

OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting

Warsaw, 24 September – 5 October 2007

Working Session 14 “Democratic Institutions” –

Democracy at the national, regional and local levels

Contribution of the Council of Europe¹

**SUMMARY DESCRIPTION OF THE DEPARTMENT OF
DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION
(PART OF THE DIRECTORATE OF DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS OF THE
COUNCIL OF EUROPE^{[11](#)})**

The programmes outlined below respond directly to the underlying theme of the Council of Europe's Programme of Activities of 2008, i.e. “the promotion of democracy by strengthening the role of civil society in democratic processes and at the same time continuing to support the promotion and protection of human rights and the promotion of the rule of law” (CM(2007)49). This sector of the Council of Europe programme introduces the assistance and co-operation dimensions to the pluridisciplinary approach of the Programme of Activities. Political priorities of the programme include the strengthening of democratic culture in all of Europe and, for certain activities, to promote intercultural and interreligious dialogue. South East Europe, the South Caucasus, Russia and Ukraine, as well as Belarus are the geographical priorities of the first two sections of the programme described below.

1. RELATIONS WITH INTERNATIONAL NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

Relations with INGOs focus on the promotion of co-operation between the Council of Europe and the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe in a spirit of mutual interest to strengthen democratic stability through an active and responsible civil society.

The Council of Europe has developed fruitful relations with NGOs since the introduction

¹ Established by the Directorate of Democratic Institutions, Directorate General of Democracy and Political Affairs.

of a consultative status for INGOs in 1952 (changed to participatory status in 2003, cf. Resolution (2003)8 of 19 November 2003). This status has enabled INGOs to increase active participation in the policies and work programme of the Council of Europe, and to reinforce co-operation between the Council of Europe and the various associations in member states. The 400 INGOs enjoying participatory status constitute, since 2005, the Conference of INGOs which represents civil society in the “quadrilogue” with the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities.

Current priorities of the Conference of INGOs include participatory democracy, NGO legislation, Human Rights defenders, intercultural dialogue and the fight against poverty. It co-operates closely with the concerned departments (e.g. the Directorate General of Human Rights and Legal Affairs, the Co-ordinator for Intercultural Dialogue), the institutions of the Council of Europe (e.g. the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, the Commissioner for Human Rights) and the stakeholders of the Council of Europe (e.g. political parties, NGOs, think tanks) who regularly participate in events held in Strasbourg and activities carried out in the member states.

2. SUPPORT TO CIVIL SOCIETY INITIATIVES

Activities in the programme “Support to Civil Society Initiatives” mainly seek to reinforce the role of NGOs in a pluralist democracy by increasing dialogue and co-operation between NGOs and public authorities in policy making and by strengthening democratic accountability, transparency and local ownership through the participation of civil society in political processes. The project also addresses the function of NGOs in democratic society in terms of conflict resolution, reconciliation, as well as intercultural dialogue.

The Conference of INGOs is actively involved in the implementation of activities of the programme Civil Society Initiatives, thus giving a European dimension to national activities and contributing to the creation of regional networks of NGOs. The First Regional NGO Congress in Warsaw in March 2006 illustrates the active role of the Conference of INGOs. The second Regional NGO Congress is scheduled for November 2007 in Kyiv, with discussions to continue on major themes as the role of civil society for democracy, NGO legislation and the situation of civil society in the region.

The programme Civil Society Initiatives also benefits extensively from the experience and Network of the Schools of Political Studies which the Council of Europe supports in different countries in the Balkans, South East Europe and the Southern Caucasus.

3. GOOD GOVERNANCE IN THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

AD HOC COMMITTEE ON E-DEMOCRACY

In May 2006, the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers decided to establish an ad hoc committee on e-democracy (CAHDE). The committee will examine developments on

e-democracy/e-participation at European and international level, including government-to-citizen and citizen-to-citizen communication and interaction, with a view to identifying political, social, ethical, legislative and technological issues and their interdependence, as well as examples of emerging good practice which could be of interest to member states, and to elaborating definitions of key terms in this field. CAHDE, by looking beyond the widely addressed field of e-Government, fills a gap in intergovernmental work by examining the potential of ICTs to facilitate democratic practice.

The Ad Hoc Committee on E-Democracy (CAHDE) works in co-operation with other Council of Europe sectors, in particular the Steering Committee on the Media and New Communication Services (CDMC).

On 23-24 April 2007, CAHDE organised an e-democracy symposium which attracted close to 100 participants. Going beyond mapping the range and take-up of e-democracy initiatives, the Symposium provided a cross-national consideration of how new technologies might be changing the relationship between public authorities and the citizenry.

RECOMMENDATION ON E-VOTING

An intergovernmental meeting, held in November 2006, to review developments in the field of electronic voting (e-voting) since the adoption of Committee of Ministers' Recommendation Rec(2004)11 on legal, operational and technical standards for e-voting in two years earlier has reconfirmed that the Recommendation has become accepted by member states as a valid and currently the only internationally agreed benchmark by which to assess and evaluate e-voting systems. Subjects that require further research and attention in this field include the accreditation and certification of e-voting systems, the development of guidelines on the observation of e-enabled elections and the need for codes of conduct for e-campaigning. The next two-year review meeting is scheduled for 2008.

RECOMMENDATION ON E-GOVERNANCE

The Council of Europe has adopted a recommendation on electronic governance ("e-governance" - Rec(2004)15) of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers to member states) and is continuously following developments regarding e-governance and e-government, inter alia by taking part in the follow-up meetings to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and in particular the WSIS action line C7a on e-government.

4. THE FORUM FOR THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

At their 3rd Summit, held in Warsaw from 16 to 17 May 2005, the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe decided to establish, a Council of Europe Forum for the Future of Democracy to strengthen democracy, political freedoms and citizens'

participation. The Forum is open to all member states and civil society, represented by policymakers, officials, practitioners or academics. It shall enable the exchange of ideas, information and examples of best practices, as well as discussions on possible future action. The Forum acts in close co-operation with the Venice Commission and other relevant Council of Europe bodies with a view to enhancing, through its reflection and proposals, the Organisation's work in the field of democracy.

The Forum process should support the development of proposals that address the different challenges to democracy in Europe. Each Forum meeting will deal with one main theme.

At the launch meeting of the Forum held in Warsaw from 3 to 4 November 2005 the main theme was citizen participation. The second Forum session, on "The Role of Political Parties in the Building of Democracy", took place in Moscow in October 2006. In June 2007, the third Forum was organised in Stockholm/Sigtuna, Sweden, on "Power and Empowerment – the interdependence of democracy and human rights". The theme proposed by the host government of the 4th Forum session which is scheduled to take place in Madrid, from 15 to 17 October 2008, is e-governance and e-democracy. Ukraine and Armenia have expressed their willingness to host the Forum in the two subsequent years.

The Forum for the Future of Democracy is an inclusive process under the auspices of the Council of Europe, associating all main stakeholders of a genuine democratic society (parliaments, governments, local and regional authorities, civil society, media and academia) as well as international partners, aimed at the promotion of democracy at all levels across the continent and furthering pan-European reflection on its multifarious aspects. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the Committee of Ministers, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe, the INGO Conference and the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) play a leading role in this ongoing process and are represented on the FFD Advisory Board. As each session's theme is different, the Forum involves different intergovernmental bodies in its work each year.

^[1] The Department of Democratic Participation is part of the Directorate of Democratic Institutions within the Directorate General for Democracy and Political Affairs. Please note that DGDPA also has other democracy related programmes such as the Summer University for Democracy and its related Schools of Political Studies.