



Parliamentary Practice Project

Legislatures and Citizens

REPORT

Final Regional Conference

VENUE

1-4 April 2004, Budapest, Hungary

Day I

Opening of the conference by Bert Koenders, MP, Chairman of the EWPPP Steering Committee

On behalf of the East-West Parliamentary Practice Project, Mr. Koenders welcomed all participants to the final conference in the framework of the EU-Stability Pact programme *Legislatures and Citizens*. During the mid-term conference in Sofia the first phase of the programme was assessed, which involved roundtable discussions of national legislation and relations between parliament and civil society in each participating country. Since the Sofia conference, the programme expanded to include public forums and regional exchange visits, focusing on common problems and strategies.

Some of the highlights of this second phase of the programme included:

- The visit of a Serbian parliamentary-civil society delegation to Albania, with a return visit to Serbia of an Albanian parliamentary-civil society delegation - the first of its kind
- During the visit of a Croatian parliamentary-civil society delegation to Bosnia, a joint delegation of MPs from the parliament of BH and the Federation Parliament visited the National Assembly of the Republic of Srpska in Banja Luka - also the first such visit

- Public forums with debates on:
 - The law on referenda in Bulgaria
 - The law on free access to information in Serbia
 - Transportation rights for the handicapped in Macedonia
 - The law on the protection of national minorities in Bosnia
 - The education reform bill in Croatia
 - Legislative reform of the electoral system in Romania

Intensive activities within the Legislatures and Citizens programme have fostered contacts between parliamentarians and civil society representatives both within the countries and at the regional level. Comments from participants indicated that what distinguishes the L&C project from others is that contacts have been more open, informal, less diplomatic, and less political – hence, in their view, more successful and fruitful. The exchange visits have been cited as the most beneficial aspect of the programme, giving delegations comprised of civil society representatives and parliamentarians the opportunity to learn first-hand about practices in neighbouring countries and enhancing regional understanding and cooperation.

Mr. Koenders concluded by noting that the aim of this final conference was to evaluate the second phase of the programme, share experiences, best (and worst) practices, and plot a future course which will enable us to continue our work in promoting cooperation between parliament and civil society in Southeastern Europe.

Parliamentary cooperation with civil society: common gaps in resources and know-how throughout the region

The first part of the conference chaired by Bert Koenders and Lord Roper addressed specific gaps in resources and know-how that the project participants had identified in the process, including common approaches to common problems in the region. A parliamentary perspective and an NGO perspective on the issue was presented by representatives of each parliament and each NGO involved in the project. The discussion included the issue of cooperation within the community of NGOs. It was mentioned that educating citizens and parliamentarians is a continuous process. Recent developments in the organization of civil society were elaborated on by conference participants. Matters such as the importance of multi-purpose NGOs and the tendency towards the development of specific-issue NGOs were put into a comparative regional perspective.

Dorel Bahrin, Member of the Parliament of Romania, emphasized that there are still MPs who think that NGOs are not important. Institutional democracy is still missing throughout the region. The development of informal partnerships and relationships has been a very welcomed outcome of this project. Hydajet Hyseni, Member of the Assembly of Kosovo, noted that Parliament-NGO cooperation in Kosovo is done in the framework of the law-making process. However, due to the shortcomings of the constitutional framework, direct relations between MPs and citizens are left out, i.e. citizens in Kosovo do not have the right to undertake legislative initiatives. Goran Danilovic, Member of the Parliament of Montenegro, added that although the opposition parties were boycotting parliament at the time, they were not boycotting NGOs. Their participation in the conference showed their appreciation for the work done by the NGOs both in the country and in the region. NGOs in Montenegro should work towards enhancing their expertise and move away from populist tendencies and political interference.

Regional minimum standards of conduct between Parliaments and civil society

This session was chaired by Jan Dirk Blaauw, The Netherlands. The panel discussion included Makbule Ceko, MP, Deputy Speaker of the Albanian Parliament; Ivo Hristov, Chief Expert, Committee on Legal Affairs, Bulgarian National Assembly; Stevan Lilic, Democratic Centre, Professor of Law, Serbia; and Miodrag Vlahovic, Centre for Democracy and Human Rights, Montenegro

Albania

After 45 years of an oppressive and isolationist communist dictatorship, in 1991 Albania faced a new world of democratic possibilities, with mountains of inherited political, economic and social problems and an institutional infrastructure ill-prepared to face them. Regarding the minimal conditions for cooperation between the nongovernmental sector and the Parliament, the level of this cooperation at present is characterized by:

- Providing assistance in the law-making process: about 40 draft laws have been co-written with NGOs on fields such as justice, public order, human rights, prisoners;
- Providing NGO expertise to parliamentary committees;
- Providing forums for the exchange of views between NGOs and MPs on issues of importance in the country.

