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Communications of the President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to the Bureau of the Parliamentary Assembly

Communication
President of the Assembly

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1. President's activities between 1 October and 21 November 2007

1.1. Highlights

1.1.1. Conference on "Security of Relations: the Netherlands and Russia" (The Hague, 16 October 2007)

I addressed the conference, which was organised by the "Energy Delta Institute" as a high-level meeting for politicians and top executives in the energy industry. After my address, I took part in a round table dialogue. I emphasised that a stable and strong partnership with Russia is essential to peace, prosperity and stability in Europe and spelled out a three-point strategy for achieving such a partnership.

1.1.2. Working visit to Slovenia (17 October 2007)

During my working visit to Slovenia, which took place in the context of the forthcoming Slovenian EU presidency, I concentrated mainly on the EU presidency, the EU's accession to the European Convention on Human Rights and regional issues including Kosovo. Other topics covered were the Council of Europe's role in ensuring a Europe without dividing lines and the follow-up given by national parliaments to Parliamentary Assembly activities.

1.1.3. EPP Statutory Summit (Lisbon, 18 October 2007)

The EPP Summit, preceding the EU Summit, was an excellent opportunity to explain, in the presence of many heads of state and government, the Assembly's position on several issues concerning co-operation between the Council of Europe and the EU, including the EU accession to the European Convention on Human Rights.

1.1.4. Speeches at the Venice Commission plenary meeting (Venice, Italy, 20 October 2007)

I attended the plenary meeting of the Venice Commission on 20 October 2007 in order to express, in person, my recognition of its important contribution to democratic development in Europe and beyond and to convey my gratitude for the excellent co-operation of the Venice Commission with the Assembly.

I also participated in an exchange of views with the Union of Arab Constitutional Courts and Councils.

1.1.5. Medal award ceremony for Mr J-C. Juncker, Prime Minister of Luxembourg, and speech at the University Robert Schuman (Strasbourg, 25 October 2007)

I attended the ceremony of the award of the title of "Dr Honoris Causa" to Mr Jean-Claude Juncker by the University Robert Schuman in Strasbourg and delivered a speech at the ensuing colloquy on "The future of the Council of Europe vis-à-vis other international organisations".

1.1.6. European Day on Migration and Integration: "Migrants: actors and vectors of intercultural dialogue", Aachen, Germany (18-19 November 2007)

In my opening address, I emphasised that integration is the greatest challenge in achieving the many positive outcomes of migration and that it cannot be a one-sided adaptation process: it requires dialogue and goodwill on the part both of the host society and of migrants. I announced the inauguration in 2008 of a European Day for Integration and Intercultural Tolerance as a part of the Parliamentary Assembly's contribution to the European Year of Inter-cultural Dialogue.

1.1.7. Award ceremony of the "Légion d'Honneur" (The Hague, French Embassy, 20 November 2007)

On 20 November 2007, I was nominated to the grade of "Commandeur dans l'Ordre National de la Légion d'Honneur", the highest French distinction, at the Embassy of France in The Hague.

1.2. Past meetings and visits

1.2.1. Conference on "Security of Relations: the Netherlands and Russia" (The Hague, 16 October 2007)

On 16 October, I addressed a conference in The Hague entitled "Security of Relations: the Netherlands and Russia", organised by the "Energy Delta Institute" as a high-level meeting for politicians and top executives in the energy industry. After my address, I took part in a round table dialogue.

In my speech, I emphasised that a stable and strong partnership with Russia is essential to peace, prosperity and stability in Europe. Europe must invest in relations with Russia on every possible level.

I used this occasion to spell out a three-point strategy for achieving such a partnership. First, the keystone should be the common values upheld by the Council of Europe, because these values are not just important in themselves, but human rights, democracy and the rule of law are the prerequisites for prosperity, peace, stability and economic growth.

Second, creating an atmosphere of trust and co-operation, not one of confrontation, is necessary to help prevent the return of cold-war thinking. I said that the lack of consultation over a planned United States missile shield in Europe was an example in this respect.

I emphasised that we must not close our eyes to the shortcomings in the fields of democracy, human rights and the rule of law in Russia. However, we must think positive and be tough, but fair, in our dealings with Russia. In this connection, I reminded delegates that the Assembly's monitoring reports on Russia were an excellent example of such co-operation, based on involvement, not confrontation.

Third, I stressed that we need to intensify people-to-people contacts and invest in personal relations. We also need a more open EU visa policy – including freer movement for students and professionals.

