

Working with the Parliamentary Assembly

Questions and answers

Parliamentary Assembly of
the Council of Europe

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Introduction

This short guide has been put together to help staff of the Council of Europe find their way around the work of the Parliamentary Assembly and understand how best to work with Parliamentarians, the Assembly's Committees and its Secretariat.

The Assembly is one of the two statutory organs of the organisation and its work is closely interlinked with all the activities of the Council, whether they be monitoring, standard setting, co-operation or other activities.

Many important activities, small and large, are carried out within the Council of Europe involving the Assembly which produce important results. To name a few:

- ✓ the parliamentary dimension to the campaign against child abuse;
- ✓ the work done in promoting ratifications of the recent Conventions against trafficking and combating violence against women;
- ✓ the Council for Democratic Elections which provides a bridge between the Assembly, the Venice Commission and the Congress on election matters;
- ✓ the work carried out with neighbouring countries on the Southern shores of the Mediterranean and with Central Asian countries.

There are prospects for much closer co-operation and synergy, and it is hoped that this short guide will make it clearer and easier, in particular for staff not used to working with the Assembly, on how best to carry out activities with the Assembly.

This guide is based on a number of questions and answers in two parts.

- ✓ The first covers how to obtain information on the work of the Assembly, including its documents, members and its Sessions?
- ✓ The second looks at how to work with the Committees of the Assembly and individual Parliamentarians.

How do I obtain information on the work of the Assembly, including its documents, members and Sessions?

In general, all information on the composition, functioning, public documents, calendar of work and news are on the web site of the Assembly. The site is currently under reconstruction and will be updated in the course of 2013.

<http://assembly.coe.int/defaultE.asp>

What are the main documents of the Assembly?

The main documents can be classified into the following groups:

- **Adopted texts**¹. These include:
 - ✓ Resolutions (which are addressed primarily to member states of the Council of Europe);
 - ✓ Recommendations (which contain proposals addressed to the Committee of Ministers, on which the Committee of Ministers is required to reply);
 - ✓ Opinions (which contain the view of the Assembly on requests by the Committee of Ministers, for example on draft Conventions or the draft budget).

¹ Since the adoption of Resolution 1368 (2004), Orders (instructions from the Assembly to one or more of its committees) have been abolished. However some of their characteristics can now form part of Resolutions.

- **Working Documents.** These include:
 - ✓ Reports (which are prepared in the individual Committees and may contain a draft Resolution and/or draft Recommendation to be adopted by the Assembly), and Opinions (which are opinions by other Committees on the reports that have been prepared);
 - ✓ Motions for recommendations and resolutions (these are short documents, not exceeding 300 words, signed by at least 20 members of the Assembly, or adopted by the requisite quorum by Committees. They may upon decision of the Bureau of the Assembly, once ratified by the Assembly, be forwarded to a committee for a report to be prepared);
 - ✓ Written Declarations (these allow members of the Assembly to give formal expression to their views on matters of European interest; at least twenty representatives or substitutes of four nationalities and two political parties must sign a written declaration. The declaration binds only those signing it and not the Assembly as a whole);
 - ✓ Questions (written or oral questions to the Committee of Ministers);
 - ✓ Other types of document are: communications from the Secretary General; requests for opinion transmitted by the Committee of Ministers; progress reports of the Bureau and the Standing Committee; replies by the Committee of Ministers to Recommendations of the Assembly and written questions from Parliamentarians.

- **Verbatim records. These include:**
 - ✓ Reports of plenary sittings during Assembly sessions.

I know these documents are on the web site, but concretely how do I find them?

Instructions on how to search for these and other documents of the Assembly are contained on the web site:

http://assembly.coe.int/ASP/Doc/DocumentGuide_E.asp

On-line documentation includes adopted texts from 1949, Assembly documents (Docs.) from 1997 (partially) and verbatim records (CRs) from 2000.

