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*Analysis of the Romanian
Parliament websites*

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Bucharest
May 2004

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In the course of preparing this report, information and insights have been provided by the following individuals, who are gratefully acknowledged:

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Ellen K. Sullivan (School of Public Policy, George Mason University, SUA)

Laurian Tanasescu (CEO, eRomania Gateway Association)

Marius Boboc (Chief-Expert, Database and software applications department, Senate)

Marian Botocan (Head of Department, Department of ITC, Chamber of Deputies).

The eDemocratie.ro team would like to thank them for their help.

Content

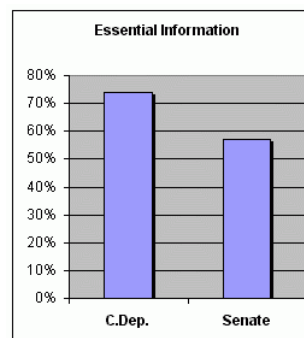
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Executive Summary

With frequent Internet users at 20% of Romania's population, the web becomes an important communication channel for public institutions. Among them, the Parliament, as a representative institution of the citizens, must be open to the innovations facilitating its connection with the population.

Our study aims to identify the issues that require further developments, as well as the successful solutions and applications. It focuses on the essential aspects for providing citizens with easier access to information and for making the legislative process and parliamentary procedures more transparent. The main topics of the analysis are:

- the structure and the content of information available online
- accessibility
- interaction with users



Findings

The analysis finds that the websites of the two chambers focus mostly on presenting information (providing most essential information), while overlooking accessibility and bi-directional communication with citizens.

In the absence of other interactive functions, the main communication mean available to citizens is the email. However, only some 27% of the 485 Romanian MPs have email addresses – far below the minimum in EU member states (46%).

32 of the 42 counties represented in the Senate don't have any senator with an email address. Nevertheless, even if some MPs have an email address, this doesn't guarantee their dialogue with the citizen: only 9% of the inquiries sent via email receive an answer from parliamentarians.

The comparison with European websites confirms the conclusions of the survey – the Romanian websites do well in providing information, but they drop to the bottom half of the table when it comes to interactivity and accessibility.

Conclusions and recommendations

Thus, the Romanian Parliament presents a wide range of information online, but in terms of interactivity, the MPs grant little importance to the dialogue with their constituents.

Based on the analysis, the report presents several recommendations for the websites of the two chambers, as follows:

- **Interaction** – providing online communication tools (both for MPs and for the site users);
- **Transparency** – publishing relevant and accessible information to allow the public to monitor MPs' activity;
- **Accountability** – publishing the lists with MPs' attendance of meetings and the vote expressed by them (provided the vote was open);
- **Monitoring** – personal record of given awards or disciplinary sanctions or other relevant information (i.e.: requests for parliamentary immunity cancellation);
- **Budget** – direct access to specific annual laws (especially in the chapter about the institution).

Publishing such information online would lead not only to increased accountability of the MPs, but would also strengthen citizens' trust in the institution that represents them.

1. Background

E-government and e-democracy have seen an exponential growth in the recent years, confirmed by:

- a) the growing number of citizens taking part in on-line debates
- b) the central role of Internet as public information source
- c) the growing number of on-line governmental services
- d) the development strategies in this field, such as eEurope and eEurope+

The Internet provides new means of communication, available 24x7 and requiring low operational costs compared to the classic means. This channel is available not only for public authorities to disseminate information, but also for effective and real-time dialogue with the citizens, thus contributing to the consolidation of the democratic process and to a greater citizen involvement in the political life.

Parliaments on the web

Therefore the Parliament, as a representative institution of the citizens, must be open to the innovations facilitating its connection with the population. The Inter-Parliamentary Union Resolution (Geneva, 3 October 2003)¹ also emphasised this idea, recommending to the national parliaments to make the maximum use of IT&C in order to enhance the efficiency and the transparency of the legislative activities and to relate with the electorate.

