Speech by President Rosen Plevneliev at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

Mr. President,

Mr. Secretary General,

Honourable members of the Parliamentary Assembly,

Excellences,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I want to thank all of you for the opportunity to address this distinguished audience. Since 1949 this assembly has become a generator of ideas and a platform for meaningful debate. A guardian for human rights, democratic values and the rule of law. For more than sixty five years you have been a driving force for positive change, guiding Europe and 800 million Europeans on their path to peace, unity and cooperation.

Bulgaria joined the Council of Europe in 1992. This membership opened new horizons for my country and facilitated the transition from a totalitarian communist regime to a vibrant democracy. This is a historic achievement for the Bulgarian nation. But it is also a historic commitment to the European values, on which the Bulgarian foreign and domestic policy has been based since then. We are determined to continue to honor and implement this commitment, to respect the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, which is at the heart of this great organization.

Today, Bulgaria is a proud chairman of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. This is a very demanding responsibility, given the seriousness of the challenges we are facing today. Joint and coordinated efforts are needed to preserve and promote our common European values. The 126th Session of the Committee of Ministers will be held in Sofia on May 18, 2016. Bulgaria will spare no effort to achieve the results it has set out to accomplish as Chair of the Committee of Ministers. We shall count on the valuable support and cooperation of your respective parliaments and governments.

We welcome the adoption of the Declaration on the Principles of European Unity and Cooperation by the Standing Committee in October 2015 and support the convening of a Summit of Heads of State and Government to reaffirm, at the highest political level, Member States’ commitment to the common values and principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. We commend the efforts of the Chair of the Bulgarian Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly Madame Dzhema Grozdanova for making this declaration a reality.
Dear friends,

The number of crises around the world and in Europe is at a record high. The challenges ahead of us are very serious and we cannot afford to wait or shift them to the next generation. We need to act, we need to make bold decisions. A decision can only be right or wrong, but sometimes even a wrong decision is better than no decision at all. Mistakes can be fixed, but no decision creates a dangerous grey zone of illegitimacy and indifference. Being indifferent today is not an option. Let me point out some of the challenges we need to address.

First challenge: The rule of law. Every crisis can be traced back to its initial phase when someone violated the rules. But peace can only be achieved when the rules apply to everyone. Without rules there is no peace. We need efficient mechanisms to guarantee the rule of law. Today it is even possible for a permanent member of the UN Security Council not to follow the rules and principles of the international order.

Second challenge: Early detection of crises and proactive approach. We see weapons and the use of force in so many places around the world. But the use of weapons and the violation of the rule of law is not an argument, it is the absence of arguments. We should not wait for weapons and crises to appear on our TV screens, in order to act. Peace is not just the absence of war. Peace is human rights. Peace is rule of law. We need an early detection system at a European or even global level to warn us when those universal values are violated. And we need not just to be concerned, not just to register the crises, but to be proactive and solve them.

Third challenge: Migration. The ongoing hostilities in several conflict zones have forced millions to leave their homes. Millions are at Europe’s doorstep. Many of them are running away from the devastation of war, asking for nothing else but the right to live. Others are simply looking for better economic opportunities. Closing our doors to those fleeing for their lives, denouncing international human rights protections and forgetting Europe’s core values is not an option.

Bulgaria follows the rules of the Dublin Regulation and the Schengen Agreement. We show solidarity with all refugees and give humanitarian status to those that meet the criteria.

Bulgaria supports the establishment of a solidarity scheme which will allow the fair relocation and resettlement of refugees among all Member States. We need to establish a relevant mechanism in order to distinguish those in need from those just looking for better life. This doesn’t go against stricter border control and security checks.

I reaffirm Bulgaria’s irrevocable position to respect the International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law standards for asylum seekers. My country is a responsible member of the international community, member of the EU and state party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol.
As Chairman-in-Office of the South East European Cooperation Process, Bulgaria will initiate a Joint Statement on Migration Challenges to be adopted at the Second Informal Meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs on the 2nd of February 2016 in Sofia.

Fourth challenge: Terrorism and violent extremism transcend national borders. They strike unexpectedly where it hurts most – our values, our way of life. No country can manage on its own. Terrorism is a global threat, the solution must be global too. United we can win the fight against hate, extremism, and destruction. We have to address the causes of this global menace, not just the consequences. It is only a matter of time for the international antiterrorist coalition, of which Bulgaria is a proud member, to win the fight against Daesh. But the ideology of terrorism cannot be defeated with weapons. We need better ideas, education and tolerance.