1.2.2. Working visit to Slovenia (17 October 2007)

During my working visit to Slovenia, which took place in the context of the forthcoming Slovenian EU presidency, I concentrated on the following main issues: the EU presidency; the EU's accession to the European Convention on Human Rights; and regional issues including Kosovo.

Other topics covered were the Council of Europe's role in ensuring a Europe without dividing lines and the follow-up given by national parliaments to Parliamentary Assembly activities, in particular the annual report on human rights and democracy, and the Assembly's current campaign on domestic violence against women.

I met the State Secretary at Slovenia's Foreign Affairs Ministry, Andrej Šter, the Slovenian National Assembly Speaker, France Cukjati, members of Slovenia's delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly and the leaders of different political groups in the parliament, as well as representatives of the Slovenian minority in Austria.

1.2.3. EPP Statutory Summit (Lisbon, 18 October 2007)

In my capacity as President of the Parliamentary Assembly, I took part in the EPP Summit preceding the EU Summit. It was an excellent opportunity to explain, in the presence of many heads of state and government, the Assembly's position on several issues concerning co-operation between the Council of Europe and the EU, including the EU accession to the European Convention on Human Rights. I also held a series of bilateral meetings on this occasion.

1.2.4. Speeches at the Venice Commission plenary meeting (Venice, Italy, 20 October 2007)

I attended the plenary meeting of the Venice Commission on 20 October 2007 in order to express, in person, my recognition of its important contribution to the Council of Europe and to democratic development, both in Europe and beyond. I also wanted to convey my sincere gratitude for the excellent, long-standing and close co-operation of the Venice Commission with the Assembly.

In my address, I pointed out that the Venice Commission is one of the essential elements that make the Council of Europe indispensable to the whole of Europe when it comes to promoting and protecting democracy, human rights and the rule of law. I deeply regretted that governments and most members of parliament, including the European Parliament, were not sufficiently aware of its work. I expressed my commitment to supporting and promoting the Venice Commission in my official meetings and visits, at all levels, as I had done throughout my mandate as president.

I was particularly honoured on this occasion to receive the Venice Commission Award – a concrete symbol of our mutual appreciation for the work we do together.

For over five years the Venice Commission has been an enlarged agreement, open to non-member states of the Council of Europe. I therefore also participated in an exchange of views with the Union of Arab Constitutional Courts and Councils. I expressed my appreciation for the fact that distinguished lawyers and judges from both European and Arab countries can come together to discuss matters of common and profound public interest. I stressed the significance of the rule of law to the Council of Europe system and the importance of the Venice Commission. I received a commemorative plate from the Union of Arab Constitutional Courts and Councils.

1.2.5. Medal award ceremony for Mr J-C. Juncker, Prime Minister of Luxembourg, and speech at the University Robert Schuman (Strasbourg, 25 October 2007)

On 25 October 2007, I attended the ceremony of the award of the title of "Dr Honoris Causa" to Mr Jean-Claude Juncker by the University Robert Schuman in Strasbourg. This ceremony was followed by a colloquy on the theme of "The future of the Council of Europe vis-à-vis other international organisations", where I delivered the introductory speech.

1.2.6. European Day on Migration and Integration: "Migrants: actors and vectors of intercultural dialogue", Aachen, Germany (18-19 November 2007)

From 18 to 20 November 2007 I visited Aachen, Germany, to participate in the European Day on Migration and Integration conference, co-organised by the state of North Rhine-Westphalia and the Parliamentary Assembly in co-operation with the European Parliament and the Charlemagne Prize Foundation. Besides the Assembly, the European Parliament and other international Parliamentary Assemblies, the conference brought together politicians from local, regional, national and European levels, members of migrant communities, as well as religious leaders and academics.

In my opening address, I emphasised that migrants are an integral and important part of European society. I highlighted that migration – if properly managed – brings enormous opportunities and advantages for our societies as well as for the countries of origin. Integration, however, is the greatest challenge in achieving the positive outcomes of migration. I stressed that integration cannot be a one-sided adaptation process: it requires dialogue and goodwill on the part both of the host society and of migrants. Education plays an important part in this process. I pointed out that intercultural and inter-religious dialogue is the key to integration and one of the most important contemporary challenges.

I encouraged all participants to find ways of improving intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding. In this context, I announced the inauguration in 2008 of a European Day for Integration and Intercultural Tolerance as a part of the Parliamentary Assembly's contribution to the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue.

