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Electronic Democracy

Committee Opinion[1]
Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs
Rapporteur: Mr Gerd HÖFER, Germany

A. Conclusions of the committee

The committee welcomes the draft resolution and draft recommendation presented by the Political Affairs Committee, which cover a broad range of aspects related to e-democracy and are drafted in a most constructive spirit. The committee also appreciates the proposals made in the draft resolution concerning the development of e-parliament and, in particular, the promotion of e-democracy at the parliamentary level in Europe. Thus, the Political Affairs Committee has fully met the expectations expressed in the conclusions of the general rapporteurs of the Madrid Forum for the Future of Democracy on "e-democracy who dares".[2] In order to draw attention to some specific issues, the committee has prepared three amendments.

B. Proposed amendments to the draft resolution

Amendment A : (to the draft resolution)

At the end of paragraph 13 of the draft resolution, add the following words:

> *"However, it should also be borne in mind that e-democracy tools are not themselves a miracle cure for democratic challenges".*

Amendment B : (to the draft resolution)

After paragraph 20 of the draft resolution, insert the following new paragraph:

> *"The Assembly invites the Bureau to ask the competent Assembly committee to examine if the application of further ICT instruments for the Assembly requires the adaptation of the Assembly's Rules of Procedure."*

Amendment C : (to the draft resolution)

At the end of paragraph 21 of the draft resolution, add the words:

> *"To this end the Assembly decides to organise a round table on the development of e-parliament in Europe".*

1. Doc.11783 tabled by the Political Affairs Committee.
2. "The forum welcomes the current work of the Parliamentary Assembly on e-democracy and calls on it to take further initiatives in particular with regard to e-parliament. Indeed e-parliament can help parliament at all levels, as well as elected representatives, to better fulfil their role as representatives of the people."

C. Explanatory memorandum, by Mr Gerd Höfer

1. Introduction

1. The opinion of the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs will deal, in the first place, with an essential dimension of e-democracy, namely e-parliament.[3] It will contribute to the considerations of the Political Affairs Committee in respect of:

– the new relationship between citizens/stakeholders and parliaments/MPs, for their mutual benefit;

– easier and better access to the work of parliaments and MPs through information and communication technologies (ICT).

The relationship between these subjects and the procedures and practices of parliaments, including those of the Parliamentary Assembly, will be highlighted.

2. Furthermore, the opinion will submit considerations regarding some e-democracy instruments not directly related to parliament and include a section on ICT tools in the Parliamentary Assembly.

2. Parliament, information society, information and communication technologies (ICT) – what is an e-parliament?

3. The world we are living in, the information society, has been marked by ICT and by the Internet in particular. Parliaments could not ignore the growing influence of ICT and, under the impact of these technologies, parliamentary activity has undergone a fundamental change, particularly in how parliaments interact with the electorate and civil society. Many consider that parliament has a "new status" in the information society. The Secretary General of the Interparliamentary Union has recently said that e-parliament is synonymous with parliament in the modern world.

4. The World e-Parliament Report 2008 defines e-parliament as a legislature that is empowered to be more transparent, accessible and accountable through ICT. It enables people to be more engaged in public life by providing greater access to its parliamentary documents and activities. It is an organisation where connected shareholders use information and communication technologies to support its primary functions of representation, law-making and oversight more effectively. Through the application of modern technology and standards and the adoption of supportive policies, e-parliament fosters the development of an equitable and inclusive information society.[4]

3. The new relationship between citizens/stakeholders and parliament/MPs

3.1. Disenchantment of citizens concerning democracy and parliamentary institutions

5. Already in the past, parliaments and their processes did not meet with much interest from citizens. Black and white photos of elderly, little known people sitting in parliament were not very attractive. Rather abstract texts by political professors describing parliament in general publications for citizens did not generate interest in parliamentary work.