The improvement of this cooperation is still important because the Albanian parliament is lacking new experience and has an insufficient and often underqualified staff. The Parliament, in most cases, works with Government experts. Parliament is then paired with the Government, while many good experts and professionals work with NGOs. Changing this landscape is difficult for many reasons. For improvements in the area of cooperation between NGOs and Parliament the following must occur:

- The cooperation between Parliament – Civil Society must be institutionalized on both sides. In this respect it is difficult to provide any guidelines because different methods could be employed.
- The NGOs should have the opportunity to see the Parliament's agenda; the agenda should be made public prior to sessions;
- The Parliament should be obligated to inform the public about draft laws sent for discussion to the Assembly;
- The Parliament should recognize the need for the participation of NGOs in the meetings of the parliamentary committees;
- The Parliament should establish a public information room where civil society representatives can access different materials, information, draft laws, glossaries, etc.;
- The Parliament's website should be improved and updated with information on its activities and that of its members. Such information could include recent development in the following areas:
 - The titles of all draft-laws approved or not approved by Parliament;
 - Important details of the work of Committees;
 - Summaries of the questions and interpellation with the participation of the members of government;
 - Extracts from debates on draft-laws that are important to the public;
 - Texts of all conventions ratified by the Albanian Parliament in the Albanian language.
 - Permanent parliamentary committees and ad-hoc committees must be able to interact on-line with the NGO network;
- Parliamentary staff must also improve their cooperation with civil society organisations.

Also, the leaders of NGOs should be separated from politics, because this cooperation has no value and damages the process. Communication between Parliament and civil society actors would enable better transparency of Parliament's activities and better access to documents which are relevant to citizens. This information will stimulate public debates about parliamentary work and regulations.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The implementation of the regional project "*Legislature and Citizens*" in Bosnia and Herzegovina demonstrates that we have made initial steps in establishing better communication between parliament and civil society. These steps are extremely significant for the further improvement of co-operation between the non-governmental sector and parliaments in BiH. In post-war BiH, it took some time before civil society was thought of in terms of a community need, a society which represents citizens' interests which they, as individuals, can hardly solve.

Non-governmental organisations are not the opposition or someone wanting to change the current government, as is often the opinion of some politicians, but they are needed in society and form constructive assistance to elected officials in solving more efficiently citizens' everyday problems.

With this in mind, the following steps are necessary to improve communication and co-operation:

- Build true partnership between non-governmental organisations and parliaments; it is an indicator of democracy in a majority of so called democratic countries, and especially those in transition.
- Enable participation of interested associations and citizens in plenary sessions of all parliaments as well as in sessions of the working parts of parliaments in which they are interested.
- Regulate, through a procedure book, that each working body have members coming from non-governmental organisations, independent intellectuals, so that the initiatives and specific suggestions of representatives of civil society can be discussed prior to the plenary session of the parliament.
- Citizens' initiatives and specific suggestions in terms of building on and improving existing laws as well as proposals for new laws, should have equal treatment with those initiatives/proposals made by representatives of political parties.
- Public debate procedure on specific legal proposals should be simplified; however, this does not mean that some laws should be passed without public debates and insight from non-governmental organizations.
- All parliaments should have an updated web page where citizens and all other interested parties can find the necessary information regarding parliamentary activities and especially opportunities to find laws that have been adopted or that have entered parliamentary procedure.
- Strengthen "lobbying" practices of NGO representatives via parliamentarians and consider it a way of advocating for achievement of citizens' interests and not something that is opposed to fundamental democratic principles.
- From the perspective of introducing European standards into the BiH legislature, develop a new political culture and create new channels for better co-operation between civil society and parliament through joint public debates on specific legal provisions, joint media presentations on different initiatives and proposals, and constant strengthening of civic initiatives in those processes.