I also took the occasion to announce that the Parliamentary Assembly together with CIS IPA have reached an agreement to continue the tradition of joint conferences and the next one, to be held on 3 April 2008, would be devoted to migration issues.

1.2.7. Award ceremony of the "Légion d'Honneur" (The Hague, French Embassy, 20 November 2007)

On 20 November 2007, I was nominated to the grade of "Commandeur dans l'Ordre National de la Légion d'Honneur", the highest French distinction, at the Embassy of France in The Hague.

1.3. Speeches

– meetings with students (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, 18-24 September 2007);
– speech on the security of relations: the Netherlands and Russia. Partnership with Russia – keystone for stable and prosperous future of Europe (The Hague, 16 October 2007);
– speeches at the Venice Commission plenary meeting (Venice, Italy, 20 October 2007);
– speech at the University Robert Schuman (Strasbourg, 25 October 2007);
– speech on Europe (The Hague, 2 November 2007);
– speech on the occasion of the European Day on Migration and Integration: "Migrants: actors and vectors of intercultural dialogue" (Aachen, 19-20 November 2007).

For a full text of these speeches, please follow the link http://assembly.coe.int.

1.4. Press releases[1]

1. "I am convinced that member states undervalue the potential of the Council of Europe", says Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe President (1 October 2007)
2. Parliamentary Assembly President condemns outright the terrorist attack in Sirnak province, Turkey (1 October 2007)
3. Parliamentary Assembly President responds to Estonian Speaker: "Please read my views" (3 October 2007)
4. Daniel Hoeffel – a great friend and supporter of the Council of Europe, says President (5 October 2007)
5. Murder of Anna Politkovskaya: time to know the truth, says Parliamentary Assembly President (Strasbourg, 6 October 2007)
6. René van der Linden urges Marko Mihkelson to "stop this slandering" (8 October 2007)
7. Stable partnership with Russia "essential to peace and prosperity in Europe" (16 October 2007)
8. Parliamentary Assembly President visits Slovenia ahead of its EU presidency (Strasbourg, 17 October 2007)
9. "Rejection of anti-semitism is a universal principle", says Parliamentary Assembly President (20 October 2007)
10. Parliamentary Assembly President welcomes imminent entry into force of Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (Strasbourg, 24 October 2007)
11. René van der Linden: "Our Assembly is an inclusive forum" (26 October 2007)
12. Parliamentary Assembly President reminds students of the greater Europe (29 October 2007)
13. Parliamentary Assembly President appeals against death penalty for human rights activist in Iran (30 October 2007)
14. Monitoring human rights in the EU "is the job of the Council of Europe" (Strasbourg, 31 October 2007)
15. Parliamentary Assembly President reacts to bus bombing in Togliatti, Russia (1 November 2007)
16. Parliamentary Assembly President stresses there must be "no witch-hunt of Romanians in Italy" (7 November 2007)
17. Parliamentary Assembly President welcomes Georgian decision to lift state of emergency (14 November 2007)
18. Parliamentary Assembly President announces a European Day for Integration and Intercultural Tolerance in 2008 (19 November 2007)

2. President's activities between 22 November and 17 December 2007

2.1. Highlights

2.1.1. Meetings with the Slovak authorities at the occasion of the Bureau and Standing Committee (Bratislava, 22-23 November 2007)

During this visit I had official meetings with Ivan Gašparovič, President of Slovakia, with Pavel Paška, President of the National Council and Ján Kubiš, Minister for Foreign Affairs.

1. These texts are available on the Council of Europe Internet site, at the following address: http://assembly.coe.int.

2.1.2. Conference EUROPADAG: "Europe, between ideals and reality" organised by the EPP (Maastricht, 24 November 2007): award of a medal and diploma to Jean-Claude Juncker, Prime Minister of Luxembourg

I stressed Jean-Claude Juncker's outstanding contribution to European integration and co-operation and his visionary report on "Council of Europe – European Union: a sole ambition for the European continent". I awarded him with a medal and a diploma, the highest distinction of the President of the Assembly, intended to pay tribute to "a great European and a genuine friend of the Council of Europe, deeply committed to its values and principles".

2.1.3. Ceremony of signing of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe/EP agreement (Brussels, 28 November 2007)

On 28 November 2007 in Brussels, European Parliament (EP) President Hans-Gert Pöttering and I signed an agreement to improve co-operation between the two institutions and increase complementary initiatives and synergies. This agreement is a concrete follow-up to Jean-Claude Juncker's report. Among specific items in the agreement are regular meetings at presidential level and enhanced co-operation between respective committees as well as in election observation missions.

