Ms Liliane MAURY PASQUIER (Switzerland, SOC, President of the Assembly): Ladies and gentlemen,

I declare open the Fourth Part-Session of the 2019 Ordinary Session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

My dear colleagues,

This part-session will be the culmination of the 70th anniversary celebrations of the Council of Europe. Tomorrow, Tuesday 1 October, we will celebrate, at the Strasbourg Opera, the achievements of the Council of Europe. We are all honored to receive, on this occasion, the President of the French Republic, Emmanuel Macron, who will first address the Parliamentary Assembly before the commemoration ceremony.

In this context, it is particularly important for me to recall that, during these seventy years, our Assembly has been an unique forum for many political figures, including leaders and heads of state and government, to express their ideas about the present and their vision on the future of European architecture.

These visionary declarations guided our action and allowed the Council of Europe and our Assembly to play a leading role in the process of European unification, the construction of our common house which today houses 47 Member States.

This common house belongs to us all. As members of the Assembly, representing the citizens of Europe, our responsibility to keep it in order is all the more important.

We must tirelessly strengthen the foundations of this building, by launching innovative ideas and by inspiring the development of new conventions, as we did for example with the Istanbul Convention, which was signed at that time by almost all Council of Europe member states.

Whenever the values of democracy, Human Rights and the Rule of Law are called into question, we must react and find the courage to take firm positions without hesitation, to denounce anti-democratic drifts and Human Rights violations.

But even in the most serious crisis situations, we must never close the door to dialogue. Because when we live under the same roof, it is necessary to talk to each other to better understand each other, to listen to each other and to exchange, to find solutions that are always aimed at a better protection of all people living on the European continent.

My dear colleagues,
As you know, the next part-session of January 2020 will see the election of one of our members to the presidency of our Assembly. This is thus the last time that I am addressing you at the beginning of the part-session and I would like to take this opportunity to share with you some reflections on our work, seen from the privileged position that I occupy, thanks to the confidence that you testified to me by electing me to the presidency.

If I recalled, just now, the importance of the Parliamentary Assembly as a forum for dialogue, it is because it is one of our essential tasks, one of our fundamental responsibilities.

It is not by chance, as for decoration, that the Statute of the Council of Europe provides among its two statutory organs, besides the representatives of the governments, a Parliamentary Assembly which brings together members of the 47 national parliaments who—even if their voice is mostly consultative—have the responsibility to meet and talk to each other in order to find answers and solutions to the problems they are facing.

This is why the Parliamentary Assembly is one of the two statutory organs of the Council of Europe.

By joining the Council of Europe, by living in our common home, our 47 Member States have agreed to participate fully in all our activities in a constructive way. This participation is neither optional nor facultative. It's just part of our basic obligations.

On the other hand, if we all made the effort to carry out this necessary dialogue in a constructive way, without trial of intent and with the sole aim of finding solutions, we would not only be more efficient in our work—and therefore closer to these solutions that we seek—but also more available to deal with all the problems we face, to respond to too many violations of democracy and the Rule of Law, too many violations of Human Rights we are unfortunately experiencing without reacting, for lack of time.

In recent years, we have devoted a lot of energy to solving our internal problems—the fight against corruption, the introduction of a procedure of termination of a leading function, differences between the statutory bodies, in particular—and even if these problems were serious enough to require answers as quickly as possible, it must be acknowledged that they also prevented us from dealing with other issues with the speed and efficiency they would have required.

Only a constructive dialogue between all of us and an unwavering willingness to consider all issues, all problems, without focusing on a single issue, will allow us to properly fulfill our role as guardians of democracy and Human Rights defenders!

A space for dialogue and even better, a wider pan-European platform for dialogue, this is the role of the Parliamentary Assembly and I count on you all to work actively in the years to come.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I come now to our political news.

If I had to identify a lesson from the crisis that our organization has just been through, I would again, without hesitation, mention the importance of dialogue and cooperation.

Indeed, faced with an unprecedented situation, we have lived up to our responsibilities.

The reinforced political dialogue between the Assembly and the Committee of Ministers has thus made it possible to find a way to preserve the unique and pan-European nature of our organization and the system of the European Convention on Human Rights. The importance of our decisions for the protection of the 830 million people living in Europe cannot be underestimated.

Nevertheless, we are aware that, even if our decisions were taken by a clear majority, both at the level of the Assembly and of the Committee of Ministers, these decisions are not unanimous.

As President of the Assembly, it is my duty to be attentive to all the voices, including the critical voices of the members who have expressed to me in particular their disappointment or a certain loss of confidence in the Parliamentary Assembly.

Even if I do not share these feelings, I can understand their causes. It is up to me, therefore, to do my utmost to allay the fears that some of our members have expressed.

In this context, I would like to highlight three important aspects.
Firstly, the decisions taken in Helsinki and Strasbourg should not be seen as the "victory" of one side or the "defeat" of another. The Council of Europe is not a place of "geopolitical battles" but a mechanism for the Human Rights of 830 million Europeans. Our decisions aim to best defend their rights and fundamental freedoms.