These are just some ways to contribute to the establishment of better co-operation between civil society and parliament; however, the most important is the willingness of elected officials to

advocate for the interests of citizens to whom they should be accountable in their work, in addition to the political parties.

The current situation in BiH is such that we can say we are at the beginning, a very important beginning, and improvement in communication is evident; however, the situation varies in intensity for some non-governmental organisations. A large number of NGOs do not have or have difficulties establishing contacts with parliamentarians, especially if they support initiatives or solutions that do not favour the current political perspective. However, the Centres for Civic Initiatives (CCI) together with the other non-governmental organisations involved in the project, contributed much to the elimination of barriers with regards to the NGO sector, which is always seen as being the opposition. We have succeeded in creating a partnership in the last two years with entity and national parliaments in BiH and have gained a mutual respect, which is, as many have observed, a big step forward in co-operation with elected government representatives.

Specific results have been accomplished, we are currently preparing proposed changes and amendments to certain laws we will initiate in the parliament:

- We have managed to get representatives of civil society to become more and more involved in the working bodies of parliaments, to regularly attend sessions in which we are interested, and also, to create opportunities for citizens to be involved in the work procedure book.
- We have regularly been invited to sessions; often our proposals are equal in status to proposals from those who are authorized to initiate them, and our constant lobbying for the introduction of parliamentary web pages has finally had positive results. Soon our partner parliaments will have web sites which will enable easier access to information for all interested parties.
- We have established a very strong co-operation with key segments of the executive authorities in BiH, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as the Bureau for European Integration BiH, with which we have been co-operating since the beginning of project implementation. Together we organized the roundtable where we discussed the steps that Bosnia and Herzegovina needs to take to become a member of the European Union.

We can conclude that the regional project “Legislature and Citizens” has contributed to improvements in communication between parliaments and civil society, created opportunities to influence legislative reform in BiH, and helped accelerate the process of European integration. We are aware that this is just the beginning of desired co-operation and a good foundation for co-operation to be improved through future activities.

Bulgaria

Interaction between non-governmental organisations and parliaments is one of the main factors in the functioning of a genuine civil society. The very genesis of modern democracy is rooted in the transformation of representative professional associations into bodies of a working civil society that, through parliament, develops and imposes its interests in the form of legislative decisions. However, what is an established standard in developed democracies tends to be but a goal in the ‘so called’ new democracies. In addition to the numerous difficulties arising from the transition from a totalitarian to a democratic society, there is also the serious problem of the relative ‘unrepresentativeness’ of representative institutions of states that are (according to their public claims) democratic.

The Bulgarian social life of the last 15 years has not been any special exception. Intensive developments under conditions of the ‘so called’ *transition* put to the test the presence and the actual efficiency of both the representative democracy and the non-governmental institutions -

most notably, the civil society structures. Interaction between parliament and these structures has had its ups and downs: in the worst case it was simply missing while in the best case it was reduced to co-operation of varying degrees of efficiency when working on different draft laws. All this, however, has produced the positive result of accumulating experience that can now be codified as the basis of efficient future cooperation.

The understanding of the essence and functions of civil society is not to be reduced to the, by now, fossilised cliché that the civil society is the sum total of non-governmental organisations. First, the statement is untrue, and second, non-governmental organisations still have a long way to go in order to prove themselves as the institutional 'texture' of civil society. Parliament and non-governmental organisations need to understand that one cannot operate without the other:

Minimum standards can be summarised in the following way:

- Parliament needs the specialised expertise and support of civil structures;
- Civil structures need to advance their interests in the form of legislative decisions; otherwise they will be incapable of obtaining any real practical results;
- As a consequence of the above, parliament should include in its internal structural acts and, most of all, in the Regulations on the Activities of the National Assembly the obligation to take into account the interests of civil society by means of:
 - Establishing a specialised parliamentary committee as a standing parliamentary body;
 - Obliging all parliamentary committees to consider civil society interests by drafting the respective procedures in the internal structural regulations;
 - Mandatory inclusion of civil expertise in the case of draft laws of considerable public interest;
 - Public sittings of the standing and ad hoc parliamentary committees where civil society representatives can participate not only in the expert discussions but also in drafting specific legislation;
 - Participation of civil organisation experts in public discussions and in working groups comprised of members of the executive, parliament and the specialised parliamentary committees.