The Romanian Parliament was among the first public authorities on the web (the first site of the Chamber of Deputies was launched in 1995). Meanwhile, the websites of the two Parliament's Chambers were reorganised several times, and now they offer comprehensive information about laws, MPs, assembly and committees' activity, legislative process etc.

“Parliaments are well placed to take advantage of the Internet's ability to disseminate electronic documents quickly, cheaply and efficiently. Moreover, as new communication technologies make it possible to establish a closer relationship between citizens and their representatives, it is increasingly likely that the Internet's role in the political process will evolve beyond the mere dissemination of information.”

(Interparliamentary Union –
“Guidelines for the Content and
Structure of Parliamentary Web Sites”)

Purpose of study

Within this framework, the purpose of our study is to analyze the presence of the Romanian Parliament on the Internet, considering the Inter-Parliamentary Union Guidelines² and the W3C Recommendations³. Finally, the results were compared among the two chambers and then with other European parliaments. The study aims to identify the issues that require further developments, as well as the successful solutions and applications.

The analysis focuses on the essential aspects for providing citizens with easier access to information and for making the legislative process and parliamentary procedures more transparent. The main topics of the analysis are:

- the structure and the content of information available on-line
- accessibility
- interaction with users

¹ *The Contribution of New Information and Communication Technologies to Good Governance, the Improvement of Parliamentary Democracy and the Management of Globalisation*, <http://www.ipu.org/conf-e/109-3.htm>

² *Guidelines for the Content and Structure of Parliamentary Web Sites* (May 2000): <http://www.ipu.org/english/structure/cnldocs/166%2Dweb.htm>

³ *Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 1.0*, <http://www.w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT/>

The websites will be re-evaluated periodically in order to monitor their progress within the context of global evolutions in technology, as well as developments in e-government and e-democracy.

With this analysis and other connected activities, we intend to contribute to the development of better **e-democracy applications**, capable of addressing the citizens' needs, and to support online communication in becoming a modern and efficient tool for the public institutions in Romania.

2. Evaluation

The criteria for the evaluation were based on the framework of the InterParliamentary Union and the World Wide Web Consortium. The websites of the Chamber of Deputies (www.cdep.ro) and of the Senate (www.senat.ro) were analyzed and graded by the eDemocratie.ro team in April-May 2004 (last visit: May 23rd, 2004), based on a set of detailed guidelines.

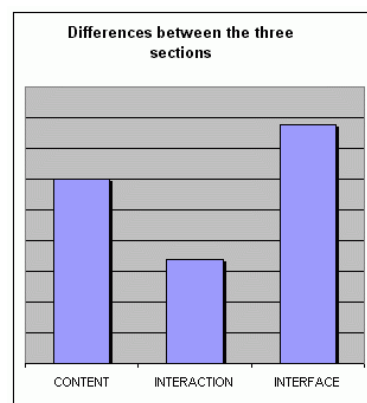
The results of the analyses were recorded using the model below:

- 0 = the website does not meet the criteria;
- 1 = the website does only partially meet the criteria (or the required information is difficult to find)
- 2 = the website meets the criteria.

Scores were then weighted based on the importance of the criterion, thus leading to subsection scores, based on the formula below:

subsection score = $(2/3 \times \text{essential components average}) + (1/3 \times \text{optional components average})$

Analysis results were then aggregated into a scoreboard.