2.1.4. Official visit to Mexico (Mexico City and Monterrey, 30 November to 4 December 2007)

I was welcomed to a plenary session of the Senate and the Chamber of Representatives, met the Speakers of both Chambers, representatives of different political forces and committee chairmen, held meetings with the Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Special Federal Prosecutor for Crimes related to Violence against Women, the Governor of the State of Nuevo Leon, the Mayors of Monterrey, San Pedro and several other cities of the state, consular representatives and human rights NGOs, and held exchanges of views with students.

Discussions concentrated on issues regarding migration, intercultural and inter-religious dialogue, violence against women, trafficking in human beings, the fight against terrorism and the human rights consequences of climate change. I also welcomed the clear position of Mexico against the death penalty.

2.2. Past meetings and visits

2.2.1. Meetings with the Slovak authorities at the occasion of the Bureau and Standing Committee (Bratislava, 22-23 November 2007)

During this visit I had official meetings with Ivan Gašparovič, President of Slovakia, with Pavel Paška, President of the National Council and Ján Kubiš, Minister for Foreign Affairs.

2.2.2. Conference EUROPADAG: "Europe, between ideals and reality" organised by the EPP (Maastricht, 24 November 2007): award of a medal and diploma to Jean-Claude Juncker, Prime Minister of Luxembourg

During a ceremony in Maastricht, I emphasised Jean-Claude Juncker's outstanding contribution to European integration and co-operation and his visionary report on "Council of Europe – European Union: a sole ambition for the European continent". I awarded him with a medal and a diploma, the highest distinction of the President of the Assembly, intended to pay tribute to "a great European and a genuine friend of the Council of Europe, deeply committed to its values and principles".

2.2.3. Ceremony of signing of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe/European Parliament agreement (Brussels, 28 November 2007)

On 28 November 2007 in Brussels, European Parliament President Hans-Gert Pöttering and I signed an agreement to improve co-operation between the two institutions and increase complementary initiatives and synergies.

The agreement is a concrete follow-up to the report "Council of Europe – European Union: a sole ambition for the European continent", prepared by Jean-Claude Juncker, Prime Minister of Luxembourg, and presented to the Parliamentary Assembly in April 2006. The report makes a series of proposals for strengthening the

partnership between the two European organisations – including a proposal that the EU could become a member of the Council of Europe by 2010. The co-operation agreement mirrors a similar agreement initialled in May this year for the intergovernmental branch of the Council of Europe.

Among specific items in the agreement are regular meetings between the Presidents of the bodies and enhanced co-operation between respective committees as well as in election observation in the framework of international observation missions.

2.2.4. Official visit to Mexico (Mexico City and Monterrey, 30 November to 4 December 2007)

Upon the invitation of the Mexican Senate, I visited Monterrey from 30 November to 2 December and Mexico City on 3-4 December 2007.

In Mexico City, I received a welcome to a plenary session of the Senate and the Chamber of Representatives, met the Speakers of both Chambers, representatives of different political forces in the parliament and committee chairmen, held meetings with the Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Special Federal Prosecutor for Crimes related to Violence against Women and representatives of human rights NGOs, and held an exchange of views with students at the National Autonomous University of Mexico.

In Monterrey, I held meetings and exchanges of views with the Governor of the State of Nuevo León, the Mayors of Monterrey, San Pedro and several other cities of the state, consular representatives, representatives of NGOs, students of the Autonomous University of Nuevo Leon and Mexican graduates of US universities. I also held meetings in the framework of the Monterrey 2007 International Forum of Cultures.

During this visit, our discussions concentrated on issues regarding migration and integration of migrants, intercultural and inter-religious dialogue, violence against women, trafficking in human beings, the fight against terrorism and the human rights consequences of climate change. I also welcomed the clear position of Mexico against the death penalty and its support for a worldwide ban on the death penalty.

I was extremely pleased at the importance which the Mexican Parliament gives to the co-operation with the Parliamentary Assembly, including at committee level and with the Assembly's rapporteurs. In this connection, the excellent co-operation with the rapporteur of the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, Mrs Vermot-Mangold, on the "disappearance and murder of a great number of women and girls in Mexico", was particularly appreciated.