Croatia

In order to accomplish the minimum, a permanent and concrete relationship between the parliament, non-governmental organisations and representatives of civil society, a permanent Parliamentary Committee for Co-operation with non-Governmental Organisations should be established. Furthermore, it is necessary to introduce a binding code on inter-relationships between parliament and civil organisations.

The code should contain the following elements:

- The Parliament as an institution, its bodies. and each member of parliament must receive any citizen or civil organisation and listen to their requests
- Civil organisations should have a possibility to participate freely in the work of parliamentary committees and should not be invited to the meetings of parliamentary bodies according to the political criteria of parties in parliament
- Representatives of civil initiatives must unconditionally participate in the work of the parliamentary committees which discuss law proposals or changes of laws, as external members
- The responsibility for the above mentioned co-operation of the parliament with NGOs is taken by the parliamentary committee

- The Committee must establish a calendar of monthly contacts with NGO representatives interested in co-operation with the Parliament
- The Committee must inform the representatives of the media about each activity undertaken by NGOs in the Parliament
- The Parliamentary Committee for co-operation with NGOs must consist of representatives of all parties in the parliament
- The work of the Parliament must be open to the public through an informative and interactive website that will not only contain basic information about the Parliament but also include regularly updated data on discussions of parliamentary bodies about law proposals. The website must provide a possibility for each citizen to enter his/her opinion on issues related to the work of the Parliament. In the Parliament building, there must be a place where every citizen has free access to the Parliament web site.

Macedonia

The experience from the activities carried out within the framework of the East West Parliamentary Practice Project *Legislatures and Citizens Programme* can be divided into three groups, from which one can draw the minimum standards of relations between the parliamentarians and civil society:

1. Experiences of the NGOs in the communication and the implementation of projects with parliamentary groups;
2. Experiences of the parliamentary groups in their communication with the NGOs;
3. Experiences of the citizens, i.e. certain communities which are the targets of this project.

Regarding the experiences of the NGOs with the communication and the implementation of projects with parliamentary groups, the minimum standards that proved to be necessary for communication are:

1. Achieving continuity of projects regardless of the changes in the parliamentary composition:

A solution for this might be if certain parties accept these projects as part of the agenda of their parliamentary groups regardless of the changes in the group's composition.
2. Creating enough awareness about the importance of the initiative:

The awareness building might be the most essential minimum standard, because some of the MPs involved in project activities view their participation as something to be added to their CV or as an opportunity for travel.

In order to avoid these negative effects, more efforts should be made towards briefing the lobbying groups' members or including more frequent meetings at which the importance of the projects will be realized by participants.
3. Maintaining the position that projects need to not only be started but also brought to a conclusion:

This third factor in establishing minimum standards emerges from the first two. If the composition of the lobby groups changes frequently, continuity is not possible, which reinforces the need to create awareness about the importance of the entire initiative.

Regarding the experiences of the parliamentary groups in their communication with the NGOs, the minimum standards that have emerged from working with the members of the parliamentary groups organised for cooperation within this project is:

1. Maintaining contacts and cooperation with the parliaments in the other countries in the region.

There is a need to initiate a greater flow of information regarding each activity and each country involved. More specifically, through alternative forms of communication, not just the regular meetings and conferences.

It has also been suggested that there is a need for greater involvement of the lobby groups in the projects' drafting phase.

According to surveys conducted in Macedonia, as well as a certain atmosphere that emerges from the civil and media context in this country, there is a strong awareness of the position and the possibilities of civil initiatives. However, regarding the experiences of the citizens, i.e. certain communities which are the targets of this project, a minimum standard should be:

1. Creating a strategic marketing plan to overcome the views that, unfortunately, still exist about NGOs, such as: money laundries, political parties' branch offices and a way for certain individuals involved in the civil associations' activities to get rich. These views about NGOs can be overcome with greater publicity, transparency, and increased human interest in determining and implementing the projects. Many of the NGOs in the country either do not have sufficient or have not planned any funds in their overall budgets for promotion and media campaigns for their projects. A strategic marketing plan is an important minimum standard needed to positively influence current existing stereotypes about NGOs.

