries on quietly working for the common good. It has been doing so with considerable patience and perseverance, and with all the qualities of a builder, for more than fifty years. Its assets are persuasion, dialogue, co-operation and assistance.

One of the Council's prime qualities, in my view, is regular monitoring of compliance with the commitments freely made by its member states when they joined. Monitoring is an essential, across-the-board activity deriving from the certainty that all governments are fallible and that everyone may need reforms at one time or another. On several occasions the Grand Duchy has also carried out reforms based on the Council's work or on the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights. The variety and complementarity of the statutory organs are one of the Council of Europe's original features because they effectively reflect, inside the institution, the democratic principles and machinery that it advocates for the outside world.

The Organisation derives its strengths and its wealth of experience from the combined activities of its constituent bodies. However, I should like to pay tribute to the Parliamentary Assembly's role as a witness upholding human rights and democracy and as a political stimulus for the Council's work; to the efforts to promote the contribution made by towns and regions to the architecture of the continent, through the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe; to the defence of human rights through the judges of the European Court of Human Rights and the work of the Commissioner for Human Rights; to the commitment shown by specialist bodies such as the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance and the Committee for the Prevention of Torture; to the Committee of Ministers' management of political affairs; to the contribution made by the conferences of specialist ministers to resolving the problems confronting all of our societies; to the steering committees and other expert groups which maintain a broad network of contacts and exchanges throughout Europe.

Luxembourg, which is proud of having been a founding member of several European organisations, has always felt at ease in this great democratic family in which the rule of law is observed and all the member states are represented on an equal footing. It has therefore been involved, as a committed partner, in the quest for ways to unite Europe ever more closely around the same key