No one is born a terrorist. Terrorists are created. Social exclusion, inequality and lack of access to basic human rights fuel hatred and division. There are many young people that have no jobs, no prospects and no goals in life. Radicalization is just a step away. Marginalization has no nationality, ethnicity, religion or skin color. We can prevent the radicalization of marginalized groups within our own societies only through education and integration.

The role of the Council of Europe as a guardian and promoter of the values of democracy and freedom, is essential in shaping a comprehensive democratic response to terrorism.

Bulgaria welcomes the Council of Europe’s timely action in response to the increasing manifestations of violent extremism and radicalization and commends the adoption of the comprehensive Action Plan on the fight against violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism by the Council of Europe Ministerial session in May 2015.

We welcome the adoption and the opening for signature of the Additional protocol to the Council of Europe’s Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism concerning “foreign terrorist fighters”. Bulgaria signed the Protocol the very day it took over the Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers. The Bulgarian Chairmanship will spare no effort to ensure its full and rapid implementation.

Fifth challenge: Global interests vs. global principles. Today’s Russia acts based on the ideology of Great Powers with their spheres of interest. On the other hand we have the European Union, which is a unique project for peace, where big Germany with 80 million citizens and small Estonia with 1,3 million have the same rights. And where consensus-driven policies make every state important. No state is a periphery or subordinate. Everyone is a partner and everyone, big or small, rich or poor, matters. On the world stage, we hope to see global interests that do not oppose but reflect the guiding principles and values of the international order.

Sixth challenge: The West and Russia are opponents once again. Unfortunately, the game in Europe has changed. The Ukrainian crisis is the game changer. We have entered a new phase, which I call “cold peace”. It is peace, because nobody wants a war and nobody wants to go back to the Cold War. But it is a “cold peace”, because, unfortunately, we are
seeing elements, rhetoric and propaganda from the Cold War times. And some countries get destabilized through frozen conflicts. The annexation of Crimea was a blatant violation of international law and its principles. Bulgaria stands firmly behind Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity. For us, Crimea is Ukraine and Ukraine is Europe!

Seventh challenge: Frozen conflicts – their number is rising. Eastern Ukraine could be the next one. Is that what we are offering to the people of Eastern Ukraine? Are they going to live better in a frozen conflict area, run by illegitimate groups and their guns? Look at other frozen conflict areas. Do people there live better? Are they more free, more safe and more prosperous? Who is going to invest in a frozen conflict area? If we think about people and their right to live in peace and prosperity, we need to oppose this wrong and dangerous strategy of keeping regions, countries and nations unstable and dependent.

Eighth challenge: Nationalism vs. patriotism. We should make the difference between nationalists and patriots. A wise president, president De Gaulle, once said: “Patriots are those who love their country, nationalists are those, who hate the different” There is a new wave of nationalism in Europe, addressing people’s fears on migration, high unemployment and others. Nationalists and populists have a loud voice and they are on the rise. Modern patriotism, not nationalism is needed, more than ever today.

Feeding on people’s fears, nationalistic parties are growing stronger, promoting intolerance, hatred and xenophobia. Sixty five years since the adoption of the European Convention on Human Rights, they denounce international human rights protection for their own partisan gain. We must remember that the Second World War was made possible by the denial of the democratic principles of dignity, equality and mutual respect. We must never allow such a tragedy to happen again.

Three years ago in the European parliament a wise and respected president said: “Better economic crisis than moral catastrophe, better economic problems than historic shame”. These words came from the president of the State of Israel Shimon Peres. Together we opened an exhibition in Brussels to celebrate the 70th Anniversary of the saving of the Bulgarian Jews. In his words “ Bulgarian people are modest, very quiet and shy, but, at the same time, real heroes”, a nation which he called an example of courage and humanity - people who 70 years ago dared to create a miracle. People who gave to their children and to the world an example for humanity and a lesson: when the time comes to make the choice of your life, you better make a decision that you would never doubt and you would never regret. A lesson that you need to believe in human values, to be honest and brave, to help those in need. To stand proudly because you did what was right and you proved that everyone can change history.