6. The report of the Political Affairs Committee by Mr Szabó has pertinently described the current alienation of citizens from political processes and referred to the Assembly's debates and texts adopted on this subject (for example, paragraph 45 of Resolution 1547 (2007). Many people believe that they are

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3. More recently, the Council of Europe has dealt with e-parliament in a workshop organised by its intergovernmental Ad Hoc Committee on e-democracy (CAHDE), in Vienna on 12 December 2007, the informal conclusions of which are available on www.bmeia.gv.at/botschaft/auslandsoesterreicher/ratgeber/wahlen/e-democracy/council-of-Europe.

A draft recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member states, prepared by CAHDE, contains large sections on e-parliament.

4. See World e-Parliament Report 2008, executive summary, p. vii. According to paragraph 34 of the draft Council of Europe recommendation to member states on e-democracy, currently under examination, the term "electronic parliament" refers to all measures aimed at promoting an increased use of new ICTs by parliamentarians and their administrative staff in the exercise of their tasks. Its main goal is to facilitate the work performed by parliamentarians and, by doing so, improve its quality. Another important objective is to actively involve citizens. "E-parliament" refers to legislative, consultative and deliberative assemblies at international, national, regional and local levels and has many stakeholders: members, political and administrative staff, electors, citizens and media. Some consider that the term e-parliament is at least partially misleading, as this is not yet a form of parliamentarism, but rather a process.

powerless to change or influence the system of government. Parliaments appear to be particularly affected by the citizen's disenchantment. Indeed, in states where the executive power is elected by universal and direct suffrage, the rate of abstention in legislative elections is substantially higher than in executive elections. This is a general and structural phenomenon which goes beyond individual states and which concerns both long-established and more recent democracies. It becomes manifest, for instance, in electoral behaviour characterised by high rates of abstention and recourse to protest and sanction votes.

7. Astonishingly, citizens remain committed concerning certain favourite political issues. The situations in Iraq, in the Middle East and in other areas of the world regularly motivate citizens to organise and participate in major demonstrations. Furthermore, in several European countries, there have been closely contested elections with narrow results.

3.2. New ways to improve participation by citizens in parliamentary and political life

3.2.1. Increased contacts between the public, parliaments and MPs

8. The solution to citizens' political disenchantment and to the distance between citizens and the state is often seen in more active participation, in more participatory democracy and in e-governance. The report of the Political Affairs Committee rightly underlines that ICT offers great potential for improving democratic practice and participation, transparency, accountability and the responsiveness of democratic institutions. ICT is also a major tool that can be used to promote citizens' engagement and to increase the empowerment, accessibility and inclusiveness of the political process.

9. This applies fully to parliaments and MPs. The relationship between parliamentarians and citizens, which is vital to democracy, is being reshaped by new technologies and applications. For years, active citizens and other stakeholders have demanded better information and transparency, as well as greater possibilities to contribute to and influence politics. In former times, parliamentary transparency consisted of the presence of citizens in the public galleries of parliamentary buildings and having the possibility to read the verbatim reports of the debates some time after the event, although it was not always easy to get them. Today, everybody may follow parliamentary debates that are broadcast live on the Internet. Several parliaments allow interested citizens to follow the progress of legislative work in parliaments and, if appropriate, to make comments electronically. Most parliamentarians now have an interactive dialogue with their citizens. More details will be given in chapter IV of this opinion.

10. In order to improve interactivity and operativeness, the parliament's websites should include programmes by which voters can express their opinions and proposals and can suggest legislative initiatives or amendments, which parliamentarians should take into consideration.

11. In order for legislators to become more interactive and operative, there will need to be programmes which through the Web 2.0 and the development of political networks by political parties (along the lines of LInkedLn and similar networking tools) make it possible to view citizens' participation in political life in a new way, namely as a kind of "participative parliamentarism", in the sense of a participative democracy. Such a development could offer new alternatives to members of parliament and could take inspiration from the American presidential campaign in 2008. In order for this to function, the active participation of MPs, their willingness to give satisfactory replies and the involvement of well-trained technical staff would obviously be important.[5] In addition, there may be some competition between citizens and NGOs, as well as between businesses, concerning the political issues being raised electronically with parliamentarians. Admittedly, while NGOs and businesses are likely to want broader involvement with political actors, many citizens are generally interested in just a few political subjects.

