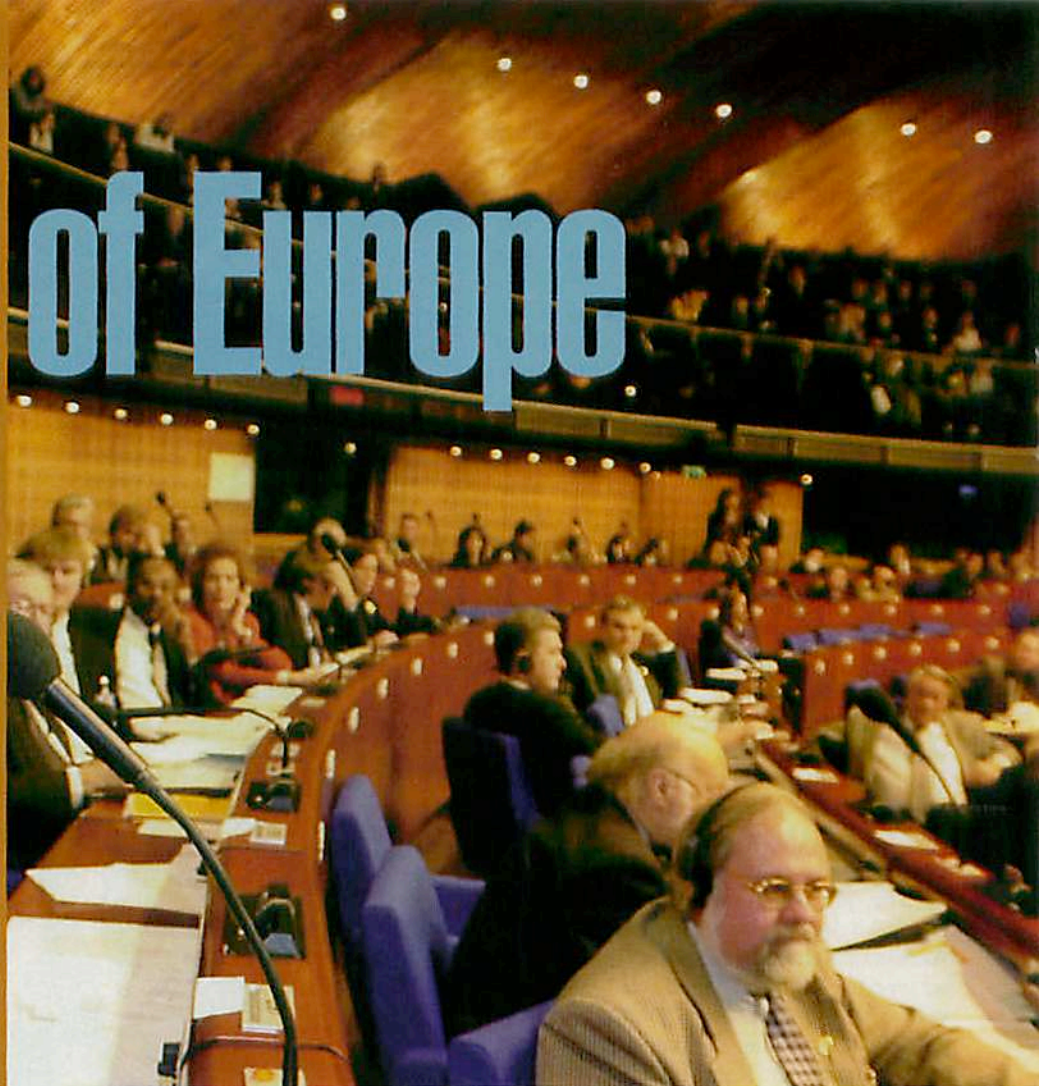


Council of Europe

Parliamentary Assembly of Council of Europe Votes in Favor of Armenia's Membership

By HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN



On June 28, the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) voted unanimously to approve Armenia's bid to join the 41-member organization. Armenia is set to become a full member of the Council of Europe (CE) when its Committee of Ministers meets in September. Azerbaijan's bid was also overwhelmingly accepted, with just one vote against.