3. Scoreboard

Nr.	Criteria	Score	
		cdep.ro	senat.ro
	TOTAL	1.23	0.94
1	CONTENT	1.36	1.05
1.1.	General Information on the Structure of Parliament	1.78	1.74
	<u>Recommended components</u>	2.00	2.00
1.1.a)	Overview of organization & structure – composition and functions of the national parliament and its constituent bodies, including a description of the specific role of parliamentary chambers and non-plenary bodies (committees, commissions etc);	2	2
1.1.b)	Full text of Standing Orders , Rules of Procedure or similar rule-setting documents;	2	2
1.1.c)	Text of the country's Constitution ;	2	2
1.1.d)	List of international and regional parliamentary assemblies of which the parliament is a member	2	2
	<u>Optional elements</u>	1.33	1.22
1.1.e)	Overview of parliamentary procedure ;	1	2
1.1.f)	Explanation of the routine order of parliamentary business ;	0	1
1.1.g)	Statistics on the activities of the current legislature;	2	2
1.1.h)	Brief history of the national parliamentary institution;	2	2
1.1.i)	Texts of official press releases of the parliament;	2	2
1.1.j)	"Guided tour" of the parliamentary building ; audio-visual virtual tours of the building;	2	0
1.1.k)	Diagram of seating arrangements in the parliamentary meeting room;	0	0
1.1.l)	Organization chart of the Secretariat of Parliament together with the name of and other relevant information about the Secretary General of Parliament;	2	2
1.1.m)	Practical information on access to the parliamentary building, library & archives	1	0
1.2.	Electoral System, Party Groups	1.22	0.56
	<u>Recommended components</u>	1.33	0.33
1.2.a)	Explanation of the election procedure (voting system, electoral divisions/constituencies, who votes, who can be elected, nomination requirements, who conducts the election, etc.);	2	0
1.2.b)	Results of the last elections by party affiliation and constituency .	2	1
1.2.c)	Links to the respective party websites	0	0
	<u>Optional components</u>	1.00	1.00
1.2.d)	Current composition of party groups and coalitions;	2	2
1.2.e)	Texts of relevant election laws .	0	0
1.3.	Legislative Process and Documents	1.83	1.62
	<u>Recommended components</u>	2.00	2.00
1.3.a)	Schematic explanation of the legislative process ;	2	2
1.3.b)	Legislative agenda and schedule of the current session;	2	2
1.3.c)	Pending legislation and government proposals (full searchable text) & forthcoming debates	2	2
1.3.d)	Searchable database of legislative acts enacted by the current legislature ;	2	2
1.3.e)	Status of current parliamentary business by bill number, topic, title, date, document code, parliamentary body, etc.	2	2
	<u>Optional components</u>	1.50	0.86
1.3.f)	Searchable database of committee reports, records, hearings, votes and other parliamentary documents pertaining to the current legislature;	2	1
1.3.g)	Searchable database of legislative acts and other parliamentary documents pertaining to at least immediately preceding legislatures ;	1	1
1.3.h)	Special section on budget and financial legislation ;	1	0
1.3.i)	Summary or complete records of parliamentary debates/sessions;	2	2
1.3.j)	Special section devoted to parliamentary questions and inquiries addressed to the executive branch ;	2	2
1.3.k)	Glossary of parliamentary procedure;	1	0
1.3.l)	Audio-video Webcasts of parliamentary sessions and sub-committee hearings	2	0