Secondly, the fact that the delegation of the Russian Parliament has resumed its place in our Assembly again opens the possibility for our Assembly to work with the Russian Parliament. We can now focus on topics of common interest, but also on issues that rightly concern us. We are all well aware of the origins of the crisis and our positions on this issue remain unchanged. We will continue to follow this issue in open and frank dialogue with our Russian colleagues. I note with satisfaction some progress in this area, including the release of a number of Ukrainian nationals detained in Russia. We must therefore continue to work together to achieve the full implementation of all the points of the recently adopted Resolution, as well as those contained in other relevant Assembly resolutions.

Thirdly, the dialogue and cooperation with the Ukrainian delegation is particularly important for me and for all of us because, as a Member State of our organization, Ukraine is able to benefit from our full support. It can count on our unequivocal commitment to international law and the standards we have.

In this context, I regret that the Parliament of Ukraine has not transmitted the credentials of its new delegation in time for the opening of this part-session. I hope that this will be done very soon, within the deadlines set by our Rules of Procedure. I therefore intend to engage as soon as possible with the new Ukrainian delegation and the President of the Verkhovna Rada, a dialogue that will ensure that the legitimate positions and fears of the Ukrainian delegation are fully taken into account.

My dear colleagues,

The work on the new complementary procedure between the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly in the event of a Member State’s failure to fulfill its statutory obligations is now entering a new phase.

The intensified dialogue between the Presidential Committee and the Bureau of the Ministers’ Deputies, in the presence of the Secretary General and the previous Secretary General, made it possible to identify the main lines that the future procedure could follow. Now comes the time for consultations with representatives of all Member States. At the level of the Assembly, an initial consultation will be held tomorrow, with the participation of the presidents of all national delegations. We will then continue our discussions between the Presidential Committee and the Bureau of the Ministers’ Deputies and in the framework of the Joint Committee this Thursday.

I would like to take this opportunity to underline here the role of the French Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers and the personal commitment of Ms Amélie de Montchalin, Secretary of State to the Minister of Europe and Foreign Affairs, in charge of European Affairs, representing the French Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers. This afternoon we will have the opportunity to continue our dialogue with Ms de Montchalin as part of her Communication to the Assembly and I am delighted.

The Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Ms Marija PEJČINOVIĆ-BURIĆ, also has a very important role to play in this process. We are therefore looking forward to welcoming him to our hemicycle on Wednesday for a first statement to the Assembly followed by a series of statements by members of the Assembly. I count on you all for a constructive and fruitful exchange of views.

Ladies and gentlemen,

My dear colleagues,

I would like to end my speech by mentioning a common project that many of you have been involved in: the #NotInMyParliament initiative. The success of this project is particularly close to my heart, as you know, since it allows us, by acting against the scourge of sexism, to advance equality between women and men in our Assembly. And I am very happy to see that we have come a long way together!

I would like to thank all the parliamentarians who supported this initiative by disseminating information, mobilizing their colleagues in national parliaments and promoting this initiative through various means.

I would also like to welcome the various actions taken by the parliaments of our Member States to combat sexism, harassment and violence against women, for example, to name just a few, in Austria, in France, in Iceland or even in the United Kingdom. I am sure that significant actions have also been taken in many other parliaments, which deserve to be shared and highlighted.
In this regard, allow me to draw your attention to the fact that the Inter-Parliamentary Union is finalizing a compendium of good practices in this field, which will be presented on 16 October 2019 in Belgrade at its next plenary session. I will personally participate in this debate in order to highlight the contribution of our Assembly.

So I'm counting on you all again this week to continue to show your support for the fight against sexism and harassment in parliaments and I encourage you to visit the photo booth with the visual #NotInMyParlement installed in the lobby of the hemicycle. Together, we have already accomplished a lot, but I am convinced that we can do even more. The support of each and every one of you is important to make a difference.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I must finish my speech on a sad and solemn note. I would like, in this Chamber, to pay tribute to Jacques Chirac, former President of the French Republic, who died last Thursday.

Jacques Chirac came to the Council of Europe twice, in 1987 as prime minister and in 1997 as head of state. Addressing our Assembly, which he described as a "parliamentary democracies forum", he highlighted "the main responsibility [of the Council of Europe] to contribute to the safeguarding and deepening of the European democratic area".

For him, the construction of Europe was an "essential factor of peace between nations, an obvious vector of prosperity, [and] an indispensable condition [...] to allow our old and dear continent to find the place it deserves on the scene to preserve its cultural and historical values, and to exert an increasing influence on the decisions that engage its future, but also to serve as an example of humanism to the whole world, which is its vocation".

Today, I think we can say that the Council of Europe has been able to live up to this vision.

Our continued commitment to the values of peace, unity and human dignity is, in my opinion, the best way to honor Jacques Chirac's memory, as well as the memory of the women and men who inspired the process of European construction.

To make this tribute visible, I invite you already and everyone to gather in the Chamber, this afternoon at 3 p.m., observing, at the same time as everywhere in France, a minute of silence to the memory of Jacques Chirac.

Thank you for your attention.