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5. By January 2009, more than 82 000 people had e-mailed their main concerns to Mr Obama's website "open for questions" (for further details see *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* of 19 January 2009). Under the website's heading "This is your America", citizens involved in NGOs were invited to communicate new, innovating and successful experiences, which could be usefully duplicated. During the election campaign, Mr Obama's team received over 13 million e-mail addresses. This has created both admiration and concern. It is feared that this impressive network could become the means for militant groups to influence the White House. Furthermore, it is thought that, when the first problem arises between the next President and the Congress, Mr Obama could try to mobilise the 13 million people to send e-mails and make telephone calls to their MPs and other actors, risking a total blockage of their telephone lines (see *Le Monde* of 5 January 2009).

3.2.2. Do the new instruments increase political participation by the general public?

12. It is probably too early to raise this question and therefore also to propose answers, as there is not yet sufficient, generally-accepted appreciation material available. At this stage, it is therefore sufficient to discuss some of the arguments put forward by political scientists and by the media, without proposing any evaluation. Political scientists:[6]

– are not unanimous in believing that those citizens who are traditionally uninvolved in politics can be mobilised via the Internet;[7]

– suggest that while ICTs increase the formation of political opinions they do not markedly promote political participation;

– consider that there are increased exchanges between well-known bloggers and the traditional media and that these bloggers increasingly manage to launch subjects or revive neglected issues; this demonstrates only that ICTs have changed the instruments and methods of communication; it does not necessarily mean that these new instruments are being used by persons who have formerly been uninvolved in politics, and that, in general, more citizens are becoming interested in politics;

– underline that only 0.5% of all Internet pages deal explicitly with politics and observe that the presumption that the Internet would create political interest had not proved to be accurate;

– most websites of political parties, and also of MPs, in the member states essentially follow marketing strategies and encourage real political participation to a much lesser extent.

13. It would appear from the EU Commission-funded EPRI knowledge study on Information Society Technologies for Parliamentarians (January 2005) that, as regards relations between parliamentarians and citizens, new groups of citizens are not necessarily reached through ICT, that increased (electronic) contacts with citizens do not always lead to a better understanding by parliamentarians of their citizens' needs or interests, and that citizens do not often make innovative statements in their electronic communications with parliamentarians. On the other hand, parliamentarians appreciate the faster dissemination of information about their views and activities through ICT and are able to make contact with citizens more easily and broadly. The study further reports that negative side effects of ICT are a constant overload of information and the receipt of too much spam. Moreover, ICTs create higher expectations by the public for faster, direct and personal responses from their parliamentarians.

14. Concerning citizens' participation in elections, it is argued that a majority of those abstaining do not omit to make use of their right to vote because they are not in a position to do so, but because they simply do not wish to do so. This also has to be borne in mind for e-democracy tools.

3.2.3. Electronic monitoring of the activity of parliamentarians ("e-politician")

15. Electronic monitoring of the activity of parliamentarians consists of informing the public electronically on the work being performed by its elected representatives. Such monitoring is sometimes initiated by the representatives themselves. It would, in this case, be organised in the form of a blog or a website dedicated to a parliamentarian's political activities.

16. Alternatively, electronic monitoring of parliamentarians can also be organised by civil society, which collects information on parliamentarians' activities and performances and makes this information available to the public electronically. A good example of a website of this kind is www.theyworkforyou.com, developed by the NGO *UK Citizens Online Democracy*, which provides detailed statistics on the participation in debates and electoral behaviour of parliamentarians in the UK. Other examples are www.stemwijzer.nl, developed by the Dutch NGO *Instituut voor Publiek en Politiek (IPP)* or the Austrian www.wahlkabine.at. The report by Mr Szabó for the Political Affairs Committee notes (paragraph 65 of Doc. 11783) that MP-watch websites are becoming more and more popular and that one may expect, once they are well established in the political landscape, that they will be followed by the citizen's right to recall their representatives.