1.4. Presiding Officers		1.61	1.14
	<u>Recommended content</u>	1.67	1.33
1.4.a)	Bio data of the current Presiding Officer of the parliament/chamber;	2	2
1.4.b)	Brief description of the Presiding Officer's powers and prerogatives ;	1	0
1.4.c)	Names of Deputy- and/or Vice-Presidents .	2	2
	<u>Optional elements</u>	1.50	0.75
1.4.d)	Presiding Officer's public agenda (upcoming meetings, events);	2	1
1.4.e)	Collection of the Presiding Officer's important speeches and public addresses;	2	1
1.4.f)	List of past Presiding Officers ;	1	0
1.4.g)	Feedback page or similar mechanism for sending questions and comments to the Presiding Officer.	1	1
1.5. Members of Parliament		1.67	0.94
	<u>Recommended minimum</u>	1.67	1.00
1.5.a)	Up-to-date list of all members of Parliament (current legislature) with information about each MP's constituency, party affiliation and membership in parliamentary committees and/or commissions, and with hyperlinks to MPs' personal Web sites (alphabetical, by constituency, by party or political affiliation);	2	2
1.5.b)	Contact information for each member of Parliament including his or her e-mail address (where applicable);	1	1
1.5.c)	List of former members of parliament who have resigned from the current legislature or whose membership ceased for any other reason	2	0
	<u>Optional elements</u>	1.67	0.83
1.5.d)	Bio data of each member of Parliament;	2	2
1.5.e)	Automatically generated index of instances of participation in parliamentary debate sorted by member's name, date and topic of discussion;	2	0
1.5.f)	Public record of voting by individual members of parliament (when applicable);	0	0
1.5.g)	List of proposed/sponsored legislation	2	1
1.5.h)	Basic information concerning the status of a member of Parliament , such as parliamentary immunity, inviolability, salaries and allowances, etc.;	2	2
1.5.i)	Alphabetical list of members of Parliament of the legislature immediately preceding the current one with clearly specified dates.	2	0
1.6. Parliamentary Bodies		1.22	1.00
	<u>Recommended data</u>	1.67	1.33
1.6.a)	Complete list of non-plenary parliamentary bodies with hyperlinks to separate pages devoted to each body in that category;	2	2
1.6.b)	Description of the mandate and terms of reference of each parliamentary body;	2	0
1.6.c)	Membership and names of presiding officer(s) of each parliamentary body;	2	2
1.6.d)	Information on current business and data on upcoming meetings;	1	1
1.6.e)	Relevant contact information (addresses, telephone and fax numbers, e-mail) of each body;	2	2
1.6.f)	Composition and other relevant information concerning the National IPU Group, parliamentary friendship groups as well as national delegations to international and regional parliamentary assemblies of which the parliament is a member.	1	1
	<u>Optional data</u>	0.33	0.33
1.6.g)	Schedule of meetings and hearings held by each parliamentary body;	0	1
1.6.h)	Press releases and other relevant material pertaining to the work of each body;	1	0
1.6.i)	Historical data on the National IPU Group .	0	0
1.7. Publications		0.17	0.33
	<u>Recommended information</u>	0.00	0.00
1.7.a)	List of publications and documents indicating their prices;	0	0
1.7.b)	Information on how this material can be obtained by traditional means and (where applicable) through the on-line order service.	0	0
	<u>Optional information</u>	0.50	1.00
1.7.c)	Direct on-line order service allowing users to select their publications and pay for them with the help of electronic commerce tools;	0	0
1.7.d)	Electronic versions of those publications that can be downloaded from the site free of charge , for example, in *.PDF format.	1	2

Scoreboard (Continued - Interactivity and links with other web sites)

Nr.	Criteria	Score	
		cdep.ro	senat.ro
2	INTERACTIVITY AND LINKS WITH OTHER WEB SITES	0.65	0.31
2.1.	External Hyperlinks	0.61	0.60
	<u>Recommended links</u>	0.67	0.50
2.1.a)	Web sites of the country's Presidency, Government, Constitutional and Supreme Courts (when applicable);	1	1
2.1.b)	Official Web site of the country (maintained by the Ministry of Tourism or similar governmental services);	0	0
2.1.c)	Web site of the other chamber	2	2
2.1.d)	Inter-Parliamentary Union;	1	0
2.1.e)	Other international, regional and sub-regional parliamentary organizations	1	0
2.1.f)	Web sites of individual members of Parliament (where applicable).	2	2
	<u>Optional links</u>	0.50	0.80
2.1.g)	Web sites of political parties;	1	1
2.1.h)	Web sites of individual ministries and other national agencies;	1	1
2.1.i)	Web sites of national parliaments of other countries (or a link with IPU site: http://www.ipu.org/english/parlweb.htm , which is regularly updated);	0	2
2.1.j)	Global Internet search engines (such as Yahoo!, Lycos, Alta Vista, Infoseek, etc.);	0	0
2.2.	Feedback and Other Interactivity Tools	0.33	0.33
	<u>Recommended tools</u>	0.50	0.50
2.2.a)	A feedback utility that allows users to send their comments and questions directly to the Webmaster by means of forms (i.e. without resorting to e-mail services which might be unavailable in some situations);	0	0
2.2.b)	Preconfigured electronic mail for sending messages to parliamentary bodies and individual officers directly from the pages of the Web site.	1	1
	<u>Optional tools</u>	0.00	0.00
2.2.c)	Discussion forums where users can take part in on-line discussions on specific issues, usually related to current debates in the parliament; members of parliament often act as moderators for such forums; discussion groups;	0	0
2.2.d)	Mailing lists which allow users to subscribe to automatic e-mail delivery of parliamentary information, such as legislative texts;	0	0
2.2.e)	Electronic opinion polls which allow users to express their views on a given subject through multiple choice questions.	0	0
2.3.	Contact Information	1.00	0.00
	<u>Recommandation</u>		
2.3.a)	All sections of the site (from the home page down to pages devoted to individual members of parliament) should contain relevant contact information placed at visible spots throughout the site.	1	0