In the dark years of World War II Bulgaria was facing pressure to deport its Jewish community. In this turbulent time of human history it set an extraordinary precedent and saved the lives of all its citizens of Jewish origin. Unfortunately, our country was not in a situation to do the same for the Jewish people from Northern Greece and parts of
Yugoslavia, as they weren’t Bulgarian citizens. We deeply mourn their loss as well as that of all the victims of the Holocaust who we will always remember!

Let us support every initiative against fanaticism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism. Even the worst of evils can be stopped if people with different religious, ethnic, cultural and social background unite in their diversity and firmly say “No” to hatred. Today, just across my office, in the very heart of Sofia, temples of different religions – a 4th century Byzantine church, an Orthodox church, a mosque, a synagogue, and a catholic cathedral, coexist peacefully. This is a great example of tolerance, wisdom, and respect for diversity.

Ninth challenge: National interests vs. solidarity. Today Europe is weakened by the high number of crises it is facing. The perception of insecurity and lack of direction is growing stronger among European citizens. We need to restore the long term perspective, goal and vision of united and peaceful Europe. Europe’s strength has always been our unity and values. Our strongest weapon has always been integration. Today, more than ever, we need more, not less Europe. We certainly need strong political leadership and active citizens. We need leaders who understand that differences should be resolved peacefully. We need leaders that uphold, not undermine, the international order. We want to see principles, not interests, prevail on the global stage. We do not want to go back to the time of Great Powers and their spheres of influence. Many of us have been victims of such policies for centuries.

United Europe was built through unity and cooperation learning from wars and conflicts. United Europe proves to the world that peace is only possible when nations reach such a level of integration and cooperation that makes future wars impossible.

I see challenges coming from the wrong interpretation and even manipulation of history, and not learning the lessons of history. Seventy years ago, at the end of World War II, Europe was in ruins. Tens of millions lost their lives. The determination to never let such devastation happen again gave birth to United Europe. Enemies became partners and friends, working together for a common future, sharing the same values. Integration and cooperation proved to be an antidote to destabilization.

We do not want to go back to the time when the Great Powers allocated their spheres of influence. The Balkans have been victims of such policies for centuries and were considered the powder keg of Europe. A region filled with conflict and strife. The engine of EU integration and democratic civil societies drive the region to a historic change. From a region torn apart by wars, to a region joined together in peace. Today the Balkan countries work towards a common European future, building bridges of trust and cooperation. But our work is not finished yet. This positive process can be reversed.

The interests-driven policy of Great Powers and a periphery between them provokes the existence conflicts. Closing our eyes to this threat is not a sustainable political solution. This is a bitter reminder that what the international community has achieved in recent decades cannot be taken for granted; that the principles we built our world upon are not set in stone and it is up to all of us to respect, promote and protect them.
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It has been almost 19 years since a Bulgarian president addressed this distinguished audience. Bulgaria has come a long way since then. My country, the Balkans and Europe have changed for the better, we made remarkable progress.

With the fall of the Berlin wall communist regimes across Europe collapsed. As citizens of a newly born democracy, Bulgarians believed it would take a couple of years to become a “real democracy”. Today, we realize that just establishing democratic institutions and European laws is not enough. Democracy is a process, a mindset which has to be nurtured and cultivated. It needs time to take root and grow. It requires constant effort and should not be taken for granted. Our democracies are not perfect. But it is democracy that makes us strong and humane. And as the former President of the Republic of Bulgaria Dr. Zhelyu Zhelev used to say: “You can cure democracy only with more democracy”.

Today, Bulgaria is a proud EU and NATO Member. The engine of European integration brought dramatic and positive change. Our GDP tripled, public funds for education, health care and pensions tripled as well. Our state debt has been reduced to the third lowest in the EU. Bulgarians have never been as free as they are today.

Bulgaria is stable. Our economy is developing well. In 2015 we were among the top 5 best performing EU economies. We have an ambitious reform Agenda and modernization plans. Bulgaria is developing the most successful start-up and innovation ecosystem in the region. We became the home of the biggest start-up seed and acceleration funds for the region. I was proud to receive Bulgaria’s award for the best outsourcing destination in Europe for 2015.

