

"Are the Parliamentary Library and Archives of Your Country
Offering Their Services to the General Public?"
An analysis of the ECPRD Questionnaire no 1481.

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Dear friends and colleagues,

Established in 1977, the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation, known by its initials ECPRD, includes 64 parliamentary chambers and three European parliamentary assemblies. The ECPRD develops four areas of interest for shared information and knowledge (as Elisabeth Schultz has repeatedly presented but allow me to remind them once more):

- Information and Communication Technology in Parliaments
- Parliamentary Practice and Procedure
- Parliamentary Libraries, Research and Archives, (that is addressed to us) and
- Economic Research

A couple of years ago, in May 2010 the Library of the Hellenic Parliament hosted an ECPRD seminar; ECPRD seminars are organized four to six times a year at the initiative of a host parliament and with the approval from the ECPRD. The theme was "Services Provided to the General Public by Parliamentary Libraries and Archives." Its goal was to explore the attitude of Parliamentary Libraries and Archives towards citizens' information satisfaction and especially their stance and thoughts on openness and providing freely their resources and information. A wider –hidden– scope, was to evaluate the position of Parliamentary Libraries (PL) and Archives (PA) within the national net of their countries. How do PL & A fit into this net? Do they adjust, follow the trends for transparency and openness, act and react towards contemporary needs? What is the value of PLs and PAs for the society? And most importantly, in what ways have new technologies influenced parliamentary information accessibility.

40 participants from 30 European countries were present, not exclusively from the EU. It is a standard practice that the seminar programmes include, relevant to the issue approached, questionnaires. So, a questionnaire was launched then but the results are presented today, with a two years delay. There are explanations; the essential being that Europe functions in a variety of ways through the ages, sometimes hard to put in charts.

41 questionnaires were completed either on the spot or e-mailed later. There were eight questions and sometimes colleagues elaborated more, adding further explicit information, and details. I thank them, of course!

The first question asked was: "When was your country's Parliamentary Library founded?"

According to the answers, the oldest PL, founded in the last year of the 18th century, in 1799, was of the French Senate. The first of the 19th century was the Library of the Congress of the United States of America in 1800. The number of PLs established during the 19th and the 20th c. was equal. The decade 1841-1850 presents the higher density of the 19th c. indicated by the foundation of six PLs. During the second decade 1811-1820 four PLs were established; in the 1830s, the 1840s and the 1870s two parliaments were established each decade. In the 1860s three PL appeared. During the last 10 years of the 18th c. no PL marked its birth. The PL of Russian Duma was the first to inaugurate the 20th c. in 1906 but interconnected with history it was re-established in 1991. Four PLs were established in the decade 1911-1920, two the next decade. The larger number of PLs, four, appear in the 1940s, and one P Archive. Two in the 1950s, one in the 1960s, followed by two decades of no new formations, lead to the 1990s where the fall of the Soviet Union led to the creation of new states, and parliaments or their rebirth and consequently of their libraries, five in number. The WEU Assembly Library functioned in the years 2002-2011.

Information about the Parliamentary Archives does not emerge systematically; it is presented mostly on the same sheet with the PL. In some cases, Parliamentary Archives preceded the formation of the Parliamentary Libraries, i.e. in Norway the PArchive was established in 1818 while the Parliamentary Library was founded in 1871 and a full time librarian was appointed in 1887. In other Parliaments, the creation of Archives followed the Library, i.e. The House of Commons Library was established in 1818, the House of Lords Library in 1826 and the Archives as the House of Lords Record over a century later, in 1946. The same order applies for the two German Parliamentary Libraries of the Bundestag and the Bundesrat (1949) and the Archives (1970).

The second question asked whether the PL offered its services to the general public. The answering options were "Yes", "No", "Partially" and Comments were welcomed. The answers sometimes needed interpretation and the comments helped to do, so, for example a "No" answer allowed special users or conditions, leading to partial openness.

9 answered "No", 12 answered "Yes" and 22 answered "Partially". This last option is better understood by the notes and clarifications.

- When the study or research involves legislation and/or parliamentary practice and the history of the building
- In case the needed material is rare or unique and located only at the PL
- Proceedings that are not on the internet
- Requests by letters, phone, fax and e-mail are accepted and satisfied
- Officials from other European institutions
- Academics, researchers, lawyers upon request
- By appointment on non-sitting days of the Parliament
- The Secretary General of the Parliament has the authority to issue a reading permit
- In some cases, a special services branch is created for the general public.

3. "If yes, was it open from the foundation of the PL/PA to the general public?"
The third question intended to explore whether there was a change in the policy of openness from the foundation of the PLs and PAs until today.

18 PLs noted that there is a change of policy in their openness strategy. 8 state that they follow the partially servicing condition. Three provide even the year their PL opened to the public. The Austrian PL estimated it was in 1946, the Hungarian indicated it was in 1952 and the Italian Library of the Deputies in 1988.

From the group of PLs that did not change their openness policy three declared that, it was because they were from the start open and have an attitude of openness in general. Nine come from the area of not offering their services to the general public and the majority seems to be comfortable maintaining their partially open status.

4. "Indicate what kind of services the PL offers to the general public."