Scoreboard (Continued - Interface)

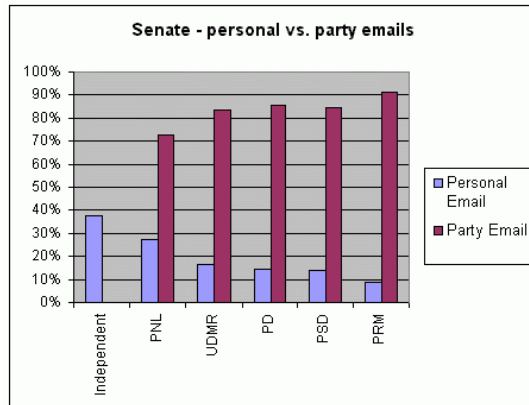
3		INTERFACE	1.67	1.43
3.1.		Access	1.47	1.40
		<u>Recommended components</u>	1.50	1.50
3.1.a)		Use the clearest and simplest language , appropriate for a site's content (object).	2	2
3.1.b)		Divides large blocks of information into more manageable groups where appropriate.	2	2
3.1.c)		The site is updated .	1	1
3.1.d)		Minimal information on the home page : mission, news, contact, feedback	1	1
		<u>Optional components</u>	1.40	1.20
3.1.e)		Provides a text equivalent for every non-text element (e.g., via "alt", "longdesc"). This includes images, frames, applets, scripts, graphical buttons.	1	0
3.1.f)		Site can be used if the scripts, applets and programmable object disabled/can't be used . If that's not possible there should be an alternative page with equivalent information.	1	1
3.1.g)		Foreground and background colour combinations provide sufficient contrast when viewed by someone having colour deficits or when viewed on a black and white screen.	2	2
3.1.h)		The page has an English version and also a minority's language version.	1	1
3.1.i)		For data tables header cells are clearly identified.	2	2
3.2.		Design and structure	2.00	1.57
		<u>Recommended components</u>	2.00	1.60
3.2.a)		Pages have consistent aspect and layout.	2	2
3.2.b)		The first page contains at least the following: organisation's name, seal and contact email address.	2	2
3.2.c)		Contact info	2	1
3.2.d)		Uses style sheets to control layout and presentation.	2	1
3.2.e)		Avoids using animated elements or provides non-animated equivalents.	2	2
		<u>Optional components</u>	2.00	1.50
3.2.f)		Avoids the use of pop-ups .	2	2
3.2.g)		Uses metadata to add semantic information to pages and sites.	2	2
3.2.h)		Avoids using Flash applications or provides a link to an alternative page that doesn't have Flash applications or/and exist the option to stop the Flash application.	2	2
3.2.i)		Each page has a printable version.	2	0
3.3.		Navigation	1.56	1.33
		<u>Recommended components</u>	1.33	1.33
3.3.a)		The user can clearly identify the target of each link.	2	2
3.3.b)		There is information about the site's general structure (index or map)	0	0
3.3.c)		Links and other objects have a logical order (for the keyboard navigation).	2	2
		<u>Optional components</u>	2.00	1.33
3.3.d)		Avoids frames , or if it uses frames, each one has a name in order to facilitate navigation and frame identification.	2	2
3.3.e)		Provides advanced search engine (with different levels and search preferences).	2	0
3.3.f)		Links open in new window (external links) or same window (internal links).	2	2