17. Furthermore, the websites of several national parliaments (Switzerland, for example) allow one to find, when clicking on the name of a member, his/her parliamentary initiatives in the chamber and his/her votes and speeches in plenary sittings.

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6. See the names indicated in an article in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* of 28 September 2008, p. 31.
7. According to an article in *Le Monde* of 16 January 2009 the "on-line democracy" in Korea has shown the limits of participatory democracy because of its emotional character, the great diversity of the contested subjects and the absence of direction.

18. Participation of members in plenary sittings and votes in plenary are also available on the website of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly.

19. It has to be borne in mind that systematic monitoring of the activities of parliamentarians could result in additional pressure on individual members and on parliaments as a whole. This and other aspects could be analysed once more information on the practice of monitoring becomes available.

20. In some international assemblies, the presence of members is monitored in order to reduce absenteeism. This is the case in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, following the preparation of a report on this matter by Mr Andreas Gross (Resolution 1583 (2007). Experience will show if the measures taken by the Assembly will result in an increased presence of members in plenary and committee sessions and a greater participation in the Organisation's work in general.

21. In at least two Council of Europe member states, democracy platforms use the Internet to fight for the right of citizens to ask for the dissolution of parliament by referendum. Following a very successful initiative in Latvia, the Latvian Parliament decided, in August 2008, to provide for the possibility of dissolving the legislature by referendum. It is likely that by March 2009 the Latvian Parliament will adopt a corresponding constitutional amendment. According to a study by the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe (CDL-AD(2007)037 add. 4), currently only Liechtenstein allows a dissolution of parliament following a popular initiative.

4. Easier and better work for parliaments and members through ICT

4.1. Faster and better information on the work of parliaments and members

4.1.1. Reporting of plenary debates of parliaments and committee meetings

22. Some years ago it was acceptable if provisional verbatim reports of plenary sittings and meetings were published one or two days after the sitting and the minutes of committee meetings one or two weeks later. The proceedings of parliamentary hearings were often produced much later. The current norm is that members, and increasingly the public, are able to follow parliamentary events, including public parliamentary hearings, via real-time Internet broadcasting. Such web television often provides background information on the parliament, its members and its legislative work.

23. Within international parliamentary institutions, access to information on sittings and meetings is often given to professionals and citizens through RSS feeds and pod casts. Difficulties resulting from several official languages were, or are about to be, successfully overcome. In the European Parliament, the plenary sittings are web-streamed in 23 languages. The Parliamentary Assembly transmits its debates by video. Interpretation into several languages is foreseen for 2009. Some parliaments have extended web television to committee meetings.[8] However, in certain national parliaments and international Assemblies committee meetings are not public unless specifically agreed by the relevant committee. Another important type of documentary material used by committees is that relating to hearings involving witnesses. Audio and video technologies are used to make this material increasingly available in real time.

4.1.2. Instant retrieval of parliamentary documents including draft legislative documents

24. Practically all parliaments in Europe, including international assemblies, give citizens electronic access to all public parliamentary documents. Increasingly, this includes committee documents. Depending on each parliament's rules for distribution of committee documents, these are either generally electronically available or available after declassification by the committee. At the Parliamentary Assembly, two of the ten general committees have put on the Assembly's website recent committee documents which were either not classified or which had been declassified. Restricted or confidential documents are electronically accessible through special systems, such as Intranet or Extranet, for members, the secretariat of the institution and other authorised persons.

25. Most parliaments enable the public to track the progress of draft legislation from the first deliberations in committee and amendments in plenary until the law is adopted. This is valid *mutatis mutandis* for some international assemblies. As the latter do not have legislative competences, it is possible to track the process

8. This will be realised in the European Parliament in 2009.

electronically, from the tabling of a motion by members until the adoption of a resolution (or a recommendation to a Committee of Ministers).[9] This facility will be provided in the Parliamentary Assembly in 2009.

