



ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE
Mission to Serbia and Montenegro

The Head of Mission

“The role of the Parliaments in the development of European democracy” (Belgrade 28 May 2004)

1) I shall start with a quotation by Karl Popper, who wrote that “*democracy is the word for something that does not exist*”. He probably meant that the people (demos) cannot rule (kratia).

“Direct democracy” as we knew it in those city-states of ancient Greece ceased to be a realistic political model a long time ago. If we were to follow Popper’s line of reasoning, the best we can expect for our modern societies, is some approximation to such “rule of people” condition.

There is no doubt that the closest approximation to the ideal of democracy is “representative democracy”.

The development of the Parliament as an institution and the evolution of modern democracy as a form of government (the best possible, or at least the “least worst” as Winston Churchill used to say) are intertwined. As a matter of fact, democracy is based on two key elements: political participation and pluralistic opposition. What institution other than the Parliament can better embody these two elements? The Parliament synthesizes these two elements in the concept of **political representation**. Whereas under non-democratic regimes there is no real political representation and power remains an exclusive preserve of a narrow circle of people (or even one man) and parliaments are reduced to mere rubber stamps of decisions taken elsewhere, democratic societies are based on genuine political representation.

The liberal state in XIX century Europe introduced the concept of “limited” political representation (voting rights were granted only to certain social groups). It was only with the affirmation of modern democracy in the XX century that universal and equal suffrage (one man one vote) was established. This principle is today well consolidated in all European democracies and has become increasingly widespread also outside the so-called Western world.

Political representation is not to be confused with political representativity (which is the relationship between the composition of the elected body and specific political, social, ethnic groups). Representatives elected to Parliament do not (or not supposed to) act narrowly on behalf of the specific individuals or groups who voted for them, but rather frame their political action in the broader, general interest of the country.

2) The development of Parliaments is also connected with the concept of **political accountability**. First, through parliamentary elections, voters are periodically offered the chance to express a judgement on how “their” elected representatives have performed. Moreover, together with the power to legislate and the power of the “purse” (the adoption of national budgets), parliaments have, in fact, a third fundamental function, i.e. a function of control over the executives. Parliaments can vote non confidence motions against “failed” governments, start impeachment procedures against Presidents who violated the Constitution; set up enquiry commissions to shed light on specific matters; monitor and oversee security services, the military and police.

Such a counterbalancing role (vis-a-vis the executive) of the Parliament is part of a broader concept, the concept of “**division of powers**”. Established gradually since the XVIII century, under pressure by the bourgeoisie in its struggle against absolutism, the division of powers has, thanks to the theoretical contributions of John Locke and Montesquieu, become a central part of the Europe’s democratic theory and, gradually, a central feature of European democratic constitutions. Thanks to division of powers and the introduction within our constitutions of institutional arrangements based on “checks and balances”, parliaments can secure both vertical accountability (accountability of the institutions vis-à-vis the voters) as well as horizontal accountability (accountability among different institutions and branches of power). **Political accountability and divisions of powers , based on strong parliament and independent judiciary, are the basic preconditions to establish rule of law, to guarantee individual freedom, human and minority rights, to provide equal opportunities for the largest number of people.**

3) Democracy is by definition a **dynamic concept and open-ended process**. It is in constant evolution and it will always be, in practice, a sort of “unfinished business”. Such dynamism has also affected over time the role and functions of parliaments. In modern and complex democracies, much of our problems are either too small or too big for national parliaments to solve. For that reason, in Europe, there has been a vast amount of experimentation with devolution of decisions to smaller units or to international or supranational units, such as the European Union. On the one hand, the principle of subsidiarity (according to which decisions should be taken at the closest possible level to the citizens) has empowered local governments and assemblies; on the other hand, the process of European integration has empowered a supranational European Parliament which since June 1979 is directly elected (every five years) by the European population, co-decides together with the Council of the EU governments on an increasing number of matters affecting our daily life, approves the European Union’s budget and has the right, as we have already experienced, to vote down the European executive (Commission). Rather than harming national Parliaments these developments a) enhance and help to better focus their institutional role at the national level; and b) further consolidate the concept of representative democracy, which has been extended to sub-national and supranational levels.