13 left the question unanswered and three gave the general answer "Standard library services".

Six PLs consider lending a popular service but the other five do not allow lending. The remaining did not bring up loaning as a service.

Opening hours as a sign of openness, were indicated in many questionnaires.

Library & Archive Services

Access to the Reading Rooms and consultation of materials

Reference Services

On-line catalogue

Web site

Databases

Digital library

Copying Services

Parliamentary Minutes

Official Gazette

Newspapers & Journals collection

Reference collection

Special collections & historical collections

PLs have expanded their services into other areas besides the "standard library services," following actual needs and rising trends:

Information Services

General information concerning the Parliament

Visitor information, orientation & support

Remote enquiry service, i.e. telephone, fax, responding to e-mail requests

Production of free publication in print & on the website

Education Service

Information sessions to educate students

Information sessions about learning opportunities for teachers

Training & orientation courses

Building & Library tours

Conferences, seminars

Exhibitions

5. "What are the most popular services areas of your PL?"

A long crop of responses, again nine PLs did not fill in an answer.

Collections

- The Minutes and parliamentary papers in print and in digital form
- *Official Gazette* in print
- Minutes of Committees
- Newspapers & journals in print and in digital form
- Law & history books
- Political biographies
- Documentation of MPs writings
- EU collection
- Statistics
- Data bases
- Digital library
- E-publications & articles

Services

- Reference & Information Desk
- Factual & bibliographic information
- Expertise
- Seminars & information sessions
- Summaries of government bills
- Thematic information packages of articles
- Questions on foreign law
- Lending & Interlibrary loaning
- Online-services i.e., website, catalogue
- Facilities i.e., reading room, e-access & computer, copying services (photocopying & digitization)
- Exhibitions & displays

6. "How many users make use of your PL/PA per year?"

Seven did not provide an answer either left the space blank or wrote "no statistics", "unknown".

On the other hand, a variety of subcategories of users that complicated the total image emerged: internal, external, visitors of the PL/PA, visitors of the building, remote, website. I tried to focus on the general public. A diverse range of numbers concerning mostly the year 2009 occurred.

40 users : 1 library

100-200 users/year : 7

200-400 users/year : 3

401-500 users/year : 1

2000-45000 users/year : 6

6500 users/year : 2

10 000 users/year : 1

12 800 users/year : 1

28 970 users/year : 1

35 000-36 000 users/year: 4

42 000 users/year : 1
52 000 users/year : 1
59 900 users/year : 1
100 000 users/year : 1
135 000 users/year : 1
+- 1.75 million users/year : 1

7. "If your PL/PA is not offering services to the general public, is such an opening in its plans?"

12 PLibraries already open to the general public did not have something to add

Not : 8

Yes : 8

No : 10

Considerations over the issue expressed four PLs

8. "What is your personal opinion on the issue of offering services to the general public? Could you justify your opinion?"

Four omitted the question

The attitude towards openness was overall positive.

- Support of transparency policy & participatory democracy
- Accountability
- Expertise on parliamentary information, a unique asset
- Contribution to scholarship & research
- Public relations tool of Parliaments
- Positive image & raises the profile of the Parliament
- Exchange & closeness lead to interest and better understanding of parliamentary work
- Introduction to the legislative process nationally and internationally (EU legislation becomes familiar via national parliaments)
- PLibraries as a part of the library community net
- Use of historical collections, old editions, national heritage

On the other hand, a series of difficulties and practical matters were indicated to stand in the way:

- Security factor
- Rising costs
- Limited staff resources
- Premises, space, housing
- Time allocation
- Distraction from the primary users

The above difficulties lead to the creation of special public information services.

Conclusion

Summing up a number of Parliamentary Libraries and Archives offer their specialized services primarily to MPs, their associates, and staff; some selectively to defined social groups, prominent figures and upon request; and a growing number is open to the general public. Openness itself has grey

areas, has grades/scales and can be interpreted in various ways. It seems that the majority of PLs and PAs are doing their best to respond to requests under the circumstances and that they prefer partial openness.

I would like to bring to your attention especially two points. As time passes by the value of collections change; some lose their importance and significance but other come to worth more and even become priceless. PLibraries and PArchives by their nature, have come to include rare and unique historical material (i.e., Belgium 16th & 17th c., the French Senate, and others). These collections have acquired a new accumulative worth. We ought to treat them separately.

The second point is to underline that openness is nowadays detached from physical presence. One can be open behind locked doors. This is one of the achievements of the new technologies and the Internet.

New technologies' advancement and wide use have played an important role concerning the issue of openness. Data is available at the internet horizon; the notions of time and space are expanded to infinite, transformed irrevocably. No limits, no boundaries. Users do not have to actually visit, or come physically to the tightly guarded premises of Parliaments in order request and obtain the information they need or to research and study. In that way security pains are eliminated; staff can continue to service their usual users without many distractions.

Our material is reviewed, documented, possibly reorganized, digitized and presented to the general public in quantity and quality. Coupled by digital born documents is accessible and retrievable night and day. The effects do not need explanations and analysis, they are obvious. We hope that they lead to a wiser, better informed world.