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**VIII<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Association of European Senates**

(Bern, 20 – 22 April 2006)

**National Council of the Republic of Slovenia and Citizens**

Distinguished Mr President,  
Dear Colleagues,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Dear Friends.

I would first like to thank Mister President for the invitation to the 8<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Association of European Senates. I would like to congratulate You on the excellent organization of the conference and the hospitality we are enjoying.

The National Council of the Republic of Slovenia as the upper chamber that is not on equal footing with the first chamber, the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia, performs its role of cooperation in the legislative field, determined by the Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia. It uses all its competences in practice though these are not, to a great extent, very powerful, so that it only acquires information, gives opinions, requires the calling of a referendum or the initiation of a parliamentary inquiry or can withhold decisions taken by the National Assembly. It is greatly due to weak competences that the National Council implemented in practice various relations with citizens and civil society which form the basis of a representative democracy.

The National Council has in its ten-year functioning established various forms of cooperation with citizens and civil society. On the one hand these relations are demonstrated through the publicity of the activities of the National Council and on the other hand through certain activities of the National Council such as organisation of numerous consultations, lectures, various forms of public debates and other activities of the National Council.

The sessions of the National Council and its commissions are open to the public which is characteristic of modern representative bodies. The publicity of work is demonstrated through the opportunity for the citizens to be present at the sessions, through the information that the National Council gives about its work and its decisions either directly or through the mass media. The acts and other materials discussed by the National Council are published in the entirety or as summaries in the National Council Bulletin. However, the public may be limited or excluded from the work of the National Council only exceptionally if it is decided so by the National Council for the common benefit.

The publicity of the National Council is exercised also through the organization of press conferences. These are convened in the first place by the president of the National Council, and according to the Rules of Procedure also by the chairpersons of the

Commissions and by the leaders of interest groups. Press conferences are convened on the occasion of important events or after the sessions where important issues had been discussed.

The councillors of the National Council and the representatives of local interests use councillors' offices for the establishment of direct relations with citizens. Their aim is to enable the transfer of propositions, opinions, issues and initiatives of the individuals and organizations concerned to the National Council which on the legislative level endeavours to shape appropriate solutions to the burning problems and to incorporate them into the legislation under discussion.

The National Council exercises the relations with citizens and civil society not only by assuring the public the presence at the sessions and press conferences but also by the organization of various forms of consultations, lectures, different forms of public debates in which the public can actively participate.

Since its beginning the National Council has organized hundreds of consultations, lectures, round tables and public debates (henceforth: consultations). Their aim is to present to the public concerned the regulation, functioning and problems in a particular field of social life. The consultations deal with topical, interesting subjects predominantly from the field of economy, European union, environment, finance and regionalism.

Slightly different in content are the consultations with the electoral base in which the National Councillors - as representatives of individual interests in the National Council, address their voters and present to them their work as well as their future guidelines and exchange opinions with them. The maintenance of contacts with the electoral base throughout the whole term of office is a characteristic feature of the National Council's work.

The National Council invites Slovene and foreign experts to take part in the consultations as well as the members of the public interested in getting acquainted with the discussed issues or eager to present their opinion. The aim of inviting so many people is to acquire as many as possible various and significant opinions. In the organization of consultations the National Council has cooperated with more than one hundred civil associations, professional societies, organizations and institutes. In this way the National Council focuses its endeavours to attract a wide cross-section of civil society to debates on various issues of social life. The purpose of the consultations is not only to raise public awareness but also to obtain feedback and opinions from civil society. All the materials and the minutes of the debates are usually published in an independent publication by the National Council.

The National Council receives many new ideas through these activities. It frequently incorporates the opinions presented at the consultations and in the framework of its competences communicates them within the legislative process. Considering the fact that also the members of the executive branch of power attend the consultations, they very often directly incorporate the ideas and opinions into the government acts and draft laws.

Such a manner of acting of the National Council strengthens its role. The National Council endeavours to actively participate in monitoring and development of the Slovene and European society in the economic, cultural, political, health and social spheres. And not lastly, the National Council advocates for a good and just organization of individual legal fields. The result of such activities is considerable interest of people to attend lectures and consultations, greater recognition and better image of the National Council in the public.

The National Council also carries out activities involving young people. The project “The National Council and Youth” involves young people getting to know the functioning of the Parliament in general. The young people can present their own issues. Due to the problematic and demanding lifestyles, ever more young people are facing problems connected to drugs, alcohol, criminal, problems in schools and domestic conflicts. First young people are informed of the opportunities available to express their opinions, later they also have the opportunity to cooperate in the formation of different ideas and decisions. The goal of this project is to transfer young people’s ideas into the legislative process.

The National Council endorsed another important project. It is called “The Growing Book” (*Rastoča knjiga*). It is a project providing financial support for and promoting the role of Slovenian books. Books have been an essential partner of the Slovenes for over a thousand years. The project is a tribute to all those Slovenes throughout history who have creatively contributed to the Slovene culture. Through projects such as “The Growing Book” the National Council shows its support for ideas relating to Slovenia’s national awareness. It is a step in the search for Slovene culture, identity and self-confidence which are ever more important in today’s climate of globalisation and with Europe and the whole world being ever more integrated. This is the first project of its kind in the world. It is a way in which we can present ourselves to the world as a nation wanting to offer its culture to the world’s heritage. This is a noble and well-intended idea that is open to each and everyone and to us all.

The presented manner of functioning of the National Council arises from its composition. The National Council represents social, economic, professional and local interests. These interests cover practically all the main segments of the society. Among the forty members of the National Council four are the representatives of employers, four representatives of employees, two representatives of farmers, one representative of craftsmen, one representative of independent professions, six representatives of non-commercial activities and twenty-two representatives of local interests. So, the National Council consists of two fundamental parts: of the representatives of functional interests and of the representatives of local and territorial interests. The National Council is a legitimate representative of social interests and it can, with the already stated five interest groups, establish relations with civil society.

Since the National Council is very active in the field of organization of consultations it has legally regulated this activity also in its Rules of Procedure. In the new chapter on acquiring information on the National Council, it has regulated the activity it has been exercising since the very beginning.

And, finally it has to be emphasised that the National Council is affirming itself as an institution, cooperating and encouraging the cooperation with civil society regardless of the fact that the National Assembly, the Government and other administrative bodies are doing the same. Namely, the National Council is not an institution that takes final decisions on important state affairs and is as such not burdened with the discussions and decision-making on all the matters that have to be settled for the normal functioning of the state. It is up to the National Council to decide what matters it will discuss according to the importance from the point of view of the interests represented in the National Council. In this way it can focus on a more detailed discussion on individual subject matters with the help of the professional public – civil society.

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