Currently it is possible to search Assembly documents using the following search criteria:

- ✓ Title
- ✓ Year
- ✓ Number
- ✓ Author/Signatory
- ✓ Committee
- ✓ Part-session
- ✓ Assembly member

On the new web site (2013), search criteria will be expanded to include a theme search using the Eurovoc and PACE thesauri.

If you have trouble finding a document, or knowing what to look for, you can contact the Committee Secretariat concerned. If you are unsure of the Secretariat concerned you can contact the Documentalist of the Assembly kathleen.layle@coe.int (ext. 3101).

If work is ongoing on an issue you will probably need to have direct contact with the Committee Secretariats, as these documents are not accessible on the web site. The new web site will host committee pages (Webrooms) which will contain information, contact details and public committee documents.

Reminder of the Committees of the Parliamentary Assembly:

- ✓ Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy
- ✓ Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights
- ✓ Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development
- ✓ Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons
- ✓ Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media
- ✓ Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination
- ✓ Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee)
- ✓ Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs

Who are the Members of the Parliamentary Assembly?

The list of members of the Parliamentary Assembly is kept up to date and is available on the web site:

http://assembly.coe.int/ASP/AssemblyList/AL_DelegationsList_E.asp

It is sorted alphabetically by members, by delegations, by political groups and by committees. Contact details and photos are provided as well as information on members' roles in the Assembly with links to documents for which they have been author/rapporteur or signatory. Observers and Partners for Democracy are also listed. A paper-back version is published following each part-session entitled "Assembly List" and can be obtained on request. There is also an historic list of members since 1949.

How do I know what is coming up in a Session and how do I follow a Session of the Assembly?

The draft Agendas of the Part-Sessions are posted on the Web Site of the Assembly approximately one month before each of the four Part-Sessions. The Agenda can be changed up to the Monday of the opening of the Session when it is approved by the Assembly.

Anyone can attend the sessions in the Public Gallery or follow the debates on the live link on the Assembly Web Site.

Part-Sessions last five working days and take place normally:

- ✓ End of January
- ✓ End of April
- ✓ End of June
- ✓ Beginning of October

How to work with the Committees of the Assembly and individual Parliamentarians?

What are the different ways in which I can work with the Committees of the Assembly?

Some examples can be given:

- ✓ Providing information to the Committees and their rapporteurs on work you are responsible for;
- ✓ Following work of the Committees relevant to your own work, and using the Resolutions and Recommendations of the Assembly in your work;
- ✓ Exploring the possibility of extending signatures and ratifications of Council of Europe Conventions using Parliamentarians;
- ✓ Involving Parliamentarians in activities, campaigns or conferences or seminars;

- ✓ Using the expertise, political influence and contacts that Parliamentarians can provide;
- ✓ Highlighting issues of concern in your work, either on a national or European level;
- ✓ Providing input into the reports and other work of the Committees;
- ✓ Participating in conferences, hearings, seminars and meetings of the Assembly and its Committees.

The Secretariat of the Assembly will in many instances take the initiative to contact you for information or input so as to tap into your experience and expertise. You do not however need to wait for this to happen.

How can I follow the work of the Committees, the reports and the different meetings and hearings of the Committees?

All the Committees have Work Programmes which are either contained on the web site (under Committees) or available direct from the Secretariats. These provide information on the reports underway and the timing of the different events being planned.

There also exists an overview of all “Reports under preparation” which is regularly updated and can be accessed directly from the home page of the Assembly site.

Can I attend the Committee meetings?

While in principle meetings of the Committee should be in private, a Committee can decide otherwise. In practice most of the Committees are willing to open up their meetings and members of the Secretariat are encouraged to attend. If you would like to follow a meeting, you should inform the Committee Secretariat in advance in order to clear your attendance. There are however some meetings that you cannot attend. These include the meetings of the “Monitoring Committee” and the Sub-Committee on the election of judges to the European Court of Human Rights, which are held *in camera*. There are also certain Committees which in practice do not open up their meetings, such as the Committee on Rules of Procedure.