Based in the French city of Strasbourg, the Council of Europe is the first pan-European organization. It was established in 1949 by 10 Western European countries. The CE was set up to strengthen democracy, human rights and the rule of law throughout its member states.

While for the first 40 years of its existence it remained a mainly West European institution, since the fall of the USSR, its membership has expanded to over 40. Today, some 800 million people in Europe and former Soviet states have access to the CE's democracy and human rights programs.

The Council of Europe is not a structure of the European Union (EU). While the CE cooperates with the EU and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), in practice, the CE and the EU are "profoundly different institutions," even though 15 EU

countries are members of CE and play a leading role.

Ambassador Christian Ter Stepanian, Armenia's Representative to the Council of Europe, explained to AIM during an interview from Strasbourg the significance of Armenia's membership.

"First, it will help the process of regional cooperation among the three south Caucasus states," he said. "Already, under the auspices of CE, the parliamentary speakers of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia have met several times. The ministers of the three states have also met to discuss mutually concerned issues, such as social and educational issues."

The second area of importance is the technical assistance Armenia will receive from CE. Ter Stepanian explained, "The CE can contribute greatly bringing Armenia's laws in conformity with European norms. This has significant impact on Armenia's integration into European structures and eventually, when the time comes, its membership application to the EU."

And third, Ter Stepanian added, is democracy and protection of human rights. As Armenia's point man in Strasbourg, he explains that already "several Armenian ministries – such as Justice, Interior, Health, Social

Welfare, Culture, Education and Local Administration – are involved with CE committees and programs in implementing structural reforms and protection of citizens' rights." He says, "this will certainly be invaluable for the development of Armenia's state structures and the development of civil society in Armenia."

Indeed, because of Armenia's pending CE membership, many of the country's laws concerning for example, social security, family laws, higher education and cultural policy, have been and are being reassessed. Perhaps the most important aspect of Armenia's membership in the CE would be the "new rights" accorded to the citizens of Armenia. Unlike any other international organization, the CE has a judicial procedure, which allows individuals in each member state to bring actions against governments, if they consider that they are the victims of a violation of the Convention.

"The citizens of Armenia will now be able to apply to the European Court for Human Rights," says Ter Stepanian, adding that since Georgia's membership last year, they have already made 25 applications to the European Court of Human Rights.

Since 1996, when Armenia first applied for

membership and received "guest" status, the road has been an arduous one. "There were two pre-conditions for Armenia's membership," says Ter Stepanian. "Progress in the political solution of the Karabakh conflict and free parliamentary elections in 1998. The face-to-face meetings of Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents reassured the CE that the process toward negotiated settlement of the Karabakh conflict was on its way," he continues. And the free parliamentary elections in 1998, albeit with minor irregularities, "assured the CE that Armenia is serious about membership."

However, the shootings in the National Assembly last October had their own impact on the process of accession. Some CE member states thought Armenia's membership should be delayed, but, then, others thought continuing the process would benefit Armenia more. In fact, a CE delegation visited Armenia in November, a few weeks after the assassination of much of the country's top leadership. They decided in favor of Armenia's admittance. Yet, while Armenia was getting closer to fulfilling CE requirements, Azerbaijan was slow in instituting the necessary legislative reforms. "The general view in the CE was that Armenia and Azerbaijan should be admitted together," explains Ter Stepanian. This presented difficulties for Armenia as there was a tendency among CE members to think that Armenia should wait until Azerbaijan is ready to be admitted.

However, Ter Stepanian says that CE officials thought of another process. They actively got involved in convincing the Azerbaijani leadership that "instead of getting upset over Armenia's imminent membership, they should speed up changes in their legislature and catch up with Armenia faster. In a way, Armenia's readiness encouraged Azerbaijan to become ready sooner than expected," explains Ter Stepanian.

