

Parliamentary Assistance Programs

Directed by:

*The Special Task Force on the Development of
Parliamentary Institutions in
Central and Eastern Europe
U.S. House of Representative
and
The Joint Committee on the Library
U.S. Congress*

1990-1996
Final Report

Congressional Research Service
Library of Congress
March 18, 1998

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between 1990 and 1996, the U.S. Congress established parliamentary development programs in twelve emerging democracies of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The Congressional Research Service of the Library of Congress was asked to administer and implement the overall Central and East European programs. The House Information Systems Office (HIS, subsequently renamed HIR) was asked to provide automation experts to carry out the program. Direction was provided by a special House of Representatives Task Force on the Development of Parliamentary Institutions in Eastern Europe. Programs in Russia and Ukraine were authorized and carried out under the auspices of the Joint Committee on the Library of the U.S. Congress. Since parliamentary development programs were envisioned as short-term "jump start" efforts when begun in 1990, Congress decided to end all such activities by December 31, 1996.

Funding for these programs totaled nearly \$28 million (mainly from the U.S. Agency for International Development, but with important early foundation funding totaling roughly \$600,000 from Ford, MacArthur, Pew, IREX, and the German Marshall Fund). Approximately one half of all funds were used for purchase of automation and networking equipment and international reference materials for the parliament libraries. The rest of the funds were used for training and technical assistance.

The program assumed that successful democratic transitions in former-Communist countries depended on the establishment of effective democratic legislatures. A key prerequisite for an effective legislature is access to independent information and analysis that permits it to make informed choices, rather than continuing to rubber-stamp ministry proposals. Congressional leaders and the new East European parliaments recognized the close link between democracy and information.

As a result, the programs were targeted mainly to strengthening parliamentary infrastructure, especially the information services, streamlining work with modern automation and office systems, building independent and objective information capabilities and the capacity to use them effectively. The programs were designed to improve the efficiency of the institution and the professionalism of Members and staff, as well as to increase transparency and accountability.

The program provided over 1,200 PCs (most of which were state-of-the-art and networked); over 60 copiers, 470 printers, as well as faxes and other office equipment. Extensive networking equipment, software, and know-how were provided. More than 9,300 books and other library materials were purchased. Ten new research and information units were established, patterned largely on CRS. More than 2,200 staff and Members participated in a series of CRS training programs in Washington and in Eastern Europe.

The programs have achieved tangible results in strengthening parliamentary infrastructure, streamlining work with modern automation and office systems, building independent and objective information capabilities and the capacity to use them effectively, and strengthening the professional capabilities of Members of Parliament and professional staff.

Automation has led to more effective bill tracking and day-to-day operations in the Parliaments we have assisted. Technology provided through our program has accelerated the capacity of parliaments to produce draft bills, plenary records and committee documents, and make them generally available to legislators, policymakers and the public. The time for production and distribution has been shortened from months to days, and in some cases, hours.

East European parliamentary libraries have expanded their mission from simply lending books to providing and actively promoting the use of a broad range of information services. They now have the international reference sources to provide comparative information on a wide range of policy issues.

Ten new research and information units were established in 8 parliaments (both Poland and Romania are bicameral) with the help of the program. In some countries, full-scale legislative research services were created, patterned on CRS, producing a full range of products and services. In others, the building process is just beginning.

Most importantly, the program has served as a catalyst to raise the level of attention by parliamentary leaders to building the infrastructure for an effective democratic parliament. In some countries, our efforts have led to the creation of special working groups of key members and staff. We were told that the efforts of the Task Force had advanced parliamentary development in these countries by several years. Most of the East European parliaments have such heavy competing legislative demands on their time that they might not have turned their attention to those steps that would improve their effectiveness for some time.

Through the program, Members and staff of parliaments have been made more conscious that information must be shared in order to increase the constructive choices available to parliament and to improve its dialogue with the executive. These programs have created the capacity for these parliaments to better help themselves. East European legislators are beginning to use information more and to actively seek it out.

Members of Parliament have gained a broader and more comparative perspective on parliamentary procedure and policy issues as a result of attending programs in the United States and in their own countries. Our staff training programs were designed to stimulate a comparative approach to law-making. As a result, staff are better able to serve the Members.

Very active regional cooperation among the new democratic parliaments has been successfully promoted, through the scheduling of multinational training

programs in Washington and regional conferences in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Estonia. Librarians, research, automation, and administrative staff from these countries now regularly turn to one another for assistance.

Clearly the democratic transformation of parliaments has not proceeded in an equally smooth fashion throughout Eastern Europe. The success and impact of the Task Force programs has also varied from country to country. Nevertheless, a lasting positive impact on the democratic work of parliaments can be demonstrated in all of the countries. Even in Albania which was plunged into a virtual civil war in 1997 and Bulgaria where worsening social and economic conditions brought down the government and required new elections, the parliamentary infrastructure remained largely intact. Task Force trained staff continued to work effectively and with integrity through very difficult times.

The least quantifiable but most evident impact of the program is the goodwill it generated toward the United States Congress and the American people. The program had high visibility throughout the region. East Europeans appreciated that it was the United States--and specifically, the U.S. Congress--that stepped forward first and most generously to help the fledgling parliaments in their struggle to achieve effective democracy. A principal finding of an AID-sponsored evaluation of the program was that no other assistance program has had the impact for the money in terms of good will. Several West European officials who deal regularly with East European parliamentarians have made the same observation.