Our foreign policy is balanced, based on clear principles - integration, connectivity and good neighborly relations. Bulgaria is an engine of regional connectivity and integration. We are building highways, railways, bridges and energy networks to bring people and businesses together. The region is developing and is on the right track. But the past is still strong, the future still not prevails. We see geopolitical tensions in the region, we see a clash between entrepreneurs with sound business models and oligarchs with their behind curtains networks. We are seeing a clash between media that are free and telling the truth and media that serve as propaganda machines. We should accelerate reforms all over the region, especially justice reform, open government policies, anti-corruption and media legislation. We should promote transparency of public procurement and e-government, because when you run public money, there is nothing to hide.

The Balkans should be a region of international cooperation, not of geopolitical tensions. We Bulgarians want to see the region at peace, humane and tolerant. A region that can overcome the differences, and give an example to the world for peaceful settlement of conflicts and democratic transformation. We want borders on the Balkans to fall, not to be moved. We work for progress and development, for connectivity and integration. We accelerate cross border cooperation. Cooperation between neighbors is a very powerful
instrument, especially on the Balkans. It is unique to see how people on both sides of the Iron Curtain get together and build a common future. Now, all of us can see the difference between isolated, forgotten regions and those that cooperate.

Today Bulgaria is Chairman-in-Office of the South East European Cooperation Process. During our chairmanship, we will mark the 20th anniversary of this great initiative that has become the leading political format for security and stability in the region. We work on three priority areas: connectivity, security and migration and strengthening the fundamentals of democracy including media freedom, promoting access to the internet and new technologies to support an active civil society.

Having realized the positive impact of European integration for the development of the region, Bulgaria is a strong supporter of the EU and NATO enlargement process. Over the years, Bulgaria has become a pillar of stability and an important factor in the region. The Balkans are a truly beautiful and exciting part of Europe. Together with our neighbors, we work to deepen regional cooperation and promote democratic development.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Bulgaria has been a member of the Council of Europe for more than 20 years. It was the Council who first welcomed former communist countries into the democratic family of nations. Thanks to its guidance in the years of transition we managed to establish a modern democratic state where human rights and the rule of law are held high. Since 1992 we have come a long way. The recent reforms undertaken by the government in the fields of education, security and justice are another proof that Bulgaria has taken its future in its own hands, that we are acting in a responsible way, that we are making reforms and achieving sustainable results. Therefore, I urge this distinguished assembly to lift the post-monitoring dialogue for my country.

Dear friends,

Only through cooperation, respect for the rule of law and value-based policy we will be able to address the challenges we face. No nation, regardless of its political will and military might, can manage on its own. Cooperation is no longer a matter of choice, but of necessity. The Founding fathers of the European Union made history. But if you stop making history, somebody else will. We should continue our journey to a more integrated, peaceful, humane and sustainable European and world order.

As we live in 21st century, we need new ideas and not to look back at the wrong ideologies from the past. In the 21st century, states should be strong not because of their armies of soldiers, but because of their armies of well-educated young people. Nations should be strong not with the size of their territory, but because of the size of their
dreams and ambitions. The strength of a nation should not be measured by weapons of mass destruction and propaganda machines, but by the talent, inspiration and culture of people. The achievements of a country should not be measured by reshaping borders, but by the success of its ordinary people. We need an international order where everyone is important, regardless of how rich or poor, strong or weak, big or small they are. We need leaders who resolve differences peacefully. Powerful people cannot be a symbol of a successful state. Only democratic institutions which effectively serve people are a symbol of success.

The real question today is whether the same generation that brought down the Berlin wall will start building new walls, in the very heart of Europe. The challenges we face are great but so is our strength when we stand united. What all of us share is much more than what separates us. We share the great values of peace, justice, human rights, rule of law, tolerance and humanism. The modern history of Europe is most of all a history of diplomacy, trade and cooperation, not of wars and conflicts. We must address urgent issues, but the only sustainable solution is a peaceful political solution. The only positive development is the inclusive development that brings opportunities for everyone. Success is to give, not to take. Success is to solve, not to freeze conflicts. To prevent future crises, we need unity and we need rules. Solidarity has to be constant. We can’t have strong solidarity on one issue and no solidarity on another. We are a family of shared values with a shared destiny, not a family built on calculations and interests. In a crisis a family does not get confused. In difficult times a family stands together. Today, our joint European project needs an extra dose of trust and support. Let’s give it!

Thank you!