Can I speak at a Committee meeting, and if so how best to address Parliamentarians?

It is always at the discretion of the Chairperson to offer the floor to participants other than Parliamentarians.

In general, where invited, the Committee will expect to be addressed by the Director General, Directors or Heads of Department. Parliamentarians will be used to being addressed by Ministers and high level civil servants and thus will expect similar levels in the Council of Europe. There will be exceptions.

If a member of the Secretariat is to intervene in a meeting it should be organised in advance with the Secretariat of the Committee concerned.

Parliamentarians are interested in political rather than technical issues and they will want information to be given to them succinctly, therefore long speeches should be avoided. Reference to activities, publications, internet sites, etc. will have limited interest. Highlighting issues and problems, and then identifying steps to be taken, are more likely to stimulate a debate and questions from Parliamentarians.

Can I provide input into a report being prepared by a Committee?

This is in general possible and Rapporteurs often appreciate feedback on their draft reports. Comments and suggestion should be channeled through the Committee Secretariat, who will, at any rate, often make the first contact with you to tap into your expertise. Feedback is most useful in the early stages of preparation (when an outline is prepared, or when a memorandum is discussed, or even when a preliminary draft report is being looked at).

Once the report is up for approval, it is difficult, or impossible to introduce changes. Once the report is approved by the Committee, nothing in the report can be changed at Committee level. The only opportunity for changes to be made is in the texts to be adopted by the Assembly (i.e. the draft Resolution and draft Recommendation), but for these, amendments have to be tabled by Parliamentarians according to the rules of the Assembly.

Therefore, it is essential to receive input at an early stage before approval of the reports in the Committees.

Whom should I contact for information on the work of the Committees?

For the most part, the assistants working for the Committees will be able to provide you with documentation or information on the activities, time schedules and planning of the Committees; or they will refer you to the administrator dealing with the issue.

For a discussion on substance you may need to go to the Head of Secretariat, or the Secretary of the Committee, or other administrator.

You can find up to date information on the names and contact details of the Secretariats under the individual 'Committees' on the Assembly's website.

http://assembly.coe.int/ASP/AssemblyList/AL_CommitteesList_E.asp

When should I invite a member of the Assembly to take part in an event?

This may not always be clear and you are urged to discuss the matter early on, before an agenda is fixed, with a member of the PACE Secretariat.

Keep in mind that the Assembly is interested in your work! If you are inviting other bodies such as the Human Rights Commissioner, or the European Parliament, or if you are dealing with issues that the Assembly is working on, then the likelihood is you should consider inviting the Assembly.

Some examples of when to invite the Assembly:

- ✓ If the issues covered are political or need a political response.
- ✓ If the Assembly has worked on, is working on, or is known to be interested in the issue.
- ✓ If the participants are political / high level (for example if you are inviting Ministers, or high level VIPs).
- ✓ If you invite other members of parliaments (such as the European Parliament).

Some examples of when not to invite the Assembly:

- ✓ When discussions are only technical (working group, expert meetings, etc. (although when there is a Rapporteur of the Assembly specifically dealing with the issue, it may be useful to invite him or her)).
- ✓ When discussions are not linked to work of the Assembly.
- ✓ When meetings are being held outside of Strasbourg during a session of the Assembly (Parliamentarians will not be authorised to attend these events).

If in doubt speak with the PACE Secretariat (at the preparatory stage rather than at the end). It saves potential embarrassment and complications later if it transpires that the Assembly should have been invited.

How do I contact the Parliamentarians?

If you wish to contact a Parliamentarian the question will arise as to whether you contact him or her direct, or whether to go through the Secretariat of the Assembly.

You are best advised to go through the Secretariat of the relevant Committee of the Assembly who can advise you.

