

AS/Inf/ParlConf (2004) 1

« EUROPE OF CITIZENS »  
Parliaments and participation of citizens

**Contribution**

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## 1. To What Extent Our Democracy is Democratic?

Russia is an organic part of the democratic Europe and European civilization. Naturally, we have our own features and traditions, as well as any other European countries, but centuries of coexistence on the continent brought us together both historically and spiritually. We have a common fate and a common route for development.

Over 10 years of intensive state transformations the democratic principles set forth in the 1993 Constitution became a reality of our life. The route of development of the Russian civil society in many aspects coincides with the broad avenue of movement of Europe.

In recent years Russian legislators have placed a special focus on establishment of a consolidated domain of law. To address this task we actively use both our own experience and numerous European standards in state, legal, social, economic, cultural and other areas of life. Primarily, this refers to human and civil rights. The Russian Federation has already accumulated significant experience in exercise of rights to free education and medical care. Over the past few years Russia has implemented state, federal, municipal, judicial and administrative reforms, as well as reforms in the area of voting rights and public service.

The Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation has made its major contribution to resolving these issues. The Federation Council and the State Duma - two houses of the Russian Parliament vested with equal rights – maintain day-to-day communications with government authorities of the subjects of the Russian Federation and with the public.

Both domestic and international experience evidences that in the rapidly changing world the parliament as other democratic institutions cannot pause in its development. On-going and focused efforts need to be made to improve forms and methods of implementation of constitutional powers of the parliament, its interaction with all bodies of state power, local self-governments and institutions of civil society.

The Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation possesses a significant amount of authorities in such areas as providing for constitutional and general legality, rule of law, stability of federal and national relations, as well as of political and territorial arrangement of Russia.

The two-house system proves to be much more efficient for Russia than the single-house one. It gives the Parliament and the entire system of state power that degree of stability which is prerequisite for such big and multinational country as Russia. At the same time this system provides the federal center with maximum possible outreach to regional issues and interests.

More active representatives of the civil society acting through political parties, associations of voters and public movements are involved in the political life of the country and become parliamentarians at local, regional and federal levels and exercise direct influence on the contents of bills approved with their participation.

The more important regulatory and legislative bills are published in periodicals for public discussions. The Constitution of the Russian Federation and various constitutions (charters) of subjects of the Federation were discussed in such manner by the public in the past. Comments and proposals submitted in the process were summarized and appropriate amendments were made to relevant bills based thereon.

In general, now one can speak about optimization of the mechanism for interaction of citizens with state power bodies. Administrative justice will soon emerge in Russia to consolidate direct links between citizens and authorities and to accelerate settlement of any potential conflicts between them.

## **2. Modern Technologies and Democratic Procedures. Problems of Electronic Democracy**

Four years ago Russia became a signatory to the Okinawa Charter of global information society. The state took an obligation to provide incentives for Russia's transition to information society, to contribute to information technologies becoming a tool for sustained economic growth, improvement of public welfare, stimulus for social accord, consolidation of democracy, creation of a system for transparent and responsible rule of the society.

"Electronic democracy", establishment of which should be promoted by the Federal Target Program "Electronic Russia 2002-2010", is an important component of the information society.

"Electronic democracy" means use of information technologies for promotion of fundamental democratic values, primarily, for ensuring participation of citizens in the decision-taking process of government authorities.

We view "electronic democracy" not as just interaction of citizens with power bodies, but also the entire sphere of the civil society where in the process of communication a public opinion emerges to which the state must be receptive.

Internet is a modern communication medium where network interaction of individuals, organizations and institutions evolves. In Russia Internet users are generally young, active, educated and success-driven people who have adjusted to economic and political realities of the modern world.

The resource base of the political segment of Internet in Russia by different estimates varies from 0.5 % to 1% of the total resources of the net. Nevertheless, most of subjects of Russia's political specter are represented there.

Both houses of the Russian Parliament – the Federation Council ([www.council.gov.ru](http://www.council.gov.ru)) and the State Duma ([www.duma.gov.ru](http://www.duma.gov.ru)) - have their own web-sites which contain detailed information about the history, composition and current activities of the Parliament. Besides, many members of the Federation Council and deputies of the State Duma have their personal web-sites

Leaders of the Houses perceive the importance of promoting the Parliament's presence in the network and pay a lot of attention to development of the parliamentary internet-resources, turning such resources into an efficient tool for interaction with citizens. A special focus here is made on improvement of feedback mechanisms.

The state, and in particular the Federation Council, makes significant efforts to improve political activity of citizens, to consolidate institutions of the civil society, to promote democratic political culture.

As per expert estimates, by 2005 the number of Internet users in Russia may increase 8-fold. All higher educational institutions will be connected to Internet, and by 2010 all secondary educational institutions will have Internet access. And the cost of Internet services by 2005 should reduce by half.

There are all grounds to believe that implementation of projects pursued under the Electronic Russia program will result in creation of a solid foundation for a full-fledged system of Russian "electronic democracy".

### **3. Cooperation with National Parliaments and Inter-parliamentary Assemblies of Europe**

Cooperation between parliaments is certainly a priority area of activities of Federation Council. Over decade this cooperation has lived through three major stages of its development, each stage having its own specifics.

The transition period, as defined by the Constitution of the Russian Federation, from 1993 till 1995 resulted in the accession of the Russian Federation to the Council of Europe and commencement of activities of Russian parliamentarians in the Parliament Assembly of the Council of Europe. New inter-parliamentary structures, in particular, the Parliament Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation and the Inter-parliamentary Assembly of the Commonwealth of Independent States were established at the initiative and with participation of Russian parliamentarians.

New inter-parliamentary structures were established and experience of cooperation and interaction with international parliament organizations was accumulated in the period from 1996 till 2001.

2001 ushered in a new stage where cooperation of the Federation Council with virtually all international parliamentary organization was brought up to a new quality level. This was made possible due to active efforts made by delegations of the Federation Council in all areas both of bilateral and multilateral cooperation between parliaments. Russian parliamentarians easily became a part of the processes of consolidation of security and stability in the European Continent.

Member-states of all international parliament organizations of Europe are united by common historic and humanitarian values, by the desire to strengthen and promote links between the citizens to expand interaction in political, economic, legal and humanitarian areas. We are also brought together by shared principles and approaches to democratic values and freedoms, supremacy of human rights, including the right to freedom of movement.

The active involvement of Russian representatives in joint sessions of PACE and the European Parliament, their panels and commissions including in the activities of the Committee of Parliament Cooperation Russia-European Union is of particularly importance in this respect. From the point of view of development of democracy in the Pan-European space, participation of Russian representatives in the work of Inter-parliamentary Union, Parliament Assembly of NATO, Parliamentary Assembly of Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, European Parliament, Northern Council and other international organizations is of equal importance.

To promote inter-parliamentary relations the Federation Council itself entered in 36 agreements with parliaments of foreign states or upper houses of the same. Dynamic and stable nature of interaction of parliamentarians under the umbrella of international parliament organizations is the necessary component of deepening of current dialogue and joint search for responses to new challenges and threats of the modern age.

Only by joining our efforts we'll be able to find efficient approaches to resolve such pressing global problems as struggle against terrorism, incidents of extremism, racism, intolerance, respect of human rights in conflict areas. However, the ultimate success will certainly depend on the political will of all member-states of international parliament organizations, their willingness to create indivisible common European space with universal democratic principles and rules.