Montenegro

The nongovernmental sector in Montenegro has significantly strengthened its resources during the past couple of years. Organizationally, expertly, and technically it has reached the ability level to become a strong partner of the Government in strengthening and intensifying reform processes. A nongovernmental initiative embodied in a declaration about cooperation between the Montenegrin Government and nongovernmental organizations, which was proposed by the Center for Democracy and Human Rights for developing nongovernmental organizations in 2002, was not approved and, as result, did not pass. The nongovernmental sector is not taken as a serious partner by the Government, hence most initiatives that are a product of their partnership are motivated only by pressure from the international community. It should be noted though, that through persistence, expertise, and influence the nongovernmental sector in Montenegro did play a significant role in social reforms.

In order to increase the level of cooperation between state institutions and nongovernmental organizations, it is necessary to adopt agreements between the State and the nongovernmental sector in which models of cooperation are defined, as was done by *Compact*, a document of similar content that was adopted by Tony Blair's government in Great Britain.

In the process of inter-sector cooperation and the strengthening of mutual trust, Parliament can play a very encouraging role, considering its significant legislative function. Through that perspective, we should consider reform of the Rules of Parliamentary Procedure, which should encourage civil initiatives instead of suppressing them. I believe that conditions for cooperation between Parliament and the nongovernmental sector should be defined through a few important points. Not fulfilling these conditions would lead us to a situation where possible contacts would only be technical communication, not productive cooperation.

In order to improve the quality of cooperation between the Parliament and the nongovernmental sector, I believe the following is necessary:

- to reach and adopt a declaration of cooperation between the Montenegrin Parliament and the nongovernmental sector,
- to include nongovernmental organizations in preparing the Rules of Parliamentary Procedure,
- to enable the presence and participation of representatives of interested nongovernmental organizations in the work of parliamentary boards
- to improve the Rules of Parliamentary Procedure by making those boards professional and efficient,
- to regularly provide information about legal projects which are placed in parliamentary procedure by parliamentary services.

I believe that fulfilling these conditions would significantly improve the quality of the reform processes, as well as accelerate the improvement of relations among other state bodies and Montenegrin nongovernmental organizations.

Romania

It can be said that the relationship between the Parliament and civil society in Romania has been continuously improving over the last several years. There are some examples of MPs working with NGOs in drafting and promoting laws which are very important. Probably the most spectacular example refers to the Freedom Of Information Act (Law no.544/2001 regarding the free access to information of public interest) which was a result of good cooperation between MPs and 8 NGOs from the time the bill was drafted until the law was adopted by the chambers of Parliament. Another example is the Constitutional review process. An important number of articles from the new Constitution reflect the will and proposals of civil society (for example, the article regulating citizens' legislative initiative). Also, the entire consultation process was run under the official partnership between the Chamber of Deputies of the Romanian Parliament and an NGO, Asociatia Pro Democratia. The law which regulates the activity of political parties, the law on political party financing, and the law on the transparency of the public administration's activity (all three adopted in 2003) are also good examples of NGO involvement in the legislative process.

However, the cooperation between the two sides is still far from ideal. The examples mentioned above are the result of the will and ability to use the expertise of NGOs by a few MPs.

The development of the "*Legislatures and Citizens*" project confirmed the fact that the obstacles that make the relationship between the Parliament and civil society so weak are more cultural ones than a lack of know-how or resources. The main consensus in Parliament seems to be not to trust NGOs. They consider themselves and their colleagues entitled to adopt laws and other decisions without consulting anyone outside the Parliament, since they represent the nation. Most of the NGOs acting in the democracy and human rights field (for instance) are perceived by many MPs as associated with various political forces and this aspect is enough for them to reject any cooperation. In addition, cooperation with civil society might result in a more complicated legislative process, and for many MPs this is more important than the fact that the results of their work might be better.

On the other hand, even though an improvement of the NGOs' abilities in lobbying for some pieces of legislation is evident, there are still many wrong approaches. There are still approaches which have or seem to have partisan connotations and this is one of the main

factors that make at least some of the MPs reject the influence of those NGOs. In addition, cases where NGOs consider themselves more professional in their field of activity and unwilling to change their positions also occur. Obviously, this attitude represents a very serious obstacle in any attempt towards cooperation.

The situation has positively evolved during the last couple of years. The more concrete and positive results are obtained, the easier and faster the attitudes of skeptics will change. The MPs and NGO representatives who have had a positive experience working with each other should disseminate their success stories and promote the concept of cooperation between the Parliament and civil society.

