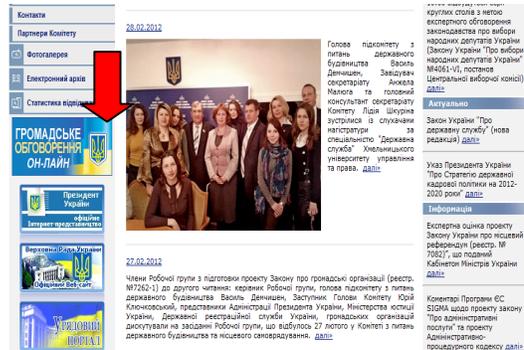


## USAID Ukraine's Parliamentary Development Project Information Technology in the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, GOU and VR ARC: Increasing Transparency and Access to the Policy-making Process

The Verkhovna Rada (VRU) has historically had a great information management system, and, under pressure from civil society, has become increasingly transparent over the last two decades. Today, thanks to both legislative and technological developments, public information can be requested online, and citizens are guaranteed a response within 5 business days. The public can also find information on VRU and committee websites, weigh in on draft laws and regional policy priorities on a new civic platform, and follow their favorite MP or ministry on Facebook. The VRU is rising to meet the demands of a 21<sup>st</sup> century electorate, and is doing so with the help of international donors and technical assistance programs.

USAID's Parliamentary Development Project for Ukraine (PDP II) implemented by Indiana University since 1994 has been working with the VRU and with the Ohio State University John Glenn School for Public Affairs since 2008 with the VRU, the Executive government and the subnational legislature of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea.



**VRU Committee Websites**

There are now 18 VRU standing committees which maintain their own websites with specific information about the work of the committee, its meetings and dialog with civil society, etc. Several are trying new innovations. The [Committee on State Building and Local Self-Government](#) has piloted an e-discussion of draft laws using the Draft Law on Lobbying as a first trial and has posted public service message videos about local government reform. The [Committee on Fighting Crime and Corruption](#) has posted [solicitations](#) for participation in Committee hearings through their site and has posted relevant documents regarding international treaties and obligations and evaluations of Ukraine's steps to meet them. They have also posted and published proceedings of their committee hearings.

During this period of assistance they have cooperated on a number of fronts, though always with the goal of helping Ukraine build strong, functional, transparent and capable institutions. From the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, one of the USAID's primary foci was to work with VRU committees to institutionalize their role in VRU operations and make their work regular, functional and transparent. Once the committees were operationally

sound, USAID turned assistance toward making their work more relevant for the Ukrainian public. Consequently, over the last several years, PDP II has provided assistance to establish individual committee websites. There are now 18 committees (of a total of 26) with fully functional websites that are kept up to date and feature the work of the committee and its members. Committees are posting transcripts of committee meetings, hearings transcripts, publications and research received by the committee from NGOs that has been presented at public hearings,

and inviting the public to comment on specific drafts (red arrow above). USAID partners with other donors on these efforts as well. For example, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy has worked with the VRU to improve “Writing for the Web” for VRU Committees and Press Service and will publish guidelines in July 2012.

This trend, of technical assistance branching out into the IT realm, is a reflection of the changing demands of 21<sup>st</sup> century electorates. The internet is not only many people’s go-to source of information, it is also increasingly becoming their primary means of communication. Consequently, PDP II has also been involved in a number of other IT related initiatives with the VRU. PDP II provided assistance to the VRU’s Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Division in improving the VRU general website long considered one of the best in the region. The new improvements launched for public testing in June 2012 received much higher marks than its predecessor when measured against the Inter-Parliamentary Union’s guidelines for parliamentary websites. Some of its new notable features include a completely new content management system that allows for a comprehensive search mechanism, multimedia capability, and a link that allows e-filing of access to public information requests—a useful tool that gives the historic January 2011 Freedom of Information legislation more utility.



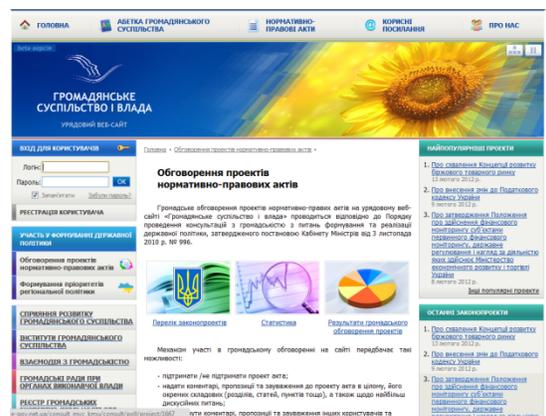
In addition to the VRU’s main site and the satellite sites of its committees, **another new web portal is under development offering Ukrainian citizens and civil society organizations a chance to gain an increased and direct opportunity to the participate in the law-making process.** USAID’s PDP II is now working with the VRU and the VRU’s Legislative Institute to create an interactive site for citizen dialogue around draft laws and issues of national and regional policy. Through crowdsourcing technologies, citizens will be able to log in, review draft laws, leave their comments and questions, and in this way contribute to important conversations about policies that affect their lives. The portal also offers citizens the chance to interact with each other by forming issue-based communities of experts online. This site is slated for a public testing launch in October, and will be fully functional when the new parliament is seated after the October 28, 2012 elections. The Verkhovna Rada Legislative Institute has also requested that this platform service public discussions on the Constitutional Assembly that was established by the President of Ukraine in December 2011 and the work of which is expected to continue through 2013.