In this connection, Mexican parliamentarians proposed to organise a seminar on the issue of violence against women, at which different national approaches and experiences could be presented and compared. Mexico considers that it has made considerable progress in this area and its experience would be useful for other countries.

I also stressed the importance of further progress on European integration. I argued during my meetings that a unified and strong Europe is in the interest of Mexico to strengthen its transatlantic relations.

I would like to stress the importance of further developing the mutually beneficial relations between the Council of Europe and Mexico and the contribution of the Mexican observer delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly. In my opinion, Mexico is a valuable partner for the Council of Europe as regards the promotion of the Organisation's fundamental values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law beyond the European continent.

2.3. Speeches

– Speech of thanks to His Excellency Jean-Michel Gaussot, French Ambassador to the Netherlands, on the occasion of the presentation of the insignia of Commander of the Légion d'Honneur (The Hague, 20 November 2007)

– Laudatio for Jean-Claude Juncker, Prime Minister of Luxembourg (Neerbeek, the Netherlands, 24 November 2007)

For a full text of these speeches, please follow the link http://assembly.coe.int.

2.4. Press releases

1. René van der Linden made Commandeur de la Légion d'Honneur – exceptional French decoration for the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe President (20 November 2007)

2. Parliamentary Assembly President pays tribute to Jean-Claude Juncker, “a great European and a genuine friend of the Council of Europe” (Strasbourg, 24 November 2007)
3. Parliamentary Assembly President René van der Linden reacts to arrests in Moscow and St Petersburg (Strasbourg, 26 November 2007)
4. Signing of a co-operation agreement between the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the European Parliament (27 November 2007)
5. Parliamentary Assembly President calls to commute the death sentences of three sentenced in Belarus (Strasbourg, 28 November 2007)
6. Signing of a co-operation agreement between the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the European Parliament (28 November 2007)
7. Official visit of Parliamentary Assembly President René van der Linden to Mexico (Strasbourg, 29 November 2007)
8. René van der Linden appalled by an execution in Belarus (30 November 2007)
9. Our partnership is based on shared values, says Parliamentary Assembly President after his official visit to Mexico (5 December 2007)
10. The President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe calls on Japan and the United States to abolish the death penalty (Strasbourg, 10 December 2007)
11. International Human Rights Day (Strasbourg, 10 December 2007)

APPENDIX

Agreement on the strengthening of co-operation between the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the European Parliament[2]

3. President’s activities between 18 December and 21 January 2008

3.1. Highlights

3.1.1. Official visit to Moscow (19-21 December 2007)

The discussions focused on the recent parliamentary elections in Russia and the presidential election in March 2008, ratification by Russia of Protocols Nos. 6 and 14 to the European Convention on Human Rights, progress with reforms concerning political pluralism and media freedom, furthering co-operation between the Parliamentary Assembly and Duma and the need to strengthen the Council of Europe as a pan-European organisation to avoid creating new dividing lines.

I met with the Speaker of Russia’s Federation Council, Sergey Mironov; the Speaker of the State Duma, Boris Gryzlov; the First Deputy Prime Minister, Dmitry Medvedev; the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov; the Special Representative of the President of the Russian Federation on relations with the EU, Sergey Yastrjembski; the leaders of political groups in the Duma (Gennady Zyuganov, leader of the Communist Party; Vladimir Zhirinovski, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party; Alexander Babakov, head of the Fair Russia Group) as well as Yevgeny Primakov, President of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the leader of the Russian delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly, Konstantin Kosachev. I also met two opposition leaders: Mr Mikhail Kasyanov, former Prime Minister and a candidate in the presidential elections; and Mr Boris Nemtsov, representing the Union of Right Forces.

I gave several interviews, among others to the television channels “RTR” and “Russia Today” and the newspaper Izvestiya.

Throughout my visit, I stressed that our relations with Russia must be forward-looking and that we have to build on the many elements we have in common, rather than putting emphasis on those which could divide us.

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2. This text is available on the Council of Europe Internet site, at the following address: www.assembly.coe.int.

3.1.2. Official visit to Turkey (Ankara, 13-16 January 2008)

The discussions concentrated on issues regarding the political and legislative reforms to be undertaken by Turkey as a Council of Europe member state in the context of the accession negotiations with the European Union. During my visit, I reminded all interlocutors that the continuation of the reform process is the best way to achieve progress in accession negotiations with the EU. I also stressed that if Turkey fulfils its democratic commitments, the EU must also keep its promises as regards Turkish membership of the EU. In this connection, I invited Turkey to make full use of the potential of its Council of Europe membership and of its instruments, including the expertise of the Venice Commission.