Serbia

Within the general framework of promoting citizens' legislative initiatives in South-Eastern European democracies in transition, particular emphasis should be made on cooperation between parliaments and non-governmental organizations.

In this context, in order to establish good working relationship between the National Parliament of Serbia and Serbian NGOs, it is important to point out several key preconditions that should be met:

- particularly both politically and constitutionally the Serbian Parliament, as an institution that enjoys the status of the most important popular representative body, must rest on the premise of a high level of transparency in the legislative and related decision-making processes.
- The activities of Parliament must also rest on a high level of accessibility of all necessary information needed for the public at large to monitor its work. As representative of the civil open society, Serbian non-governmental organizations must have monitoring access to all stages of the legislative process, including the procedure of preparing bills and drafts that are of special interest to the public, from the aspect of implementing fundamental human rights (e.g. freedom of information, the ombudsperson, etc). This should ally to all stages of public and parliamentary discussions.
- In order to perform their public function in an efficient way, non-governmental organizations in Serbia, particularly those which are active in the field of promoting public awareness on sensitive legal and social issues (e.g. human rights, European integration and standards, vulnerable group interests, anti-discrimination campaigns, equal opportunity and minority rights, etc.) must establish minimum conditions of cooperation with the Parliament.
- Conditions that define cooperation between the Parliament and NGOs in Serbia should rest on mutual confidence and transparency, and should primarily include informing the NGOs in due time which bills are in the process of being drafted and when they are planned to be on the agenda of the respective parliamentary committees and Parliament itself.
- Information to the NGOs should be provided as to which experts and working bodies are engaged in the drafting of a particular bill, which methodology is being used, as well as which foreign experience the draft might refer to and why.
- Serbian NGOs could provide assistance and consultancy in various stages during the preparation of the draft (as was the case in drafting the Law on Local Self-Government) or open public and expert debates on issues concerning future legislation (as was the case of debating the issues regarding legislation on the free access to public information).

- An important technical aspect of the cooperation between the Parliament and Serbian NGOs is the need for regular and constant access to sessions of respective parliamentary committees with general or limited active participation of NGO representatives. Committee members and NGO experts and members could debate respective drafts, as well as other issues of interest to the Civil Sector. During the joint sessions, the NGOs could also assist in articulating and formatting public opinion and public interest in the drafting process. Also, if the authors of the bill, the committee and the NGOs agree on the substance of the issue, joint public awareness campaigns could be organized in which the experience of the NGOs could play a significant role.

From the previous work with Serbian parliamentarians we have learned that there are some problems that hinder a more efficient cooperation between the Serbian Parliament and NGOs. The principal objection was that public debate and committee discussions regarding presented bills could not be planned, as the Parliament itself was not able to control the time frame as to when a bill was to be put on the agenda. On the other hand, some NGOs decided to work on a certain bill without taking into consideration whether the conditions were ripe for such a bill to be put on the parliamentary agenda. Also, it was a rather regular feature that when NGOs decided to prepare a draft, they did not consult with government experts on the matter, nor did they consult with the political parties represented in Parliament.

Seriously taking these and other indicators that stand in the way of up-grading cooperation between Parliament and NGOs in Serbia into account, and particularly taking into account previous experience, the following should be considered:

- There is the need for regular meetings between representatives of NGOs and parliamentarians. Both sides should discuss issues concerning different problems and try to find solutions that could satisfy all parties concerned.
- There is the need for mutual coordination between the NGOs involved in the work of Parliament. Experience shows that different NGOs often work on the same topics; as a result, several drafts are simultaneously in circulation.
- There is need for coordination with international organizations (e.g. OSCE, Council of Europe, USAid) that can offer consultancy, technical and financial support in specific cases of preparing drafts (e.g. conflict of interest, free access to information, ombudsperson, opening of secret police dossiers, etc.).

