



Survey on the EU Parliaments initiatives on common standards for digital data and documents

As approved by the IPEX Board on 13 January 2012

This Survey is submitted to the Secretaries General of the EU Parliaments according to the mandate conferred upon the IPEX Board by the conclusions of the EU Parliaments Speakers Conference (EUSC) in Stockholm on 14-15 May 2010.

Section 14 of the Conclusions of the EUSC states that "The Speakers encourage all initiatives aimed at establishing standards for digital data and documents, so as to make information on the activities of parliaments and EU institutions more easily accessible and transparent, and entrust the IPEX Board with this task".

The EUSC initiative has been taken for the purpose of helping the Speakers and the Secretaries General of the EU Parliaments to assess the state of the art in standardization of parliamentary documents and better evaluate the costs and the potential benefits of further improvements and investments.

In the "digital information era" the standardization of parliamentary documents is so strictly connected to the values of transparency, accessibility and accountability that the standardization strategies represent not only one of the crucial tasks approached by the parliamentary administrations, but also a political challenge posed to the Speaker and to the Board.

Especially the relationship between the widespread use of open standards in parliamentary environment and the transparency of the institution has been magnified by the increasing presence of web applications and websites devoted to political information that process pieces of parliamentary digital documents.

Moreover, given the pivotal role played by parliamentary and legislative documents in the whole system of institutional information and documentation, EUSC initiative could act as a driver toward further standardization initiatives and processes in national institutional domains. The EU Parliaments are in the best position to promote a wide and unique initiative aimed at creating a higher and unprecedented level of openness in Government in the EU space.

METHODOLOGY OF THE SURVEY

The Survey has been prepared by the IPEX Central support on the basis of the replies provided by 32 parliamentary assemblies (out of 40) of 23 EU member States to a questionnaire sent to the IPEX Correspondents: Austria (both Chambers), Belgium (both Chambers), Bulgaria, Czech Republic (both Chambers), Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France (Sénat), Germany (both Chambers), Ireland, Italy (both Chambers), Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, The Netherlands (both Chambers), Poland (both Chambers), Portugal, UK (both Chambers), Slovakia, Slovenia (National Assembly), Romania (both Chambers), Spain (Congreso).

The questionnaire asked questions concerning 2 main topics:

1) the use of (or the willingness to use) an open format (XML) for parliamentary documents and bill of law and the involvement in any multi-country initiatives to exchange parliamentary documents or regulative instruments in open format (XML);

The Extensible Markup Language (XML) is a general-purpose specification for creating custom markup languages. It is classified as an “extensible language” because it allows its users to define their own elements. Its primary purpose is to facilitate the sharing of structured data across different information systems, particularly via the Internet.

2) the use of a thesaurus-based classification system for the classification of parliamentary documents and the possibility to agree on the use of a thesaurus shared by several Parliaments.

THE USE OF XML

The Survey shows that **13 Parliaments/Chambers** out of 32 uses XML for some parliamentary and/or legislative documents (mainly bills, resolution, hansards, reports of plenary and committee proceedings, summaries of MP interventions).

The documents are marked-up at different stages of their production and from different departments in each Parliament/Chamber.

In 9 Parliament/Chambers both the metadata and the datacontent are structured in XML.

Most of those Parliaments/chambers provide structured metadata for the document only.

11 Parliament/Chambers made XML data public.

11 Parliaments/Chambers plan to introduce XML mark-up for parliamentary documents or for new and additional series of documents.

Most Parliaments use **their own proprietary format**. However **12 Parliaments/Chambers** are expressly available or interested in making their XML documents compatible with XML documents produced by other Parliaments or institutions. Most of them require that a common standard is established to this end.

Some Parliaments/Chambers (7) underline that the only project for sharing parliamentary documents or information in open format (XML) with institutions of other countries is the **IPEX XML project**.

THESAURUS-BASED CLASSIFICATION

Concerning the classification of documents by using a thesaurus-based classification system **18 out of 32** Parliament/Chambers have given a positive reply.

In most of the Parliaments the application of a thesaurus-based classification system is confined to particular typologies of parliamentary acts.

In only 3 Parliaments/Chambers (Belgian Chamber, Dutch Chamber and Luxembourg Parliament) the thesaurus-based classification system applies to **all** typologies of parliamentary documents.

Half of the Parliaments/Chambers apply the classification as **metainformation** in structured format, half on the external file.

In most of the Parliaments/Chambers using a thesaurus-based classification system, the document is classified at an early stage, which tends to coincide with the accesses of the document in the parliament public databases.

The documents' classification is mainly operated by experts of the competent information or librarian department of the Parliament.

14 Parliaments/Chambers use EUROVOC (alone or combined with their own thesaurus). 4 Parliament uses only their own thesaurus.

9 Parliaments/Chambers consider expressly it possible to agree on the use of a **thesaurus shared by several Parliaments**, notably EUROVOC.

NEXT STEPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Survey shows that the EU Parliaments are increasingly aware of the importance of the standardization of parliamentary and legislative documents and data for promoting transparency, accessibility and accountability both at national and at EU and global level.

In addition a significant number of parliaments are expressly interested in sharing documents in open format with other Parliaments and Institutions as well as in using a thesaurus shared by several Parliaments.

However, only some parliaments have been able to develop up to now tools and systems for using open standards and thesaurus based-classification given the human resources, IT and budgetary constraints.

This makes essential the exchange of experience, information and know-how on standards.

Thanks to the sharing of standards, and particularly open standards, relevant financial resources can be saved in reusing and exchanging digital documents.

The **IPEX XML project** – which many parliaments mention as the only project for sharing parliamentary documents or information in open format (XML) – is a good example to this end.

What seems to be an efficacious and not expansive starting point to this end is the creation of a unique “information point” on digital standardization – at parliamentary level – where each EU Parliament can obtain updated information about the applications implemented and the projects set up and developed in this field.

In this framework it could be also explored the possibility of sharing a common open format standard and the EUROVOC thesaurus for the parliamentary documents concerning the scrutiny of EU Affairs.

This would make the exchange of scrutiny information in IPEX easier and more useful.

The IPEX Board therefore recommends that the Secretaries General of the EU Parliaments agree:

a) to continue the exchange of information and practices on the use of common standards (including thesaurus system) among the EU Parliaments, as well as with Parliaments from other geographical regions, in view of identifying best practices and common standards for documents and data;

b) to make available their know-how and/or IT tools to the Parliaments that are interested in using the XML and/or making their XML system compatible with XML documents produced by other Parliaments and other institutions;

c) to mandate the IPEX Board to explore the possibility of sharing a common open format standard and the EUROVOC thesaurus for the

parliamentary documents concerning the scrutiny of EU Affairs uploaded by the EU Parliaments in IPEX;

d) to forward the Survey to the relevant EU Institutions and bodies and to start contacts with them for identifying common standard;

e) to promote a cooperation in this field with the ECPRD – which can contribute its specific knowledge in the exchange of information in the IT field (namely through its IT area of interest) – and with the UN/IPU Global Centre for ICT in Parliament, which promotes initiatives for spreading the use of XML and thesaurus systems for Parliaments world wide.

For accomplishing the tasks listed above the IPEX Board shall be mandated to establish contacts with the ECPRD and the UN/IPU Global Centre for ICT in Parliament in order to act as an unique “information point” on digital standardization.

To this end, a specific forum in IPEX could be established, open to all the EU Parliaments and candidate Countries as well as to the ECPRD and to the UN/IPU Global Centre for ICT in Parliament;

The Secretaries General could recommend the EUSC to expressly support such initiatives by adopting specific recommendation in the conclusions of the next Conference in Warsaw.