
Summary of the 8th EPRI conference of Members of Parliament on Information and Communication Technologies

- Mr. Jiri Oberfalzer, MP, Czech Republic-

Mr. Chairman, dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to start by thanking you for giving me the opportunity to reflect what has happened since some of us met in Prague last year. The aim of the 8th EPRI conference was to maintain the exchange of recent experiences and their visible consequences on the implementation of new ICT standards, by looking at single actions as well as long term strategies.

The speakers at the Prague Conference presented a portfolio of experiences and requirements how European governments can foster the role of the public sectors and influence the setting of ICT standards. Best practice cases as well as experiences made by different countries were visualised.

It was recognised by the participants of the 8th EPRI conference that an efficient and effective government must also focus on enhancing democratic participation and to create decision making processes more transparent. The public sector reform and transformation which is currently taking place is inspired by Information Technology and should therefore also be applied to democratic processes and should lead to more political transparency. In this respect it was underlined that, Parliaments as key figures in the governance sphere need to be included in the evolution of the 'e-government' sector. Especially in the field of delivering better services to citizens it is important that public administrations are involved right from the start.

As you may remember, during the conference the discussion focused on three major themes:

1. Assessment of eDemocracy applications
2. Implementation of eDemocracy as a complementary to eGovernment
3. Fostering and creating eDemocracy in the future

For those of you who did not participate in Prague I would like to give a short summary.

1. Assessing eDemocracy

The Presentations referred to the possibilities of assessing the effectiveness of eDemocracy applications. Moreover a catalogue which can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of eDemocracy initiatives was introduced. The catalogue enabled the participants to scrutinize their own local activities and to set them in a critical context. Especially in consideration of the turnout of voters it was agreed on the fact that there is a need to concentrate even more on the communication towards the citizens and to examine existing eDemocracy applications.

2. Implementation of eDemocracy as a complementary to eGovernment

It was emphasised that parliamentarians as key actors in eGovernment need to be more included in the evolution of the eGovernment sector. Not only technological basic requirements, such as the expansion of high-speed broadband, are important. Furthermore it is essential to prevent the enlargement of a social gap between ICT-users and non ICT-users and to work against the problems and the interferences that non democratic forces bring to parliamentarians political work. Not only equal access to ICTs, the design of online public services, digital literacy and the geographic and social digital divide should be a crucial point. The creation of new opportunities and mechanism for citizen participation in governmental and parliamentary policy as well as in the decision-making processes has to be prioritized. Consequently and in the future this also means that a public administration reform must include an appropriate internal reform. This will be first step to be able to cope and respond to inclusive, citizen-centred and democratic services.

3. Fostering and creating eDemocracy in the future

Present relationships and differences between eGovernment and eDemocracy in Europe as well as their current and future challenges were analysed. In particular the so called democratic deficit was part of the discussion. There is a need to create a future for a new understanding of citizen empowerment, openness, transparency and

trust. The speakers referred to the chance to develop an eDemocracy “value chain” based on Europe’s tradition’s and values and by linking different actors and stakeholders.

As a result of the 8th EPRI conference and especially in the view of national elections as well as the next European elections in 2009 the participants expressed their wish that new ICT should be used accordingly in order to involve the citizens more in the democratic process.

At the time of our Prague session I was mentioning the open process we went through trying to get high school public involved into the Senate work. The competition based on creative IT skills and general knowledge of the main purpose of our House and its role in the legal process as well as knowledge of certain details on how it operates definitely matched the goal.

Currently, we have our newly reconstructed website in use. It is friendlier and all information are easily accessible.

Beside facts on senators, legal process and acts, written records of all official negotiations, or the office structure and organisation of our work the new Senate website offers also online transmission from all meetings held in the House including seminars, conferences, cultural or social events. There is also electronic assistance to public where all public questions and requests are dealt with.

Our new government (established with hard difficulties after last June elections has already launched the project the eGovernment the aim of which is to make the contact with public administration easy and to simplify communication and processes like tax declaration, or any formulary submission, administration acts or even simple law suit application. The committee build up from all government departments is accomplishing list of all public services and administration acts which can be possibly subject of electronisation.

Ladies and gentlemen, this brings me to the end of my summary of the eighth EPRI conference, which incidentally, was attended by around 80 participants from 20 European Countries.

At this stage I would also like to refer to the website of the EPRI Secretariat where you will find a more elaborate account of our previous conferences, workshops and a lot of interesting materials as well.

I thank you for your attention and I wish all of us an interesting conference like it was in the passed years.