The Role of E–Parliament in Hungary

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INTRODUCTION

The supreme legislative power of the Republic of Hungary is the unicameral National Assembly, which has 386 members.

The 1990 political changeover expedited the development of democratic institutions and substantially increased their importance. Besides the traditional media, electronic information has assumed an increasingly important role (European Commission, 1999).

The change of paradigm in the management of information is made necessary by the recognition that knowledge supports politics. Parliamentary work is one of the main sources of this. Thus, Parliament and its standing committees function as systems acquiring and processing information. These systems have so far tried to produce information from largely unstructured data in the course of written and verbal communication.

According to the new paradigm systematisation of the knowledge of the organisation and the environment will generate the knowledge base which will be suitable for upgrading the quality of political and professional processes (Hungarian Government, 2003).

The work in Parliament, the utterances of politicians are in the forefront of public attention. Therefore the staff of the Office of the National Assembly should provide access to current and accurate information on a continuous basis. In the information age this is a serious challenge for Parliament. This is why it has become necessary to determine the demands that electronic Parliament (e-Parliament) has to meet, and to devise ways for their gradual and systematic satisfaction.

BACKGROUND

This case study is aimed at describing the concept of e-Parliament in Hungary, its implementation, achievements and future plans. The following topics are addressed:

*   The political and legal background of the development of e-Parliament
*   The development of the information technology background of e-Parliament in Hungary
*   Social dimensions and relations of e-Parliament

THE POLITICAL AND LEGAL BACKGROUND OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF E-PARLIAMENT

At the end of 1999 the European Commission published the first eEurope Action Plan followed by eEurope 2002 and eEurope 2005.

On January 1, 2001 the Hungarian Parliament established the Informatics and Telecommunications Committee, a standing committee which has proved to be very useful in shaping the legal environment for an information society since its inception.

In 2001 Parliament subscribed to the goals specified in Chapter 3 of E-Government, the Electronic Government programme under the eEurope initiative, and became a part of the tasks outlined in the Action Plan.

Following its integration into the European Union on May 1, 2004 Hungary must realise the goals of the eEurope Action Plan approved by the Member States. The Action Plan aims to develop modern online public services (e-government) as well as a dynamic environment for e-business in all EU Member States by 2005.

This can be achieved through widespread availability of broadband access at competitive prices and a secure information infrastructure. To this end, Hungary launched the Public Network Programme in 2004, which makes broadband access available to all of the public institutions.

Launched in November 2004, the Internet Based Administrative Services system (XR) was a major step forward on the path to electronic public administration (Hungarian Act CXL of 2004).

The launching of e-government services was facilitated by the E-Government 2005 Strategy and Action Plan, which was drafted and put to social debate by the Centre for Electronic Government of the Prime Minister's Office at the end of September 2004 as part of the Information Society Strategy of Hungary.

The Centre for Electronic Government operates the Hungarian government portal at www.magyarorszag.hu, which serves as a point of entry to government services and offers interaction in certain matters. In addition, the portal presents news and information about the Government and the country, and provides the largest Hungarian database on the European Union (Hungarian Government Decree No. 44/2005 & 193/2005).

The Dialogue Forum is a particularly important feature of the portal. Unlike other online forums, it only accepts real names to log on. The operators expect people will formulate their opinion in a more deliberate fashion if they have to give their name.

The Ministry of Informatics and Communications and the Inter-ministerial Coordination Committee for Information Society envision submitting to the government the Hungarian Information Society Strategy before the end of 2004. Upon the request of the Ministry of Informatics the ministries and organisations concerned have prepared their respective sub-strategies, which contain, among others, programmes regarding the electronic signature and the smart card.

At its session on July 4, 2005 the Hungarian National Assembly passed Act XC of 2005 on the Freedom of Electronic Information with effect of January 1, 2006 except for some of the provisions, which will enter into force as of July 1, 2007. Implementation at the level of the Office will be ensured by the internal Rules and Regulations developed in 2005, which provides for the rules of disclosure of data of public interest, and of the provision of electronic information. Some of the contents of the Rules require expansion of the e-Parliament project.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ICT BACKGROUND OF E-PARLIAMENT IN HUNGARY

Today, processes supporting the work of Parliament are inconceivable without ICT support.

The Hungarian Parliament deployed its first major ICT investment between 1990 and 1992 with the involvement of American and EU (PHARE) funds. Currently the Office of the National Assembly operates nearly 1500 PC and laptop workstations and is equipped with reliable and up-to-date network and servers.

Based on the Oracle database management system, the Information System of Parliament (PAIR, by its Hungarian acronym) and the system in the assembly rooms have become an integral part of Parliament's everyday work and processes. Events related to the work in Parliament, documents and drafts are keyed in as part of the office routine and are made available for queries.

Even the early stage of development of Parliament's IT system included electronic information provided to citizens as a fundamental goal. The domain name of the Office of the National Assembly was registered by the Internet service provider on June 22, 1994. As a result Parliament has operated its own Web site on a continuous basis since 1995. The content has gradually been expanded as a result of upgrading of the IT system of Parliament.

The information system relying originally on static Web pages was replaced by dynamic data base query in 1998. This ensures that citizens can continuously monitor the functioning of Parliament, the events in plenary sessions including the votes and the committee meetings as well.

Further milestones in upgraded Internet services included regular live Internet broadcast of the plenary sessions from the beginning of the 2002 term as well as the option to search and play digitalised video recordings of speeches delivered in plenary sessions.

Annual review of the ICT strategy and full-fledged consolidation and upgrading of the medium term plan for 2005-2007 was concluded in December 2004. The plan allows for further expansion of the e-Parliament project by adding new tasks, which are handled by means of widely accepted modern IT solutions.

SOCIAL DIMENSION AND RELATIONS OF E-PARLIAMENT

The role of e-Parliament should be explored in the context of the social dimensions and relations of the electronic Parliament, which has been developed in an integrated system. Based on the functions and operation of Parliament, the social dimensions and connections can be classified as follows:

- Parliament's relations with citizens and civil organisations
- The system supporting MPs' work
- Parliament's internal processes and the system supporting decision making
- Relations with other branches of power and to administrative and social agencies
- Relations with foreign Parliaments

Parliament's Relations with Citizens and Civil Organisations

The relationship between Parliament and citizens is instrumental in terms of the exercise of democratic rights. Accordingly, the Office of the National Assembly gives a high priority to this issue. In this effort, in addition to traditional solutions, it makes use of electronic devices which meet the expectations of an information society.

A home page with an up-to-date content is a key tool of electronic information. It offers citizens and civil society organisations a clear picture of the structure and functioning of the National Assembly, its role within the legal order and society as well as of its fundamental task of legislation and related events. In Hungary citizens and

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