

Resolution 1653 (2009)¹

Electronic democracy

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The Parliamentary Assembly recalls that the Council of Europe is the oldest pan-European institution standing for democratic principles and human rights. It has established an important *acquis* in this field, which constitutes a reference for the development of democratic systems. This *acquis* has been achieved through the elaboration of legal instruments, the development of democratic institutions and the establishment of institutional structures and practices.
2. The Assembly in particular devotes considerable attention to different aspects of democracy. Its regular debates on the state of democracy in Europe aim to identify the main concerns and shortcomings in Council of Europe member states, and to propose remedies. In this context, it recalls its [Resolutions 1547 \(2007\)](#) on the state of human rights and democracy in Europe and 1617 (2008) on the state of democracy in Europe – specific challenges facing European democracies: the case of diversity and migration.
3. The Council of Europe Forum for the Future of Democracy, established in 2005 by the heads of state and government, is highly instrumental in fostering the exchange of ideas, the sharing of good practices and the elaboration of proposals aimed at remedying democratic deficits. What makes this forum unique is that it is based on the active involvement of parliamentarians, representatives of governments, civil society and academia.
4. Democracy is never completely acquired or perfect; it is an ongoing process that is constantly faced with new challenges and needs to adapt itself to new situations. Perhaps the most important among these new challenges is the alienation of citizens from political processes. Traditional representative democracies tend to limit citizens' participation to the simple act of voting. Voters, however, feel that elections do not offer real choices between genuinely different policy options and therefore they feel unable to influence the processes of political decision making.
5. The development of the information society should be considered as both a challenge and an opportunity to provide the means for enhancing democratic principles and responding to certain shortcomings and deficits of democratic systems.
6. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) offer great potential for improving democratic practice and participation, transparency, accountability and responsiveness of democratic institutions. They create opportunities to promote citizens' engagement and increase empowerment and the accessibility and inclusiveness of the democratic process.
7. Electronic democracy (e-democracy) must not be regarded, however, as a tool for replacing representative democracy by participative democracy. Representative democratic systems can naturally be complemented by elements of participative democracy. Nevertheless, this must be the decision of the society and not necessarily a consequence of using ICTs.

1. *Assembly debate* on 30 January 2009 (9th Sitting) (see [Doc. 11783](#), report of the Political Affairs Committee, rapporteur: Mr Szabó; and [Doc. 11810](#), opinion of the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs, rapporteur: Mr Höfer). *Text adopted by the Assembly* on 30 January 2009 (9th Sitting). See also [Recommendation 1860 \(2009\)](#).



8. E-democracy is primarily about democracy and not about technology. E-tools may be highly instrumental in strengthening traditional representative democracy and in contributing to the improvement of its quality. E-democracy is not a substitute for representative democracy, but should be seen as a complementary addition.
9. The technological evolution of e-democracy should be pursued in accordance with democratic principles. E-democracy can only be instrumental in a democratic environment in which human rights and the rule of law are implemented and observed. Freedom of expression and the existence of independent and pluralistic media constitute a necessary precondition for societies that wish to take full advantage of the benefits of e-democracy.
10. The risks for democracy linked to the development of ICTs, which include unequal access potentially resulting in e-exclusion and e-discrimination as well as possible abuses, should not be underestimated. Rules and regulatory frameworks including safeguards to protect citizens should be drawn up and implemented at an early stage.
11. Generalised access to e-tools is a necessary condition for the success of e-democracy and for the elimination of the risk of a “technology gap”. This includes not only access in terms of equipment and affordable connections but also considerable efforts in education and training, in particular with regard to older generations and other vulnerable categories of the population.
12. E-democracy, like democracy itself, should involve all the constituents of society including citizens, politicians, political institutions, civil society and media. All of them should be engaged in the development of e-democracy from an early stage and to this end a clear political vision followed by the creation of adequate conditions are necessary.
13. The Assembly acknowledges that ICTs have become essential in supporting the work of legislative bodies. Furthermore, e-democracy provides elected representatives with unprecedented means of engaging in dialogue with their constituencies. The voters, for their part, have an effective tool to monitor their representatives’ actions. These possibilities add a new dimension to the traditional notions of representative and participatory democracies and, at the same time, motivate citizens to step up their participation in the political process. However, it should also be borne in mind that e-democracy tools are not a miracle cure for democratic challenges.
14. The Assembly welcomes the growing introduction and systematic use of ICTs in the work of public institutions at all levels of government. They increasingly serve not only to provide citizens with information and enable them to communicate with the authorities, but they are also instrumental in engaging citizens in the decision-making process (e-consultations, e-referenda, e-initiatives).
15. Local and regional levels are particularly appropriate for promoting the use of e-tools in the political process. Therefore, the Assembly welcomes the work of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe in this field, and in particular its [Resolutions 266 \(2008\)](#) on e-tools: a response to the needs of local authorities, and 267 (2008) on electronic democracy and deliberative consultation on urban projects.
16. The role of civil society in introducing and promoting e-democracy is crucial. The Assembly notes with satisfaction a rapidly increasing civic mobilisation which results in e-initiatives and the creation of pressure groups using e-tools in order to influence the political process. The work of the Council of Europe’s Conference of INGOs on the Code of Good Practice on Civic Participation, which includes a section on e-democracy, is to be commended.
17. The Assembly is of the opinion that the Council of Europe can considerably contribute to the further introduction and promotion of e-democracy in its member states. Further regulatory action, harmonisation and education is needed. The Assembly notes with satisfaction the work of the Ad hoc Committee on E-democracy of the Committee of Ministers (CAHDE), and is convinced that its work should be pursued.
18. Taking note of existing Council of Europe legal instruments in the field of democracy, including the Committee of Ministers Recommendation Rec(2004)11 on legal, operational and technical standards for e-voting and Recommendation Rec(2004)15 on e-governance, the Assembly invites the Committee of Ministers to finalise its work and adopt without delay the draft recommendation under preparation on electronic democracy.
19. The Assembly calls on all stakeholders to take into account and translate into specific action the conclusions of the Council of Europe Forum for the Future of Democracy, devoted to e-democracy, which was held in Madrid from 15 to 17 October 2008.

