

IV. The Bucharest Seminar (June 1998) on the Parliaments of Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic States

Communication by Mr Alexandra DUMITRESCU (Romania), Moscow Session (September 1998)

Mr DA VIES invited Mr DUMITRESCU, Secretary General of the Senate of Romania, to address the Association on the meeting of the Secretaries General of Parliaments of the Countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic States which took place in Bucharest from 4-6 June 1998.

Mr DUMITRESCU spoke as follows:

"Mr President, dear colleagues,

Last June the Romanian Senate was pleased to be able to organise, with the help of the Chamber of Deputies, a conference in Bucharest for the secretaries general of parliaments of Central and Eastern Europe on the subject of "the role of parliamentary staff in the democratic functioning of the legislature".

We were delighted on this occasion to bring to fruition an initiative announced one year previously during the meeting of our Association in Cairo. The aim of the meeting in Bucharest was a regional conference at which our colleagues from countries where democracies had been introduced relevantly recently could debate relevant themes. These themes related to our common preoccupations concerning the consolidation of the democratic foundation of parliamentary institutions and the modernisation of their administration. At this meeting there participated secretaries general, deputy secretaries general and senior officials from the parliaments and assemblies of 14 fourteen countries, that is Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, FYR of Macedonia, Czech Republic, Yugoslavia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia and Ukraine. A number of those participating were members of the ASGP and those who were not had the opportunity of learning about the activities of our Association. We also had the pleasure of having as specially invited guests, two distinguished members of the ASGP Executive Committee, Ms Miriam ROBBERS from the Netherlands and Mr Seppo TIITINEN from Finland. The

ASGP Vice-President, Mr Mario FARACHIO, for his part kindly sent us a written contribution.

The agenda of the meeting included themes found in the "pool of subjects" of the ASGP. With your permission I will review briefly some of the conclusions of the debates on these subjects.

1. "The Role of the Secretary General in the Democratic Functioning of National Parliaments"

In the majority of parliaments represented at this meeting the function of the secretary general was conceived as a public, technical function of specialisation and not as a function of a political nature. Participants produced as evidence the fact that the democratic functioning of national parliaments was directly linked to the degree of objectivity and impartiality of the Secretary General and his staff in relation to all parliamentary political formations. This independence was the guarantee of their genuine support for all members of parliament. Secretaries general from our region have similar attributes. They are the main organisers and administrators of the parliamentary staff, staff who give specialised and indispensable assistance in the processes of legislative activity. They ensure the provision of the technical logistical resources necessary so that members of parliament can fully exercise their functions and they apply the procedures relevant to the constitutional competence of parliaments. They establish and maintain communication between parliament and the structures of power on the one hand, and public opinion and the media on the other, in this way contributing to the consolidation of the democratic character of political life and the social relationships of the community.

2. "The staff of permanent parliamentary committees and their contribution to the legislative process"

In emphasising the importance of permanent committees as indispensable instruments for parliament in the exercise of its legislative functions and its function of scrutiny, participants at the meeting presented the ways in which these committees were structured within their parliaments as well as relations between similar committees of the two chambers in the case of bicameral parliaments. They discussed the correlation between, on the one hand the establishment of specialisation and the experience of the technical staff of the committees, and on the other the quality of the legal texts and reports produced.

At the same time they considered the main functions of the staff of committees as well as the qualities which were indispensable in staff so that they might respond in the appropriate fashion to the tasks assigned to them.

3. "The research and documentation services of national parliaments"

The activity of these services proves essential for a modern parliament. In the parliaments of the countries of central and eastern Europe the services for research and documentation have succeeded in defining their role in relation to the needs for information of members of parliament and of parliamentary staff. Participants at the meeting presented the development of this activity in their parliaments. The different type of "products" of these specialised services as well as the way in which such "products" are distributed and the different categories of those receiving the information. They debated the different means adopted for the appointment and organisation of the staff of these services as well as the collaboration with experts belonging to institutions other than parliament. Discussions on this theme brought to light a series of principles and rules which it might be useful to mention:

- research activity must be exclusively addressed to members of parliament, to committees and to the different parliamentary departments. It must support members of parliament in the exercise of their legislative functions of scrutiny and representation and not their activity as members of a particular party;
- information must be objective, non-partisan, of high quality and produced in good time. In the case of information provided on request it is essential to guard its confidential character. On the other hand, information need not only be a response to requests received, it must also provide for the future needs of legislative action;
- areas of research must be prioritised according their relevance to parliamentary activity and at the same time research must take place in an integrated and inter-disciplinary way.

In the near future, as conditions emerge where information becomes each day more and more accessible, one of the key roles of the documentation research services will be that of selecting, filtering and managing data in such a way that adequate information is offered to the right person at the right time.

4. "Parliament and the media"

The process of democratisation of the countries of central and eastern Europe has brought, amongst other things, a full opening up of the parliamentary institution towards the public and the media. It was the unanimous opinion of participants in the meeting that the media have a decisive influence on the image that the public gains with regard to parliament and its particular activities. As a result they have a strong influence on communication and the links which are established between members of parliament and the electorate. The manner in which parliamentary activity is reflected in the media is determinant of the degree of involvement of citizens in political debates. Continual, correct and unhindered communication between parliament and society requires two indispensable conditions. On the one hand, parliament must assure itself of the transparency of its activities and thus of access to information. On the other, representatives of the media must reflect objectively in good faith and correctly parliamentary activity based on the ethical principles of their profession, with truthfulness as the primary criterion. The extent and manner to which parliamentary activity is projected in the media also depends upon technical conditions and the logistical questions which parliament decides upon, as well as the way in which the press department of this institution organises its relationship with journalists. Parliamentary press offices represented at the meeting have two significant attributes: to maintain the relationship between parliament and the media, and to appraise parliament's image as it is reflected in the media.

