



## Resolution 1353 (2003)<sup>1</sup>

# Future of democracy: strengthening democratic institutions

## Parliamentary Assembly

1. Parliamentary democracy is one of the values that are the basis of, and reason for, the Council of Europe's work towards greater European unity. By reaffirming their devotion to the ideals and values that are the common heritage of their peoples and the true source of individual freedom, political liberty and the rule of law - principles which form the basis of all genuine democracy - all member states have committed themselves under the Statute of the Council of Europe to guaranteeing free and pluralist parliamentary democracy.
2. The fundamental principles of democratic participation of everyone in decision-making have been enshrined by the Council of Europe in a number of legal and political instruments, which form a common set of standards on democracy for Europe as a whole.
3. It is the strong conviction of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe that, in accordance with its aims and values, the Council of Europe should develop further these standards as well as the means of implementation by national governments and parliaments throughout Europe.
4. The Assembly affirms that the low and decreasing participation of citizens in public life, and particularly elections, together with the decline of trust in politicians, political parties and, above all, democratic elections, requires a new definition of the essence of democracy with regard to new challenges of the twenty-first century.
5. The Assembly stresses the need for further efforts to be undertaken by the Council of Europe and member states for the strengthening of democratic institutions at national, regional and local level, in order to avoid current challenges rendering representative democracy more fragile, although it is the sole political system which guarantees that a state is governed by the rule of law and respects the fundamental rights and freedoms of everyone.
6. The Assembly is convinced that a feeling of disenfranchisement from political decision-making will grow in the countries where an active parliamentary dimension is lacking, whether at national or international level. The growing globalisation of trade, economies and financial markets poses challenges to national governments and parliaments which are beyond their control through national law and policies, provoking a feeling of insecurity and uncertainty within society, and requiring the reinforced multilateral co-operation of states. Therefore, the Assembly reiterates that the interparliamentary dimension in such co-operation is an essential requirement for bringing international decision-making closer to the citizen and for broad democratic legitimacy, as expressed in its Resolution 1289 (2002) on parliamentary scrutiny of international institutions.
7. The Assembly believes that, where the parliamentary process of dealing with important political disputes is not functioning or is perceived as not functioning, those disputes tend to cause public disregard for parliamentary democracy as well as political extremism, or even violence. Such failures of parliamentary functioning may be avoided by including conciliatory processes and constructive elements in internal parliamentary procedures, both at local and regional level. These conciliatory processes will be impossible to put into place without the active support of a strong network of civil society organisations.

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1. Text adopted by the Standing Committee, acting on behalf of the Assembly, on 25 November 2003 (see [Doc. 9951](#), report of the Political Affairs Committee, rapporteur: Mr Wielowieyski).



8. The Assembly is conscious that participation in elections at local, regional and national levels in several member states is often characterised by relatively low turnouts and considers this as alarming, although abstentions in elections may also be conscious expressions of a popular will. It also regards the low active participation of young people in political parties and democratic institutions as a challenge for parliamentary democracy.

9. The Assembly is convinced that people's identifying with political processes may be enhanced by greater openness; the introduction of more direct elements of democratic decision-making; and the development of civil society based on an increasing role for citizen participation in social activities and democratic decision-making. However, more direct popular participation requires citizens to be adequately informed about those matters to be decided upon, as well as about the democratic decision-making process in general. In this context, the Assembly believes that the Council of Europe should reinforce its activities on education for democratic citizenship.

10. The Assembly notes the possibilities offered by the new communications technologies for greater participation of everyone in democratic debates and decision-making processes. The experiences of several member states may provide useful guidance in this respect, and the Assembly thus welcomes the work currently undertaken by the Council of Europe on standards concerning electronic voting, governance and democracy.

11. The Assembly also emphasises the need to take all necessary measures for the full civic participation in democratic decision-making by people with disabilities or special needs, and welcomes the initiatives identified by the Second European Conference of Ministers responsible for Integration Policies for People with Disabilities, held in Malaga on 7 and 8 May 2003.

