

PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY IN THE AGE OF E-GOVERNING

The 'ever closer union' of Europeans seems to get closer and closer. It was clear from the beginning that cooperation in Europe was going to be more than just creating a free trade area. After the initial steps were set that put the European Coal and Steel Community and Euratom into action, the Treaty of Rome which established the European Economic Community in 1957 laid the foundations 'of an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe'. This emphasized the resolve of the Six 'to ensure the economic and social progress of their countries by common action to eliminate the barriers which divide Europe'. Gradually, the powers of individual states were to be further reduced by 'harmonisation'. In the last few years the pronouncements of European leaders certainly went in that direction.

Additionally, ideas about global democracy have been advanced since Tocqueville and Schumpeter, but in terms of time and space, we have crossed into a different realm where information is instantaneously available on a global scale. We are all party to major global events as they unfold. The aftershock of the tragic events of the September 11th was felt around the world. Every day, we witness events such as floods in Bangladesh, the death of children in Africa by starvation, major soccer games. People the world over find a common voice in day-to-day events, whether serious or pleasant in nature. Politicians need to take this fact into account because it impacts the feelings and reactions of their constituents.

The main key to the above combination, meaning global democracy with the EU developing federation, is to create a knowledge - based society. On the other hand, scientific research, technology and innovation are, indisputably, the main determinants of a knowledge – based economy.

Nowadays, Hellas finds itself in the beginning of a new age, determined by the creation of the new enlarged Europe of 25 countries – members and the new Hellenic Government.

Our country, in order to meet the contemporary demands of development and competitiveness, is moving forward to the planning of a structured national strategy for Research and Technology that out of many consists of :

- The gradual increase of the expenses for Research and Technology so that research network in Hellas (Universities, Research Institutes, private and public sectors) respond effectively to the rhythms of the international community.
- The foundation of a National Committee for Research and Technology, for the planning of a national strategy in the sector of research and technology of our country. We continue changing and creating tools of research and education, with the participation and the co-operation of all relative Ministries and all social and business partners.
- Freeing funding of research activities from every kind of clientele –oriented relations, corruption, exclusions and preferences. Within this framework, we introduce transparent and meritocratic procedures for the public announcements and the evaluation of the researching and investing projects.
- Introduction of new motives for the private sector to invest in research and technology.
- Stimulation for expansion and improvement of the collaboration between Universities and Research Institutes not only within the country but also abroad.
- Support with special motives, by using a system for continuous and reliable evaluation of progress of the researchers and the research centers.

Our country's target is to increase the research expenses from today's 0,65% to 1,5% by 2010. However, increasing the budget for research is not enough for having positive results in the reinforcement of the economy competitiveness, worldwide. Research must lead to innovation, in both private and public sectors.

- **THE USE OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES IN NEW GOVERNING & PARLIAMENT**

The use of new technologies in every sector of economic and social life, in every organized society, in every state, is strongly connected with its level in research and technology.

The access to information concerns all the citizens, despite geographic topologies, social - educative restrictions and economic differentiations. According to a recent opinion poll, held by Ipsos-INRA on behalf of the European Committee, Hellas presents, according to the indices of research, high rates in the use of television and mobile phones, but is not equally developed in the use of personal computers and Internet.

To be more specific :

- 99% of the families have a television (E.U. average is 98%)
- 99% have a telephone (at home or mobile) (E.U. average is 98%)
- 88% have a telephone at home (E.U. average is 82%)
- 90% use a mobile phone (E.U. average is 81%)
- 18% have access to the Internet (E.U. average is 39%)

The eventual impact of new technologies in the efforts to enhance citizens' involvement in taking decisions democratically and in the support of representative democracy, is now widely recognized. The local, regional and national governments in Europe, are trying to amplify democracy, providing an effective way of communication with civil society and by using new technologies innovations in view of a more open and transparent procedure of decision making. Such a democratic political participation has to include mass media and participation in decision making. New technologies are able to provide novel and effective e-democratic members that examine these common perspectives.

The question that arises is how technology will effect the electronic-democracy and, in specific, electronic-government. E-government is about transforming the way government interacts with the governed. Explaining the essence of e-governance, we usually follow a three-phase approach, namely publish, interact and transact. ‘Publish’ is all about using information and communication technology to expand access to government information. ‘Interact’ focuses on broadening the civil participation in a government. The objective in the ‘interact’ phase is to involve citizens in the governance process, by engaging them in interaction with policymakers throughout the policy cycle and at all levels of government. Finally, ‘transact’ is making government services available online. ‘The objective is to offer a direct link to government services, available at any time, either to citizens or to businesses.

As a result, the application of new technologies in order to facilitate the parliament’s function and endeavor constitutes, we could say, the cellule of e-democracy. The possibility in information, collaboration and active participation of parliament’s members, regardless their physical presence, can contribute to the upgrade of parliamentary work.

To be more specific, the use of new technologies increases the possibilities for :

- **Information**, where the government produces and delivers information to be used by citizens too and, in the case of the parliament, by and for its members.
- **Conference**, where the parliament’s members provide the body with their perspectives and opinions. The Parliament’s instances determine the topics to be discussed and lead the procedure while the members contribute their own points of view.
- **Active participation**, that is a relation based on the co-operation with parliamentary departments, where the Parliament’s members participate actively in the definition of the procedure and the content of policy making.