There are various reasons for this:

- ✓ In the first place, the PACE Secretariat will be able to let you know how to make the contact (directly, through a Parliamentary Assistant, through the National Delegation Secretariat, etc.). The PACE Secretariat may also make the contact or facilitate the contact for you.
- ✓ In the second place, it keeps the PACE Secretariat aware of contacts and activities involving the Parliamentarians, which is an essential element of the Secretariat's role.
- ✓ It avoids embarrassment and lack of co-ordination where one sector does not know what the other is doing.

There may be instances where you do not go through the Secretariat for one reason or another. In these cases you should keep the PACE Secretariat informed of your contacts and the outcome of these contacts.

Whom should I invite?

A certain sensitivity to protocol is required and it is best to check with the Secretariat of the PACE if you are unsure.

The question is really to what level you need to address the invitation.

- ✓ This may be to the President of the Assembly (for example, in any event that you have high level participation, such as a Minister or the Secretary General of the Council of Europe attending).
- ✓ This may be to the Chairperson of a Committee (for example if the issue is one which fits clearly in the realm of one or other Committee).
- ✓ Do not address an invitation to an individual Parliamentarian. It is best to address the request to the Chairperson of the Committee and explain that you would like a particular member to attend (for example because he or she is Rapporteur on a subject).

It is important to consider who should sign a letter of invitation for Protocol reasons. For example, a letter to the Secretary General of the Assembly should be signed by a Director General. Also, keep in mind that when a letter is sent to the President of the Assembly, the Secretary General of the Assembly should also be copied in. For invitations in general, the “peer to peer” principle is often the best to follow.

What if I do not know which Committee to invite or if there may be more than one Committee to invite?

In these circumstances it is best to address the letter to the President of the Assembly with a copy to the Secretary General of the Assembly, or directly to the Secretary General of the Assembly, and the invitation will filter down to the Committee or Committees concerned. This will avoid any confusion both within and outside of the Assembly.

How should I involve Parliamentarians in a meeting?

Again a certain level of sensitivity to protocol is required, and a Protocol list will help in understanding the hierarchy of the President of the Assembly and Chairpersons of Committees and Parliamentarians.

In this you should keep in mind that under the Statute of the Council of Europe, the Parliamentary Assembly is one of the two organs of the Council of Europe.

Almost without exception, for the President of the Assembly to participate, he or she should be put at the opening according to the Protocol list.

As a general rule, Parliamentarians invited to an event should be included in the programme. Depending on the event, consideration should be given to placing Parliamentarians in the opening or as speakers on particular issues, or as moderators.

Keep in mind that protocol does matter when dealing with Parliamentarians, even in quite technical meetings.

Care should be taken (without being obsessive) to make sure that the protocol *vis-a-vis* Parliamentarians and other participants is respected. For example, if the meeting is made up of civil servants then the Parliamentarian should be given a prominent role. If a prominent role is given to say a member of the European Parliament, then a prominent role should also be given to a member of the Parliamentary Assembly. These are just some examples.

PACE Secretariat members can advise where you may be unsure. Also the Council of Europe Protocol Department (protocol@coe.int) can help if there is any type of uncertainty or disagreement over protocol issues.

It can be difficult juggling the sensitivities of all persons concerned, in particular when large and important conferences are organised.

What sensitivities should I be aware of in dealing with Parliamentarians?

Parliamentarians are elected officials, they are not necessarily experts and they are not bureaucrats. They are accustomed to civil servants being answerable to them, not the other way round.

In general, they are interested and highly appreciative of the work of the Council of Europe and its Secretariat.

Purely technical matters may not be of much interest to Parliamentarians. Issues with a political content or impact will be.

The Parliamentarians represent an important political link to member states and they can be great allies in your work. The PACE Secretariat will do its best to help you in your contacts with them.

Conclusions

The Secretariat of the Parliamentary Assembly and members of the Assembly are interested in having closer links with the rest of the Council of Europe and being fully implicated in its work.

This guide is an attempt to facilitate further these links as part of the reform process.

If you have comments on how to make this guide more relevant to your work then please send your suggestions to [Beejul Tanna](#) (ext. 3975).