4. Email interaction

Given the lack of complex interaction tools (guest books, forms, polls, forums) and the high cost of direct interaction (field visits, events, hotlines), email is the most accessible way to interact with one's constituency and it is further gaining importance as internet penetration increases.

Thus, citizens need to have access to their representative's email address. But only a quarter of MP's (27%) have an email address published on the Parliament websites, with significant differences between the various parties (opposition and minorities' parties score higher) and counties (in some counties none of the MP's have email addresses), and also between the two chambers (the Chamber of Deputies scores much higher than the Senate, with 33% vs. 15% of MP's having email addresses).

Independent Senators also have more email addresses than the average. This can be explained by other Senators choosing to use the email address of their respective party instead of a personal one. More than 80% of all Senators opted for this solution (and more than 90% of representatives from one of the parties). However, such a solution does not guarantee any confidentiality or direct interaction with one's representative. It only allows for a minimal, brokered interaction, acting as a disincentive for citizens to communicate their issues by email.



Shockingly, MP's seem to not have a personal opinion – behind the group email addresses lies an excessive centralization of party decision making and a lack of personal points of view, uncommon for a European country. Direct and straight-forward answers to citizens' inquiries are rare, replaced by official and impersonal communiqués.

Reply rates

However, publishing an email address does only lead to dialogue with the citizens if the MP's answer the emails received. Our “@Parliament” study (published in February 2004 - <http://www.edemocratie.ro/editoriale/eng/replyreaction.pdf>) found that only 9% of these emails ever get a reply from MP's. If we add to this the small number of email addresses, the conclusion is obvious: citizens have slim practical chances to get in touch with their representatives by email.

If such a cost-effective and simple solution is practically avoided, then classic methods for interactivity (more costly and less transparent) seem almost out of reach for regular citizens.

5. International Comparisons

The “E-Democratizing the Parliaments and Parties of Europe” study provides us with a more objective perspective on the Romanian Parliament websites and the usage of email by Romanian MP’s.

Websites

The comparisons with European websites confirm the results of our analysis.

Romania does well in terms of information provision, surpassing some prominent western and highly successful eastern countries.

However, in terms of interactivity and interface, Romania drops to the bottom half of the table.

We note again the better standing of the Chamber of Deputies, although in Europe the lower chamber usually scores below the upper one⁴.