20. Furthermore, the Assembly calls on:

20.1. national parliaments and their members to make full use of the opportunities offered by ICTs with a view to improving the quality of representative democracy and in particular to:

20.1.1. develop a political vision for the application of ICTs in the political process, and consider the introduction of relevant legislation, particularly with regard to the rights of citizens to launch new legislation or modify existing laws;

20.1.2. set up ad hoc committees responsible for preparing annual reports for the parliament on the current status of e-inclusion and e-democracy;

20.1.3. review national legislation with a view to introducing legal standards for using e-tools in the political process, and to eliminating the risks of their misuse, both technical and political, notably as regards human rights and security issues, including data protection and the security of documents, voting, networking and information;

20.1.4. develop a vision for innovation and the application of ICTs within the parliamentary setting, initiate strategic planning and ensure its effective management;

20.1.5. provide citizens with the possibility of following the work of parliament and its members, allowing for maximum transparency;

20.1.6. improve their institutions' ability to interact with citizens and to encourage dialogue between citizens and their elected representatives;

20.1.7. develop and establish good practices as regards the active participation of citizens in the political process, including e-consultation;

20.1.8. actively seek links with, and promote, social networking activities with a view to building on the ideas about e-democracy developed within civil society;

20.1.9. continue and, where appropriate, reinforce their contribution to enhanced inter-parliamentary co-operation by electronic means, including in the framework of the Global Centre for Information and Communication Technologies in Parliament under the aegis of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and to promote the adoption of internationally recognised data standards for sharing legislative information;

20.1.10. ensure adequate financial resources for the implementation of the above recommendations, as well as training in the use of e-tools for politicians and staff;

20.2. national authorities at all levels to make full use of the opportunities offered by ICTs with a view to improving communication between public institutions and citizens, and increasing the empowerment of the latter, and in particular to:

20.2.1. develop a coherent vision for the application of ICTs in contacts with citizens aimed at providing them with adequate information and ensuring interaction;

20.2.2. introduce a regulatory framework for this vision;

20.2.3. involve citizens in the decision-making process through systematic consultation and develop good practices;

20.2.4. develop contacts with civil society with a view to making full use of their initiatives and ideas in the field of e-democracy;

20.2.5. undertake educational initiatives in society aimed at eliminating discrepancies in the access to and use of ICT tools between different categories of population;

20.2.6. ensure adequate financing for the development of e-democracy and training for staff involved;

20.3. the Secretary General of the Council of Europe and the Secretary General of the Assembly to:

20.3.1. ensure that the question of e-democracy and related issues are given appropriate attention in the work of the Council of Europe and the Assembly, and that the Organisation plays a leading role in promoting e-democracy in Europe by elaborating guidelines, setting standards and proposing solutions for regulatory mechanisms and harmonisation in its member states;

20.3.2. make full use of ICTs in the work of the Organisation and to ensure adequate financial resources to this end;

20.3.3. set up training and co-operation programmes, including at the parliamentary level, aimed at promoting e-democracy and developing skills to make full use of it;

20.3.4. set up a website that collects the best practices and related documents and have them translated into member states' languages;

20.3.5. support independent research to publish a yearly review about e-democracy;

20.3.6. with the co-operation of information technology companies, set up a competency centre for e-democracy to publish the results of research and developments of worldwide innovative solutions on e-government, e-inclusion and e-democracy;

20.3.7. start a campaign to disseminate the ideas of e-democracy and organise a conference to share the best practices of worldwide solutions.

21. 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 Rules of Procedure.

22. The Assembly resolves to follow the question of e-democracy and to promote it at the parliamentary level in Council of Europe member states. To this end the Assembly decides to organise a round table on the development of e-parliaments in Europe.