National Parliaments have been called to play an increasingly active role also within the European Union. They are responsible for the adoption of the relevant EU legislation ,

for the ratification of the process of EU enlargement and of the new European Constitution. **Pro-active and fully functioning Parliaments – at State Union and republican levels – are a key factor for the positive development of the process of Serbia Montenegro’s integration into the European Union.**

In addition to the EU, most of international, intergovernmental organizations, from the Council of Europe, to OSCE and NATO, have also created their own Assemblies/parliamentary dimensions. Inter-parliamentary activity at all levels and in different fora has proved to be a precious tool of dialogue among different countries and cultures in the search for common solutions to common problems and in the attempt to bring the international decision-making closer to their citizens.

4) We need to focus also on the quality of democracy and of democratic processes. Not everything goes well in the functioning of our democratic societies. This is true in both mature democracies and emerging democracies. Political apathy and disenchantment with politics especially among young people often reflects in low voters’ turnout and distrust vis-à-vis democratic institutions and political parties. Such trend needs to be reversed. We need to believe in the central and irreplaceable role of democratic institutions, starting from the Parliament. **Democracy - as I said at the beginning - is based on political representation and active political participation. This is a message I want to convey particularly to you on the eve of such important elections, such as the upcoming Serbian presidential elections in June: get out and vote and contribute to the political outcome that will affect your lives and the future of your country. If you don’t vote you will be a passive acceptor of decisions taken by those you did not choose.**

A lot has also been said about the need for national Parliaments to adapt to the changing realities imposed by economic globalization and transnational politics whose speed and pervasiveness risk sometimes to sideline traditional institutions at the national level, including the national Parliaments. I believe that the best response that national Parliaments can offer to today’s challenges related to globalization lies in one word, **”openness”**. **Parliaments and parliamentarians need to open themselves up, to be closer to their citizens, to communicate with them, in order to better understand a rapidly changing world, the new needs and demands of an increasingly complex society.** Parliaments should invest more resources to inform the public and communicate, to sell their ideas. **The OSCE mission in Serbia Montenegro is actively supporting the idea of improving communication between the Parliaments of this country and their public and we shall continue to do so.** Today’s initiative is a concrete example of our commitment. We are convinced that people’s identification with political processes and their active participation to political life will be enhanced by greater openness, adequate information and communication. It should be clear, however, that our support to parliamentary openness cannot be a substitute for parliamentarians’ direct contacts with their constituents, and for moderate, mature and responsible behavior by political representatives serving in the three different Parliaments of your country.

5) September 11/2001 in the United States and March 11/2004 in Spain have dramatically changed our lives. They demonstrated how vulnerable our societies are to the threat of **international terrorism**. Terrorism is a major threat to our security and our democracy. We have no choice but to fight it if we want to preserve democracy. **National Parliaments as major “guardians” of democracy can and should play a crucial role in our common anti-terror struggle.** How? By ratifying the UN Conventions against terrorism; adopting “ad hoc” legislation; monitoring the intelligence and security services; voting the budgets for the purchase of anti-terrorist equipment; deciding, when necessary, on the deployment of troops abroad. No successful fight against terrorism will be possible without a pro-active and responsible attitude of national Parliaments.

6) Democracy today more than ever should be able to count on the active political participation of its **youth**. Young people need to have a say in the political process; their contribution to the elaboration and circulation of ideas is not only valuable, but also essential to nurture political debate in our democratic societies. We need to encourage the closest possible relationship between young generations, students and national institutions. We also need to help young people in this country to familiarize themselves with parliaments and institutions of other European countries, to learn from others’ experiences through the European Youth Parliament and other existing channels. The OSCE Mission in SaM is ready to help. This is also the spirit of today’s initiative that the OSCE felt necessary to support and for whose concrete realization we want to thank warmly the leadership of the State Union Parliament and, particularly, Mr. Sami. Thank you very much.