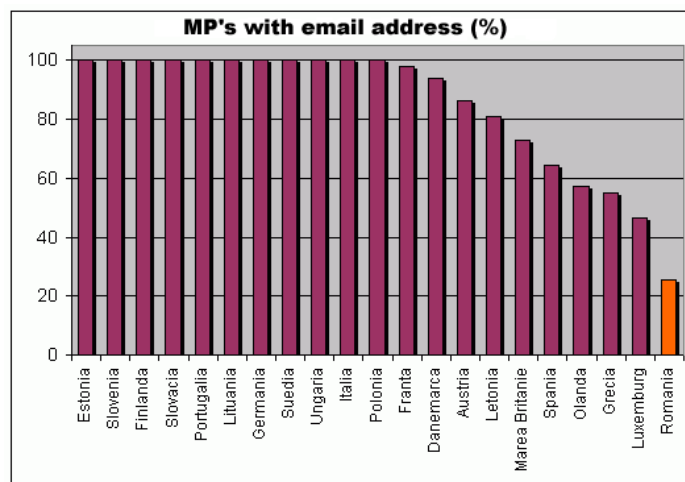
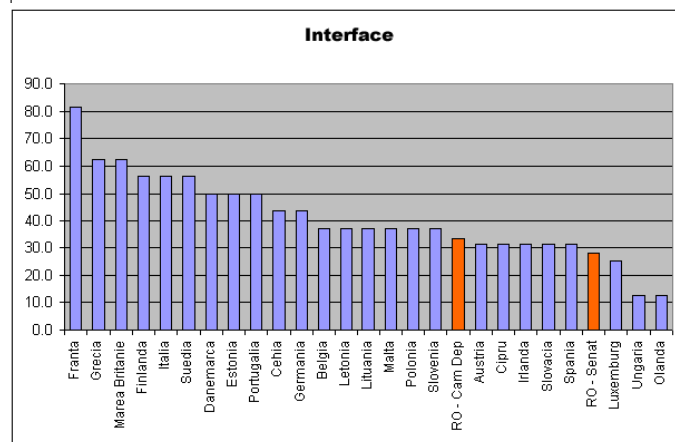
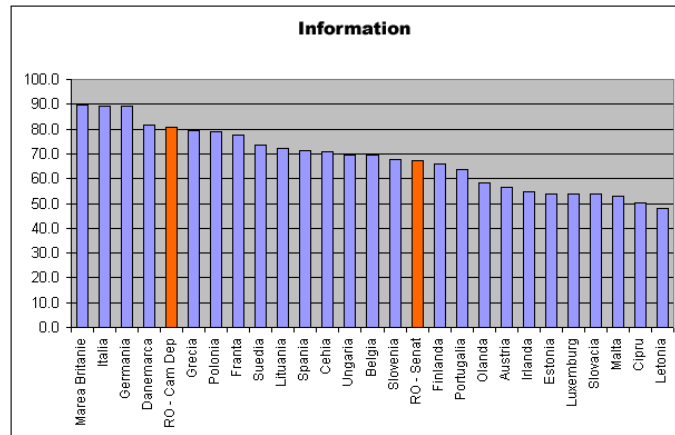
Emails and dialogue

Romania is among the last in Europe in reply rates and last place in email addresses published.

Of the 485 MP’s, only 25% have email addresses, while in Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia or Estonia, **all** MP’s have email addresses, and the average of the EU is 85%.

The lowest percentage for a European country is recorded in Luxembourg – 46%, almost double the percentage for Romania.

In terms of reply rates, Romania is marginally better, with only 9% of emails sent to MP’s getting a reply – only Italy

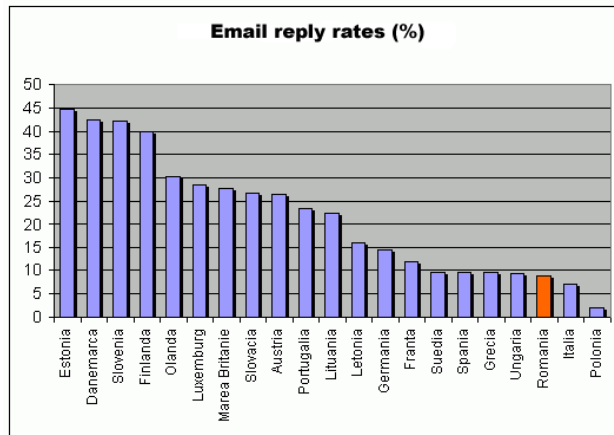


⁴ The Senate is considered to be the upper chamber, but there are smaller differences in the attributes of the two chambers, in comparisons with other European countries.

and Poland⁵ are trailing behind.

Other Eastern European countries like Slovenia and Estonia record percentages of above 40%, and the average of the EU is above 20%, more than double the reply rate in Romania.

Considering the lack of other interactivity means, Romanian MP's are yet hard to reach, in comparison with their European counterparts.