I met with the country's most senior authorities, in particular the President of the Republic, Abdullah Gül, and the President of the Grand National Assembly, Köksal Toptan. I also held meetings and exchanges of views with the State Minister for Economic Affairs, Mehmet Şimşek, the Chair of the EU Harmonisation Committee, Yaşar Yakış, and the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Murat Mercan. In the central Anatolian city of Konya, I was welcomed by the Governor of Konya, Osman Aydın, and met also with the Mayor of the Konya Metropolitan Municipality, Tahir Akyürek.

Concluding the visit, I stressed that I have chosen Turkey for my last official visit as Parliamentary Assembly President to underline the importance of this country for the future of Europe. Turkey will play an increasing role, both in economical and geo-political terms, and it is in the interest of all to have Turkey as a partner committed to European values.

3.1.3. Meeting with President Putin (Moscow, 17 January 2008)

See Press Release No. 9: "Our respect for common values should be reflected in concrete steps".

3.2. Past meetings and visits

3.2.1. Official visit to Moscow (19-21 December 2007)

At the invitation of the Chairman of the Russian parliamentary delegation, Mr Kosachev, I visited Moscow from 19 to 21 December 2007.

The discussions during this visit focused on the recent parliamentary elections in Russia and the presidential election in March 2008, ratification by Russia of Protocols Nos. 6 and 14 to the European Convention on Human Rights, progress with reforms concerning political pluralism and media freedom, furthering co-operation between the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and Duma and the need to strengthen the Council of Europe as a pan-European organisation to avoid creating new dividing lines.

Following the critical evaluation by Parliamentary Assembly observers of the recent parliamentary elections, I urged the Russian authorities to take seriously into consideration the conclusions and recommendations of the observers and make substantial improvements before the forthcoming presidential elections, in particular as regards the registration of candidates and fair access of all candidates to the media.

I informed my interlocutors about the Bureau's decision to observe the presidential elections and received assurances that the Parliamentary Assembly will be invited.

During my meetings in the State Duma, I called on Russian parliamentarians to ratify Protocols Nos. 6 and 14 to the European Convention on Human Rights. As regards Protocol No. 6, I expressed the hope that it could be ratified soon, which would be an excellent start for the new Duma to demonstrate its human rights commitment. As regards Protocol No. 14, I stressed that states must consider the Court and its decisions as an instrument of human rights protection of their citizens, and therefore do their utmost to increase the efficiency of this unique human rights mechanism.

I also expressed my concerns regarding the treatment of the opposition in Russia. I declared that opposition must be accepted as a normal and necessary part of political life. It must not be considered as an enemy, but as an integral part of every democratic society.

On the occasion of this visit, I stressed the need to avoid double standards in Europe. I reiterated my position that the Council of Europe is a unique pan-European organisation where states participate on an equal footing and using double standards would undermine the very foundation on which the Organisation is based.

I also expressed hope that the improvement of relations between Russia and its neighbours, as observed in particular with Poland, will continue. In this connection, I expect the negotiations between the EU and Russia on the new partnership agreement to start as soon as possible next year.

During my visit, I met with the Speaker of Russia's Federation Council, Sergey Mironov; the Speaker of the State Duma, Boris Gryzlov; the First Deputy Prime Minister, Dmitry Medvedev; the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov; the Special Representative of the President of the Russian Federation on relations with the EU, Sergey Yastrjembski; the leaders of political groups in the Duma (Gennady Zyuganov, leader of the Communist Party; Vladimir Zhirinovski, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party; Alexander Babakov, head of the Fair Russia Group) as well as Yevgeny Primakov, President of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the leader of the Russian delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly, Konstantin Kosachev.

I also met two opposition leaders: Mr Mikhail Kasyanov, former Prime Minister and a candidate in the presidential elections; and Mr Boris Nemtsov, representing the Union of Right Forces.

I gave several interviews, among others to the television channels "RTR" and "Russia Today" and the newspaper Izvestiya.

Throughout my visit, I stressed that our relations with Russia must be forward-looking and that we have to build on the many elements we have in common, rather than putting emphasis on those which could divide us.