26. Users of parliamentary websites vary greatly (from party whips and professors on the one side, to the general public on the other); they have a different level of knowledge concerning legislative processes and their ability to understand legislative texts varies. It is very difficult to develop systems enabling such diverse users to find useful information quickly. In any case, information available on parliamentary websites regarding draft legislation should not be complex. Parliaments which explain processes and assist citizens to understand issues would therefore make the difference. Experts propose that there should be as many links as possible to the necessary background information on parliamentary bills. When parliaments make draft legislation, draft amendments, etc. available to the public, this opens them up to scrutiny, questions and possibly also criticism.[10] This would particularly be the case if public legislative websites of parliaments allowed the public to indicate their views on bills and on policy issues. Depending on the workload of parliaments and MPs it would be appropriate not to raise too high expectations concerning possible responses to citizens' requests.

4.2. Members' websites

27. A wide range of users increasingly expect to find appropriate information on members of their parliament or their constituency. Furthermore, they hope to be able to communicate electronically with the MPs and to communicate their own views on policy issues. From the user's point of view, it is most important that the website contains information on the policy issues and on the MPs' positions and actions in addressing them. There may be problems depending on the number of information requests and also on whether NGOs and lobbyists make use of them.

4.3. Changed working methods for parliaments and members: a more informed legislature

28. Most national parliaments have web-based systems for managing library, research and/or archive resources. They generally provide information services linked specifically to policy issues and legislation being considered by parliaments. To draft bills, motions and prepare questions to governments, MPs can use these services and have recourse to numerous other data and information, some of which will be available only on internal networks of their parliaments (Intranet) and not be available to the general public.

29. MPs and their staff can, thanks to ICT, build their own databases. Closer contacts with citizens and stakeholders will also give them more information concerning the implementation of laws. Members will thus be better equipped for their supervisory role.

4.4. "Mobile" legislature – remote tabling of documents and voting

30. New information and communications technologies allow, for instance, parliamentarians to be provided with all resources and documents in electronic form, hence in a simple and personalised way. Thanks to a personalised "warning system", parliamentarians can be automatically informed on events which are of interest to them (for example, the tabling of a motion on a particular subject; the availability of committee and plenary documents). Access to the resources over a secured internet connection would provide parliamentarians with the possibility of carrying out their tasks irrespective of their whereabouts, including, for example, remote tabling of documents, contributions to committee meetings (statements and amendments, for example) and voting on parliamentary decisions.

31. Some argue that e-voting is contrary to the imperatives of democracy. An MP should always vote in person rather than through the medium of e-voting. A paper submitted to the 2007 World e-Parliament Conference noted that although they had considered allowing remote or offsite voting, few parliaments had allowed its application.[11]

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9. In case of a consultation of the Assembly by the Committee of Ministers (CM) on a draft legal text (draft convention, etc.), the process would start with the draft forwarded by the CM, include the committee work with the preparation of draft amendments and end with the adoption by the Assembly of the opinion to the CM.

10. A.B. Johnsson at the World e-Parliament Conference 2008, Brussels, 25 November 2008.

11. See discussion paper by Jeffrey C. Griffith and others for World e-Parliament Conference 2007 (Geneva, 11 October 2007) on ICT in parliaments, current practices, future possibilities, p. 8.

32. A project financed by the European Commission aiming at developing a "virtual desktop" for parliamentarians involves the national parliaments of the Netherlands, Lithuania and Hungary. In the Lithuanian Parliament it is now also possible, for instance, to raise questions electronically during press conferences. This allows press conferences to be held more efficiently and thus enhances satisfaction among both participating parliamentarians and media representatives.[12]

33. While some of these remote e-parliament tools may be interesting for the Parliamentary Assembly, others would have to be analysed with caution in regard to their possible implications. As is shown by the work of the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation (see ECPRD Request No.1128/2009), the question of the electronic submission and distribution of documents ("paperless parliament") is currently topical at the level of parliaments in Europe. This facility, completed by an electronic signature, is not yet provided for in the Assembly's Rules of Procedure and also not yet applied in practice. Because of the Assembly's problems regarding the presence of members in plenary sittings and committee meetings, remote voting on parliamentary decisions should not be encouraged.