**PDP II also worked with the VRU on the development of a new E-Parliament Strategy for 2012-2017, which passed parliament on July 5, 2012.** If it is carried out successfully, the VRU will continue its evolution into an accessible, transparent

21<sup>st</sup> century governing body. The strategy includes plans for e-chamber, e-committees, e-consultative council and e-library and research available to all members and staff. In early 2012, the Verkhovna Rada adopted a decision to disseminate documents for first reading of legislative acts only in e-format. Already there is electronic services for national and regional press clippings and the European Information Support Centre established in July 2011 together with the VRU and the European Union's Policy Legal Advice center is providing reference and research services in person, electronically and through their [webpage on the VRU website](#).

Parallel to cooperation with USAID and other technical assistance programs, some Ukrainian parliamentarians and institutions have embraced the importance of constituent accessibility and have found effective ways to relay their messages to the public. Volodymyr Lytvyn, the current Speaker of the VRU, launched an official page in Facebook and its Russian counterpart, *VKontakte*, in December 2011 and regularly conducts online FB chats every Friday. Other MPs, the Cabinet of Ministers, the Ministry of Economic Development and Trade, and the Ministry of Defense also began to post updates on Facebook in 2011 and some regularly use TWITTER for communicating with constituents and colleagues. During a public forum on Women's Role in Electoral politics journalist turned politician MP Lesya Orobets, for example, sent out a tweet seeking inputs from her Twitter followers and related the results during the roundtable. This is becoming more and more common, especially among younger MPs. PDP II conducted a number of introductory training program on use of social media in government including participation of the Verkhovna Rada, national government, regional offices of national government agencies, and civil service training centers. Subsequently a Social Media Policy Working Group worked out "Guidelines for Social Media Use in Government Offices" which has helped individuals ready to employ these technologies in their offices make the case to their agency leadership. While less formal than a committee site, and less policy-oriented than a portal built for serious dialogue with the electorate over policy, social media is an effective way to reach large swaths of the public. Taken together with the VRU's more formal endeavors, there is evidence that the Ukrainian government at least wants to be prepared to represent a 21<sup>st</sup> century electorate.

**USAID's PDP II has also been working with the Government of Ukraine on an interactive platform for citizen feedback and comment on government drafts and concepts. In June 2012, the new face of the [Citizen Outreach site of Ukraine's Government Portal](#) was launched which features social media "crowdsourcing" technology such as open comment and rating. After testing the platform on a number of concepts and draft laws, the government has prepared all government**



agencies to gradually begin to participate on the platform. This instrument for public assessment of draft laws and regulations also provides executive agencies with an automated summary of the results of electronic discussion, summarizing the ratings of different sections of the document as well as specific suggestions for changes, amendments. This automated analysis system also summarizes the feedback with demographics of the registered participants in the online discussion and comments.

The intention of this site is to more actively engage policy experts, civic activists, academicians, and interested citizens to:

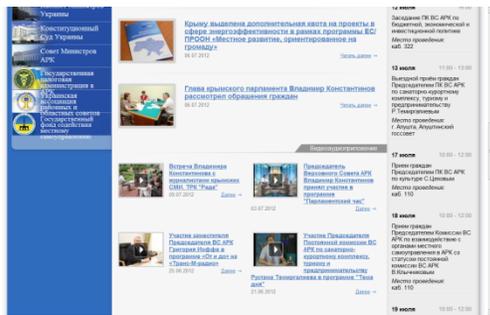
1. Be informed about governmental policies opened for public consultations;
2. Introduce themselves as experts and to establish a community (group) of experts;
3. Participate in discussion of draft documents;
4. Evaluation and assess regional policy priorities in Ukraine

USAID's PDP II is among international donors and implementing partners invited to work with the Government of Ukraine on implementation of the [Open Government Partnership Commitments](#). The commitment to e-governance as a government priority will also help move the Verkhovna Rada's E-parliament effort forward.

PDP II also helped the Government of Ukraine to establish an **Online Community of Practice** for officers charged with responsibility for implementation of the January 2011 Law on Access to Public Information (a Freedom of Information Act). The law requires government offices to respond to API requests within five (5) working days. When the law went into effect in May 2011, many government offices struggled to understand the ramifications of the law for their work and the ramifications for compliance. After a series of seminars, for government officers and the VRU and after surveying offices on the problems they faced with compliance, PDP II helped to establish an online "Community of Practice" where API officers can discuss questions regarding compliance with API law requests. Currently more than 150 officers throughout Ukraine are participating in this virtual community.



**USAID's PDP II has also been working with the Verkhovna Rada of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea** on improvements to [its site](#) which was launched in April 2009 for public testing and fully replace the old site in July 2009. The site is maintained in four languages (Ukrainian, Russian, English and Crimean Tatar). PDP II also conducted an assessment of the new site according to the 2009 IPU Guidelines. Several new features were incorporated as a result of that exercise and other improvements resulted for a June 2010 PDP II Study Tour to the UK. The information presented on the web-site covers the most important aspects of the legislature's work: legislative acts, information about MPs, information about Commissions, news. Results of Citizens meetings and "hot lines" with the Heads of Commissions and the Presidium.



The website has an improved search engine to help users find needed information in different pages on the site. While there is no broadcasting or webcasting of meetings in parliament, the site features videos of participation of leadership and commission chairs in interview shows and programs such as "Parliamentary Time." There are still improvements to be made, but these new features are a considerable step towards more public outreach.

## VR ARC and VRU ICT Cooperation

The Verkhovna Rada of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine have found a number of ways in the past two years to work more closely together to bring the specific needs of Crimea to the attention of MPs of the Verkhovna Rada and the GOU.

A [special Commission of the VRU on Crimea](#) was created May 2011 to help bring attention of MPs to the special requirements of the autonomous republic in national legislation. The VR ARC created the [Legislative Initiatives Center](#) to discuss draft laws of Ukraine through a Crimea focus and pass recommendations to the VRU. They also worked together to include the normative acts and decisions of the VR ARC in the VRU database "Legal Acts" accessible through the [VRU website](#)