At the same time participants referred to the problems which made the relationship between parliament and the media more difficult. In particular, the problems arose principally as a result of misconceived perceptions, on one or other side, of the notions of partnership, professionalism and responsibility. In this context, there was stated the need to establish certain norms which might regulate all aspects of the administration of relations with the press (accreditation criteria, rules of access and of movement within the parliamentary building, as well as the organisation and the functioning of direct reporting and transmission) emphasising that their absence casts a slur on the image both of parliament and of the press. Another aspect raised by the participants in the debate was that as a result of economic pressures felt in all the countries in central and eastern Europe the press is tending to transform itself into a source of entertainment neglecting the importance of explanation and of commentary on legislative activity.

Mr President, dear colleagues.

For the countries of central and eastern Europe, perhaps more than for others, co-operation at the level of secretaries general of parliaments and inter-

parliamentary staff is proving very important in the promotion of the democratic functioning of the legislative institution. This is the reason why, over and above the contributions made to the subjects on our agenda, all participants at the Bucharest meeting expressed their willingness to develop and diversify further their collaboration and to continue to encourage exchanges of experience and information. In organising this meeting we had wished, and we hope we have succeeded, in meeting this need and we would be very happy if our initiative was continued in the future.

I would like to take this opportunity to give my very warm thanks to those secretaries general, deputy secretaries general and senior parliamentary officials who took part in our meeting. I would also like to give my sincere thanks to the President and members of the ASGP Executive Committee for their support. I particularly would like to thank Ms Miriam ROBBERS and Mr Seppo TIITINEN for their kindness in accepting our invitation and in their invaluable contributions to our work at that meeting.

Thank you for your attention.

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Mr DA VIES thanked Mr DUMITRESCU for his presentation. He said he was sad not to have been able to attend the seminar but was glad to know that it had been of such a high quality and that a delegation had been able to attend from the Executive Committee. He looked forward to reading the account of the seminar in more detail. He was particularly interested in the section on parliament and the media. The House of Lords had, only in the last few years, appointed an Information Officer to ensure the accurate and appropriate publicity for its work. They had also done research on public perceptions of the House of Lords. It appeared that many people did not know what parliament was at all. The research was not very expensive nor very extensive but some idea had been gained. It did appear that public knowledge of parliament was limited. The Information Officer had made a difference with regard to the presentation of the House of Lords to the public. For instance there had been an important Lords report on resistance to anti-microbial agents. This was to be published on Maundy Thursday, but the Information Officer intervened. The parliamentary officers had been unaware that it was a silly thing to do. The intervention of the Information Officer meant that the report was published on a more appropriate day and received extensive coverage. There had also recently been a lot of interest in the press in the redecoration of the apartment of the Lord Chancellor

and full use of the Information Officer had been made on that occasion. Thus the section in the Bucharest seminar's proceedings on parliament and the media would no doubt be of great interest to Mr DAVIES.

Mr TIITINEN (Finland) said that he totally agreed with the importance of the issue of parliament and the media. It was indeed one of the basic questions of democracy. It was also a very difficult and controversial issue. In Finland there had been problems in parliament's information activities for some years. It had now been decided to research this question thoroughly. A special working group of parliamentarians and civil servants had been established to look at this relationship and create an information strategy for the Finnish parliament. Their nordic neighbours, Norway and Iceland, had such systems and they were now trying to do the same, to create a new system of information for media and the public, not to improve their image but to get better information to citizens. Mr TIITINEN thanked Mr DUMITRESCU for his excellent organisation of the seminar. It had all worked very well and there had been some very lively debates.

Mr DUMITRESCU thanked Mr TIITINEN for his kind words. Like other parliaments, the parliament of Romania was still trying to improve its organisation. He hoped that the Senate was going to improve its structure still further. That was why the meeting had been organised from Bucharest. They had been able to talk about many subjects and had received full backing from the ASGP as well as the participation of representatives from the ASGP. He wondered whether it would not be useful to develop further and maintain such closer connections in the future. A common database of values and rules would be very useful. With regard to relations with the media, this certainly was one of the major subjects discussed in Romania. Before the Romanian Revolution the press was of one voice. After the changes in 1989 the press became very interested in the debates in parliament and wanted to reflect legislative activity. There was now a concern to improve relations with the press and ensure an accurate reflection of parliamentary work. He hoped the Bucharest seminar was a useful initiative for the press also. In time the press would be able to help maintain proper relations between parliaments and citizens. There was a great deal to discuss on the question of such principles. He said that he might set up a correspondence with colleagues interested in this area which could result in a database in the Romanian Senate of information to deal with parliamentary and media relations.

Mr DAVIES thanked Mr DUMITRESCU again for his excellent presentation and congratulated him on the success of the seminar in June.