34. A final possible development of remote parliamentary tools could be the image of the "mobile parliamentarian", who would no longer have to physically take part in committee meetings and plenary sessions. There is no need to discuss such eventualities in depth here. Currently, the serious studies on e-parliament consider that[13] ICT-based decision support tools can never replace the role of the elected representative in making challenging and often difficult choices.[14] Furthermore, development of policies generally requires a high level of negotiation, direction and administration, particularly in parliaments.[15] At the meeting of the Association of European Senates in Vienna on 18 April 2008, several presidents of senates underscored the importance of the personal element in parliamentary work. In this connection, it also has to be borne in mind that the work in parliament is subject to special procedure and practice which have evolved over many years to ensure fairness and efficiency in the legislative process. Some procedural motions may be difficult for the layman to understand, and this can also be the case for the interpretation of votes by individual members.[16]

4.5. Electronic petitions ("e-petitions")

35. The term "electronic petitions" refers to proposals, expressions of opinion, or complaints relating to the work of the parliament and expressed by members of civil society in electronic form.

36. A way of promoting electronic petitions would be to create a website which provides electronic procedures for submission of proposals to parliament by civil society. The follow-up to be given to these proposals would then have to be considered by a competent parliamentary committee or sub-committee and at the end of the process, at the latest, feedback would have to be presented to the petitioners. Comparable structures are already being successfully implemented by the German Bundestag and the Scottish Parliament. Likewise, citizens of the European Union enjoy the right to submit their petitions addressed to the European Parliament electronically, in accordance with Article 194 TEC.

37. According to Rule 63 of the Assembly's Rules of Procedure, citizens enjoy the right to submit petitions to the President of the Assembly. A petition declared admissible is referred by the Bureau of the Assembly to the competent committees for examination. Since 1990, 15 petitions have been referred to the Bureau for further action; 8 petitions were declared admissible by the Bureau; of these 8 petitions, 4 had no immediate effect,[17] whereas 4 petitions resulted in the adoption of resolutions by the Assembly or the Standing Committee.

38. Despite the limited number of petitions submitted to the Parliamentary Assembly, the development of a system of electronic petitions could be considered in due course, after the achievement of other, more important, e-parliament applications.

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12. Presentation held by Mrs Birute Leonaviciene on the occasion of the European Center for Parliamentary Research & Documentation's seminar on ICT held in Copenhagen from 29 to 31 October 2008.
13. For example, the discussion paper by Jeffrey C. Griffith and others for the World e-Parliament Conference 2007, p. 8.
14. See also, in this connection, the article on "on-line democracy in Korea" published in *Le Monde* of 16 January 2009, which raises the issues of "cyberpopulism", "netizens" (citizens of the net) and direct democracy.
15. See Victor Gil Halindo, La democracia electronica, http://hiper-textos.mty.itesm.mx/num1gil.html, page 6.
16. Sometimes amendments are tabled to delay the adoption of the final text, albeit for some days only.
17. No further action was taken by the committees to which the petitions were referred to in two cases and by the Bureau in one case. In a fourth case, the national delegation invited by a committee to prepare a report did not do so.

5. Instruments of electronic democracy not directly related to parliament

39. In Paragraph 17.11 of Recommendation 1791 (2007) on the state of human rights and democracy in Europe, the Assembly recommends that the Committee of Ministers encourage member states to "consider the introduction of elements of direct democracy, such as the right of citizens to ask for referenda and propose legislative initiatives". This also includes electronic consultations.

40. On the one hand, electronic consultation consists of the launching of a website inviting its visitors to express their opinion on a particular question. The impact of such an initiative depends on the number and quality of opinions expressed.

