

Statement by Mr Robert Walter MP

on behalf of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE)

"The IPU at 125: Renewing our commitment to peace and democracy

130th IPU Assembly, Geneva, 19 March 2014

As we all know and celebrate here today, the Inter-Parliamentary Union was formed and held its first meeting in Paris in 1889, with representatives from nine nations, United Kingdom, France, Italy, Belgium, Spain, Denmark, Hungary, the United States, and Liberia.

Seven of those nine countries were from Europe and are just a fraction of today's members of the Council of Europe, who's Parliamentary Assembly I represent here today.

The idea of a united Europe, and of the establishment of some body of representatives of Europe as a whole and competent to speak, perhaps to act, on its behalf, was commonly advanced during the nineteenth century.

Only in the 20th century, however, has that idea taken concrete form - and then not until the First World War had demonstrated its necessity

During and after the Second World War the European idea gained greatly in force as well as the number and authority of its exponents.

Twice during the War, Winston Churchill publicly expressed his conviction that Europe must join together; and on at least one occasion he wrote specifically of a "Council of Europe"

In May of 1948 a Congress was convened at The Hague to discuss and make proposals for a body to represent democratic Europe.

The Congress, in which some 800 Ministers, Members of Parliament and others took part, came out in favour of the creation of a European assembly and of various measures for bringing European policies into line economically, socially and politically, the whole resting on a common acceptance of human rights.

On 5th May, 1949, almost sixty years to day from the formation of the IPU, ten Governments signed in London the Statute of this new body, the Council of Europe.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, which held its first session in August 1949, can be considered the oldest international Parliamentary Assembly with a pluralistic composition of democratically elected members of Parliament established on the basis of an intergovernmental treaty.

Today the Council of Europe represents 47 European nations with democratically elected parliaments and includes both the Russian Federation and Ukraine.

It is for that reason today that I condemn, in the strongest possible terms, Russia's decision to recognise the independence of Crimea, and annex it into the Russian Federation.

This is in violation of the Statute and basic principles of the Council of Europe, as well as with Russia's commitments to the organisation.

All member states of the Council of Europe must respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other states.

Member states must be reminded of the need to respect the rules of the organisations that they join.

It is our duty to remind all our member states of the rules and to speak out over what is unacceptable.

We want to do it in an open and frank discussion.

Two World Wars taught us that imposing a solution is fatally flawed.

Membership of the Council of Europe is based on commitments.

Joining the Council of Europe is a choice, but being a member implies the respect of the rules of the house.

These rules exclude recourse to threats, be they economic or the use of force.

It is a pity that here at this IPU Assembly in Geneva we were unable to express our full support for the territorial integrity and national unity of Ukraine.

We should all strongly condemn the violation by the Russian Federation of the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The actions of Russian military forces in the Crimean peninsula, as well as explicit threats of military actions in the rest of Ukraine's territory, are in direct violation of international law, including the UN Charter, the OSCE Helsinki Final Act, the Statute of the Council of Europe, and of course Russia's accession commitments to those organisations.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe is especially concerned that the Council of Federation authorised the Russian President to use military force in the Crimea and it regrets the statements by both houses of the Russian parliament that supported calls for separatism and secessionism in an already tense region.

The Assembly's Standing Committee has already expressed its full support for the legitimate new authorities in Kyiv and commends them for their restraint.

In order to strengthen national unity and the democratic development of the country, it is now important that as soon as possible a new constitution is adopted that is fully in line with Council of Europe standards and an early presidential election is held, followed by early parliamentary elections when the situation allows.

As we renew our commitment after 125 years to peace and democracy, I hope that the IPU will join with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in standing ready to assist the Ukrainian authorities, and especially the Verkhovna Rada, in this process.