⁵ These countries have a 100% rate for email addresses, thus reply rates based on the total number of MP's would be higher than Romania's.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

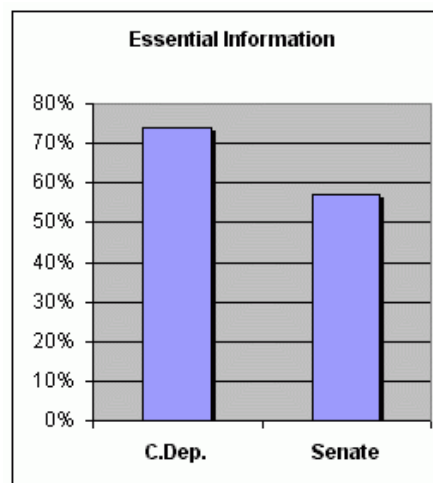
General Findings

As a general conclusion, the two sites of the Parliament have progressed significantly in the last years, in terms of content and design, as well as functions.

The websites are developed on modern and complex platforms and the institutions pay more attention to Internet communication. Therefore, a rich content is available, providing most of the essential information to most of the users, in an accessible way (see graphic).

However, the rapid development of web applications worldwide creates new demands and raises new challenges for the two parliamentary websites (especially facilitating communication with the citizens, providing content in minorities' languages and ensuring accessibility for disabled people).

The two websites are currently focused almost exclusively on using the Internet for disseminating information (one-way channel). This is usually the first step for any website, but considering the present state of Internet development in Romania, further steps should be made by adding interactive applications (the graphic shows the results of the three sections of the analysis – pointing out the differences between the sections and the need to improve the interactive level)



General Recommendations

Therefore the first recommendation is to enhance the **interaction** with the citizens, providing online communication tools, both for the members of the Parliament and for the site users.

Another important aspect for the citizens is **transparency**, which can be achieved by publishing relevant and accessible information to allow the public to monitor the MP's activity.

The **political activity of the representatives** is an issue of interest for the voters. The Chamber of Deputies site provides for every MP the list and the text of his legislative initiatives, as well as the questions and interpellations addressed to the government. This practice should be extended to Senate also.

Publishing the list of **attendance to meetings** and the **vote expressed** (whether this is an open vote) would give a greater accountability of the current activity and would require a minimum effort for data aggregation, since the electronic voting is extending. The MPs' conduct can be monitored also through a personal record of the awards or disciplinary sanctions, or the requests for cancelling the parliamentary immunity.

As for the financial control on the budgetary expenditures of the Parliament, an easy measure to take is to give direct access to the specific annual laws and especially to the chapter dedicated to this institution.

All these aspects are issues of interest for the citizens which raise a lot of public debates. Publishing such information online would lead not only to increased responsibility of the MPs, but also to strengthen citizens' trust in the institution that represents them.

Technical and Content Issues

Here are the main areas where improvements are suggested, as well as some specific recommendations:

Content

The websites should offer more data about the **electoral system and political parties**, as well as listing and on-line distribution of relevant publications. The back-end interconnection with other institutions, via XML, SOAP etc., is also recommendable.

Another important aspect (although less visible for the public) is the development of the **Intranet** – extending its functions and applications for the MPs and employees, according to their capabilities and needs.

Interactivity

Publishing **all contact data** (for the MPs and the Parliaments departments) is important for a simpler and open interaction with the citizens. Creating a personal standard email address for each MP is a quite easy and low-cost operation, but this have to be supported by an extensive use of electronic communication (settling standard procedures, use of CRM applications and frames, etc.) and interactive online applications (opinion polls, forums, etc.)

Usability

The interface should provide adequate **alternatives for persons with disabilities** and users of older systems. Moreover, a **site map** would facilitate the site browsing.

Another important aspect for the users is the up-to-dateless of information, so the publishing of the **last actualization date** is recommendable. A major weakness of both sites is the **search** function; the Chamber of Deputies offers few options for advanced search and the Senate has not implement this function yet.

Alternative versions in the minorities' languages are standard option for public institutions in US and Europe and this feature should also be implemented, especially considering the fact that minorities make up a large percentage of the population, and they even have their own representatives in the Romanian Parliament.

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