This "new process" satisfied those member states that were in favor of admitting both countries at once. Ter Stepanian believes that had Armenia been recommended for full membership by itself, there might have been difficulties during the final vote of the Committee of Ministers. "Some states, especially Turkey, would have lobbied against Armenia and advocated Azerbaijan's simultaneous admittance," he explains. "Indirectly," he adds, "Armenia's readiness for accession helped Azerbaijan's application as well." Once they are full members, the CE will provide Armenia and Azerbaijan with monitoring mechanisms and technical assistance towards the implementation of the necessary legal and administrative reforms in Armenia and Azerbaijan. ■

Facts on the Council

The Council of Europe has three main bodies:

- **The Committee of Ministers** (a decision making body) is made up of the foreign ministers of all member states - currently 41. It meets twice a year in ordinary sessions and sometimes, when matters arise, on special occasions. The Committee chairman rotates every six months among member states. The Ministers' deputies meet at least once a month and draw up the CE's program of activities and adopt its budget (currently over 1.3 billion French Francs.) It also decides follow-up procedures and presents proposals to the Parliamentary Assembly, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the specialist ministerial conferences that the Council of Europe regularly organizes.
- **The Parliamentary Assembly (PACE)** is the parliamentary organ of the CE consisting of 291 representatives (and an equal number of substitutes) from member states, with an elected President. Currently the president is Lord Russell-Johnston, a British Liberal Democrat and member of the House of Lords. The number of representatives and votes in the Assembly is determined by the size of each country. Armenia will have four representatives (and votes); Azerbaijan will have six, Georgia has five. The maximum number of representatives is 18; the smallest, two. The representatives of each member state are elected by each national or federal parliament or appointed from amongst the members of national parliaments. PACE holds four plenary sessions a year, where a wide range of social issues are debated and recommendations are made to the Committee of Ministers. PACE also plays a significant role in the accession process for new members and in monitoring compliance.
- **The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe** has 291 representatives and 291 substitutes. It is composed of two chambers, one representing local authorities and the other regions. Its function is to strengthen democratic institutions at the local level, and in particular to assist the new democracies.

Some 1500 officials from member states work in the organization's International Secretariat, headed by a Secretary General, who is elected by the Parliamentary Assembly for a five-year term.

Source: Council of Europe.

Council of Europe Priorities:

The Council of Europe pays particular attention to significant social issues and to the protection of citizens of member states.

Human Rights: extends safeguards provided by the European Convention on Human Rights, accelerates judicial procedures and adds to the list of rights, especially concerning national minorities.

Media and Communications: encourages freedom of expression and the free circulation of information.

Social and Economic Issues: establishes guidelines for achieving greater social justice in Europe and better protection for the most vulnerable and the socially excluded.

Education: Transmits democratic values to the youth and prepares them for life in a multilingual and multicultural Europe.

Culture and Heritage: develops a European cultural identity and draws up heritage protection policies.

Sports: promotes sports for all and draws up rigorous ethical principles.

Environment: helps defend the natural environment and organizes information campaigns.

Local and Regional Authorities: strengthens the democratic process and organizes local and regional cooperation.

Legal Issues: modernizes and harmonizes national legislation on issues as diverse as corruption, nationality and bioethics.

Treaties and Conventions

The bases of Council of Europe's activities are more than 160 European conventions, or the equivalent of more than 10,000 bilateral treaties. Among the key conventions are:

- The European Convention on Human Rights, designed to protect individuals' fundamental rights and freedoms.
- The European Social Charter, which lays down 23 fundamental rights for the protection of the family, young workers, trade union rights and social insurance.
- The Convention for the Prevention of Torture which provides for an independent committee with the power to make unannounced visits to places of detention throughout Europe.
- The European Cultural Convention which forms the basis for intergovernmental cooperation in the fields of education, culture, Europe's heritage, sport and youth activities.

Source: Council of Europe.