12. The Assembly considers that political parties – in spite of their sometimes diminishing numbers of members – are a vital element of parliamentary work, since they contribute to the transparency, stability and accountability of political activities and decision-making by formulating, promoting and channelling political ideas. This privileged position of political parties should require from them and their members a high degree of openness, transparency, stability and accountability. In addition, political parties should also be open to civil society organisations dealing with democratic standards. The essential task of democratic political parties should be not only to participate in the electoral process and the control of government, but equally to stimulate the development of the role of civil society and citizens' actions.

13. The Assembly stresses the necessity for a democratic system of mutual control and the separation of powers between public authorities. The system of checks and balances is indispensable for achieving public confidence in the functioning of democratic institutions. The Assembly recalls in this context also the role of the media as a public watchdog, hence requiring free and pluralist media as a platform for a public political debate, as well as ethical professional standards of journalists. Therefore, it is essential to strengthen the legal protection of the political independence of the media.

14. The Assembly reaffirms the importance of combating corruption in all sectors of society including parliaments, where even individual cases of corruption can undermine the credibility of democratic decision-making processes as a whole. In this respect, the Assembly stresses the usefulness of action taken under the Council of Europe's Agreement establishing the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), and resolves to strengthen its own monitoring work in this field.

15. The Assembly resolves to support an active discussion of the current challenges faced by democratic institutions in Europe and to promote measures which may strengthen democratic institutions at national, regional and local levels. Where this has not yet been achieved to an adequate extent, the Assembly calls on its members and Observers to consider ensuring:

- a. greater accessibility and openness of the democratic decision-making processes by:
  1. introducing or, where it already exists, facilitating distance voting for citizens in national, regional or local elections, including by electronic means;
  2. introducing the notion of a civic obligation to vote in democratic elections, in particular by raising awareness of the experience of states with a legal obligation to vote;
  3. considering more direct elements of democratic decision-making, such as popular initiatives and referendums, in particular at local level, as a means of increasing the public's identifying with political decisions thus taken;

4. providing for the possibility for members of the public to submit petitions to parliamentary and other representative bodies and members of the executive branch, and by introducing concrete results of civic action into education programmes;
  5. introducing the possibility of consulting specialists in the context of parliamentary and governmental work, for instance for local authorities, non-governmental organisations, professional associations, youth associations and the public at large;
  6. introducing measures to increase the active participation of young people in political parties and democratic institutions;
  7. introducing measures to increase equal participation of men and women in political parties and democratic institutions;
- b.* greater openness and transparency of political decision-makers and decision-making bodies by:
1. making publicly available the programmes and political positions of political parties;
  2. broadcasting parliamentary debates of public concern, including parliamentary votes;
  3. providing access to information about the income and property interests of parliamentarians and members of government while they are exercising their public functions;
  4. providing mechanisms of transparent and democratic decision-making within political parties;
- c.* greater accountability of political decision makers and decision-making bodies by:
1. introducing the possibility of direct election of parliamentarians, which would allow voting for open lists of candidates rather than solely through closed party lists proposed by parties themselves, which allow only for a vote for a particular party;
  2. providing for the possibility of parliamentary investigations into the misconduct of parliamentary bodies, members of parliament and senior government officials, in particular through investigation commissions;
  3. defining rules concerning situations of conflict of interest, the incompatibility of public and private functions of parliamentarians, and the accumulation of political mandates;
  4. defining adequate and proportional national rules on the immunity of parliamentarians;
- d.* stronger constructive and conciliatory elements in parliamentary decision-making processes by:
1. providing for possibilities to create conciliatory commissions on matters of public concern which are the object of a dispute between the political parties, local and national authorities, or representative and executive bodies;
  2. providing for such conciliatory measures, particularly where parliamentary voting rules allow for the right of veto to block parliamentary action;
- e.* greater accountability of the executive branch of government to parliament by:
1. providing for the possibility of a parliamentary vote of no confidence against the head of government;
  2. providing parliament with the possibility of subjecting ministries and bodies of the executive branch of government to scrutiny.