3.2.2. Official visit to Turkey (Ankara, 13-16 January 2008)

During the official visit to Turkey from 13 to 16 January 2008, I met with the country's most senior authorities, in particular the President of the Republic, Abdullah Gül, and the President of the Grand National Assembly, Köksal Toptan.

I also held meetings and exchanges of views with the State Minister for Economic Affairs, Mehmet Şimşek, the Chair of the EU Harmonisation Committee, Yaşar Yakış and the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Murat Mercan. In the central Anatolian city of Konya, I was welcomed by the Governor of Konya, Osman Aydın, and met also with the Mayor of the Konya Metropolitan Municipality, Tahir Akyürek.

The discussions concentrated on issues regarding the political and legislative reforms to be undertaken by Turkey as a Council of Europe member state in the context of the accession negotiations with the European Union.

I was pleased that the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2007 confirmed the stability of the Turkish democracy and resulted in a more pluralistic and representative parliament with an increased participation of women and MPs from the south-east of Turkey. However, I stressed that discussions must continue on lowering the 10% threshold for the Parliament, which remains the highest in Europe.

I further praised the strong commitment of the Turkish authorities to continue democratic reforms but emphasised that the democratic progress must be strengthened by further constitutional and legislative reforms as called for by the Assembly upon the closing of the monitoring procedure in 2004.

These measures must, among others, strengthen the guarantees of freedom of expression and religion, the independence of justice and the fight against corruption, and establish an effective Ombudsman office.

Additionally, I urged the Turkish authorities to change Article 301 of the Criminal Code to bring it into conformity with Council of Europe standards. I was encouraged by the commitment of the President of Turkey to make progress on this issue, as he also declared in his speech before the Assembly in Strasbourg in October 2007.

During my visit, I reminded all interlocutors that the continuation of the reform process is the best way to achieve progress in accession negotiations with the EU. I also stressed that if Turkey fulfils its democratic commitments, the EU must also keep its promises as regards Turkish membership of the EU. In this connection, I invited Turkey to make full use of the potential of its Council of Europe membership and of its instruments, including the expertise of the Venice Commission.

As a democratic Muslim country, Turkey plays an indispensable role in promoting inter-religious and intercultural dialogue. This has been demonstrated by the joint initiative of the prime ministers of Turkey and Spain on "Alliance of Civilisations", now holding its first forum in Madrid. The Council of Europe and its Assembly, with its representatives of different cultures and religions, is a natural partner in this Alliance.

I also discussed the question of the successful integration of Turkish communities living in western Europe.

Finally, I stressed the Assembly's potential for contributing to the solution of the Cyprus issue. The historical meeting of the religious leaders of both communities, held under my auspices in February 2007, as well as the fact that the Assembly is the only European institution to associate in its work elected representatives of the Turkish Cypriot community, are concrete examples in this respect.

I also addressed students at the TOBB University of Economics and Technology in Ankara and held a very open and fruitful exchange of views with them.

Concluding the visit, I stressed that I have chosen Turkey for my last official visit as Parliamentary Assembly President to underline the importance of this country for the future of Europe. Turkey will play an increasing role, both in economical and geo-political terms, and it is in the interest of all to have Turkey as a partner committed to European values.

3.2.3. Meeting with President Putin (Moscow, 17 January 2008)

See Press Release No. 9: "Our respect for common values should be reflected in concrete steps".

3.3. Press releases

1. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe President to visit Russia with 2008 presidential election and the ratification of Protocols Nos. 6 and 14 on the agenda (Strasbourg, 18 December 2007)
2. Parliamentary Assembly President: "The world community has spoken on the death penalty" (19 December 2007)
3. Opposition must be accepted as a normal and necessary part of political life, says Parliamentary Assembly President in Moscow (Strasbourg, 21 December 2007)
4. Parliamentary Assembly President condemns murder of Benazir Bhutto (2 January 2008)
5. Parliamentary Assembly President condemns terrorist attack in Diyarbakır (Strasbourg, 4 January 2008)
6. Parliamentary Assembly President to discuss reforms in Turkey (Strasbourg, 11 January 2008)
7. Democratic progress must be strengthened by constitutional and legislative reforms, declares Parliamentary Assembly President in Ankara (Strasbourg, 15 January 2008)
8. Parliamentary Assembly President to discuss Russian presidential election and ratification of Protocols Nos. 6 and 14 with President Putin (Strasbourg, 16 January 2008)
9. René van der Linden to President Putin: "Our respect for common values should be reflected in concrete steps" (Strasbourg, 17 January 2008)