For the on-line participation of the Parliament's members, we must concentrate on how contemporary technologies could be applied as to reinforce their contribution to the political process.

The basic aims of on-line participation are :

- To reach a wider audience so as to allow a wider participation.
- To support participation through a series of technologies intending to cover the different technical and communicational skills of the users.
- To provide relative information in a way that is more accessible and comprehensive, not only by the Parliament's members but also by citizens, as to produce more informed contributions.
- To involve an amplified audience-target, to allow deeper contributions and to support a well-informed discussion.

Technology must also be used to analyze contributions and provide citizens with relative and appropriate second information, in order to secure honesty and transparency in decision making.

To summarize, research and development in electronic participation is focused on :

- Use of technology to accommodate participation.
- Use of technology in order to deal with target groups (citizens etc).
- Use of technology in order to mandate target groups.

- **THE HELLENIC PARLIAMENT TODAY**

Members of Parliament in Hellas, like their counterparts around the world, are examining the ways that technology and electronic communications can enhance the role of elected representatives, improve their working methods, and encourage more productive interaction between elected assemblies and their electorates. Discussions about the relationships between parliaments and other institutions (whether

government, NGO or civil society) often raise expectations around concepts of e-democracy and e-parliament. No one can predict where the evolution of parliamentary government will take us or what the term citizen engagement will eventually come to mean. In the meantime, however, the Hellenic Parliament establishes the foundation that will allow it to respond strategically to these new imperatives.

More specifically, today, the Hellenic Parliament has its own site in the Internet. Through the network place of Parliament (www.parliament.gr), citizens can be informed of the parliamentary work. To be more specific, through this page, the Parliament's Members but also the citizens are enabled to get :

- Information about its organization and function, regarding parliamentary part and the different departments.
- Information about the structure, the members, the groups, the MB presidency and the committees.
- Information about the proceedings, the agenda, the meetings of the committees, the acts and the bills. Furthermore, there is an archive accessible to everyone who wants to find records, bills etc.
- Information about the plant, the cultural activities etc.
- Information through press releases, e-newspaper, MB speaker's speeches etc.
- The chance to pose questions, comments and points of view concerning the bills etc.

Besides, the Hellenic Parliament has its own TV channel that apart from the sessions and other specific committees includes also informative and recreational emissions.

Furthermore, it is essential that new technologies offer the possibility for procedures that upgrade the Parliament's function, parliamentary work and the work of the members and everyone else who is involved.

The application of new technologies in the parliament's function should follow some specific rules. More specifically :

- It should be oriented to facilitate and not to substitute the existing activities either of the parliament or of its members.
- It should not substitute the departments and the services of the Parliament, nor should it bring about institutional changes. On the contrary, it has to facilitate the efficient functioning of its departments and members, dissociating parliamentary activities from their physical presence.

Applications that could indicatively help in this direction are the following :

- On-line participation of the Parliament's members in its meetings, with the possibility of intervention. In this way, members who are absent, due to serious reasons, are enabled to participate. Of course, this possibility should not in general substitute their physical presence in the Parliament. Otherwise, in that case, it can result to a parliament where everyone will participate to the meetings from his/her own office.
- Possibility for several citizens' groups or institutions who are interested, to participate in the sessions of the parliament to present their point of view and make proposals. Naturally, this application, in order to function properly, requires the use of special equipment for tele-conference, located on chosen points through the country. Such an application would develop into the citizens the sense of participation in parliamentary work that today is expressed almost exclusively through the election of their representatives in the Parliament.

Speaking for e-parliament and in general for e-governing, we should also include the exceptionally important field of e-democracy, where applications such as electronic voting and electronic consultations with the citizens, applications, that is to say, touch upon subjects of substance of democratic operation, have the last years begun to be detected and materialized.

The development of these applications requires the existence of the appropriate infrastructure, that will ensure that procedure will be held with quality, security and above all, transparency.

Finishing, I would also like to report the action that is taking place in the rest of the public sector and is promoted by the General Secretariat of Public Administration of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. These are the gate of Electronic Governing (e-gov portal) and panel citizens (e-gov forum) at the model of other states of the European Union. Also, the services of e-governing of TAXISnet (network for taxes), IKAnet (network for public insurance matters), and the Centers of Service, that constitute an important work that aims at the creation of a wider network of e-governing.

In this wide light, the growth of system of e-governing creates new ways in the administration through the improvement of its effectiveness and the development of new ways of communication with the citizens and the enterprises. The e-governing is not a technological subject only. On the contrary, it is based on a composition of political directions, operational strategies, functional processes, informative content and technological infrastructure that aim at the same high quality and added value of services. Electronic governing constitutes a particularly attractive and open field of action for all of us. Our active participation would contribute to the consolidation of a democratic society where the state would constantly support and accommodate social, cultural and economic progress.

In conclusion, I call upon the entire Europe's parliamentarians, and their national governments to voice our concerns and using ICT to work towards the revitalization of parliamentary action, representative democracy and the establishment of a European, democratic and institutional governing body that would restore European people's hope and trust.