Cooperation between the Serbian Parliament and NGOs has to be examined and channeled in such a way that it can contribute to the articulation of public interests in the legislative process that would not only be technically efficient, but also sustain fundamental democratic values and procedures. From the current point of view this means that cooperation between parliamentarians and representatives of NGOs in Serbia should be put in a perspective and framework of activity which would, on the one hand, have all the advantages of substantial and procedural coordination in preparing, drafting and campaigning for new legislation, but on the other, not jeopardise fundamental democratic values by giving credibility and legitimacy to extreme rightist and nationalist political opinions. A project regarding the minimal standards of cooperation between Parliament and NGOs in Serbia would have a difficult, but rewarding task of setting standards regarding solutions to issues that at present seem more to divide than to join various social forces in surpassing the institutional crisis with which Serbia is currently faced.

Day II

Regional Cooperation and EU Integration: EU models of coordination and cooperation

This session was chaired by Lord Roper, United Kingdom. The panel included Zekeriya Akcam, Member of Parliament, Turkey; Professor Gabriel Fragniere, Former Rector of the College of Europe, Belgium; and Otto Vos, former Member of Parliament, The Netherlands

The project “Legislatures and Citizens” has offered both partnership and possibilities to develop new relations among its participants. This new partnership can help prevent new conflicts and on the more difficult side, change our mentality. Professor Fragniere emphasized that relations between legislatures and citizens are still evolving even within the European Union. The European Union has identified political objectives and is including new countries. In a European context, citizens exist since the Treaty of Maastricht, where European citizens were granted their right to propose new legislation. Although EU citizens are subject to EU legislation, it is not clear for them how and where to act as a pressure group.

Dusan Prorokovic, Member of the Serbian Parliament, noted that the gap between the generations is becoming an obstacle in establishing new relations with neighboring countries. This conflict of concepts will not allow for Belgrade to join the EU through Zagreb, or for Skopje to join the EU through Belgrade. However, Danijel Pantic of the European Movement in Serbia disagrees- contrary to what some politicians claim, regional cooperation will bring the Balkan countries closer to the EU. If the Balkan countries agree on a modus vivendi, they could join the EU more quickly. Promoting good economic relations in the Balkans would help in this direction. Fatmir Mediu, Member of the Albanian Parliament, pointed out that many aspects of European integration concerning the Copenhagen criteria, the negotiations of the Stabilization and Association Process and *acquis communautaire* are not very well known. The Balkans should build an integration structure which will help its move towards the EU.

Other participants agreed that EU integration is a political matter, which is illustrated further by the case of Turkey. Zekeriya Akcam, Member of the Turkish Parliament, pointed out that taking a cue from Turkey’s experience, the Balkan countries should avoid social engineering, injection of ready made models and putting EU matters on a higher agenda than domestic issues.

Concluding remarks

An important impact of this project has been the trust and responsibility invested in local NGOs during project implementation. Local NGO partners were free to determine their in-country agenda in cooperation with the Local Consultative Committee in Parliament.

It was also concluded that there is still a lot which can be done in order to increase parliament’s public outreach.

During the Legislatures and Citizens regional working meeting, held in Tirana, Albania, from 5-7 September, ideas for a follow-up to the L&C programme after its completion in 2004 were discussed.

A summary of the recommendations included:

- To establish institutional cooperation/code of conduct between parliament and citizens at the regional level by recommending minimum procedures and standards for cooperation;

- To set up a Legislatures and Citizens standing regional conference on cooperation between parliament and NGOs:
- To establish standards of good legislative practice at the domestic and regional level;
- To develop concrete projects aimed at connecting MPs with citizens, constituents through educating citizens about the legislative process, referenda, civil society monitoring of the implementation of legislation, and promoting citizen participation in the decision making process.

Petra Blass of the Stability Pact Coordinator's Office concluded that this project should continue in the region of Southeastern Europe. A very good result of this project has been its long-term regional dimension. Other regional MPs agreed that EU involvement in the Balkans should not come to an end. The Balkans has a lot to learn about integration, after having shown that disintegration can only lead to war. The East-East component of this project has proven very useful for all sides involved. A standing regional conference would really fill in the gap in this direction.

Lord Roper expressed his gratitude to the EU and the Netherlands, which have produced the resources that made this project possible. Cooperation between parliaments and civil society in the region are good for both sides: a lot can be gained. Although elements of potential conflicts are still present, these challenges will be faced by those who serve our citizens. Problems of transition can be seen everywhere and are common to all the countries involved. A democracy requires a "demos": without the people and their engagement in public life we will not be able to achieve democracy. Lord Roper added that we have to continue to build/rebuild bridges between countries that have grown apart.