41. On the other hand, electronic consultation also consists of the collection of the opinions of a predefined population on a particular question. The impact of such an initiative depends on the legitimacy of the chosen group. The main difficulty in the predefinition of such a group is technical in nature, as it must be guaranteed that all members of the group have the capacity to submit their opinion electronically. In 2004, the Council of Europe organised an electronic referendum in 80 European schools, during which 94% of the consulted students expressed themselves in favour of a new European school charter.

42. One problem posed by electronic consultations is that of the legitimacy of such an expression of popular opinion. In an extreme case, electronic referenda could be used to validate and give legitimacy to decisions which are contrary to international obligations. The problem of a discrepancy between the will of the people expressed by means of direct democracy on one side, and international law on the other, is particularly well-known in Switzerland.[18]

43. Currently, the constitutions of 15 of the 47 Council of Europe member states provide for the right of citizens (or a group of citizens) to introduce bills in parliament (popular initiative). A recent report by the Council of Europe's Venice Commission on legislative initiative[19] states that the government normally dominates the legislative process, because the executive power, combined with the necessary confidence of the parliamentary majority, is inclined to give preference to the proposals of the government. According to the Commission, the right of legislative initiative of parliamentarians is more significant with regard to their right to make amendments.

6. E-parliament tools at the Parliamentary Assembly

44. It is not possible to describe here the numerous electronic innovations introduced in the Assembly in recent years. Electronic instruments which enhance efficiency of the work within the Assembly include, *inter alia*, an electronic voting system and electronic devices for dealing with amendments. Electronic innovations aimed at increasing transparency of the Assembly's work comprise video transmissions of Assembly debates, communications on the Assembly's daily work on the Assembly's website, and an electronic collection of different types of Assembly documents since 1949. On 19 January 2009, the Assembly installed an RSS feed on its website. Moreover, interaction between Assembly members and staff on one side and the public on the other is considerably facilitated by the availability of the e-mail addresses of parliamentarians and Assembly staff to the general public.

45. New initiatives for further introduction of e-parliament instruments include the provision of video podcasts, interpretation into several languages for videos on Assembly debates and the establishment of an electronic system allowing one to follow the fate of a motion from its tabling until the adoption of a resolution or recommendation by the Assembly. Moreover, it could be envisaged to follow the efforts already made by several national parliaments to involve parliamentarians more closely in the development of their parliaments as regards the introduction of electronic devices.

46. At this stage, it might be appropriate to proceed to an assessment of the costs incurred by this additional setting up of e-parliament instruments. Member states could thereby serve as a valuable source of information in this respect, as good practice is already widespread among them.

47. The possible application of new ICT instruments for the Assembly, such as the electronic submission and distribution of documents in the Assembly (see paragraph 33 above) and possibly, at a later stage of e-petitions (see paragraph 38 above) and other tools, would require the adaptation of the Rules of Procedure. This has already been done with respect to electronic reporting of Assembly debates.

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18. See, for instance, "Direkte Demokratie im Würgegriff des Rechts?", *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 14 June 2007, page 33.
19. See CDL-AD(2008)035.

7. Conclusions

48. Building on the excellent report by Mr Szabó for the Political Affairs Committee, this opinion has tried to highlight how ICT tools, and the new relationship they create between MPs and their electorates, may improve key functions of parliament. Of particular importance is that electors have the desire to influence the system of government. This has been well expressed by the former leader of the United Kingdom House of Commons, Robin Cook:

> *"There is a connection waiting to be made between the decline in democratic participation and the explosion in new ways in communicating. We need not accept the paradox that gives us more ways than ever to speak and leaves the public with a wider feeling than ever before that their voices are not being heard. The new technologies can strengthen our democracy by giving us greater opportunities than ever before for better transparency and a more responsive relationship between government and electors."*

Reporting committee: Political Affairs Committee.

Committee seized for opinion: Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs.

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Opinion unanimously approved by the committee on 26 January 2009.

Secretariat of the committee: Mr Heinrich, Mrs Clamer.