

Task g): "To consider a new strategy for IT and administrative co-operation between EU administrative bodies in the national parliaments including the representatives of national parliaments in Brussels".

NEW NOTE

Cooperation between EU administrative bodies in the national parliaments, the European Parliament and the COSAC secretariat and a new IT strategy

1. Background

The draft proposal of the Presidency of 11 July 2002 on strengthening the role of national parliaments in EU policies and on reform of COSAC contained a suggestion regarding a strengthening of the cooperation between the EU administrative bodies in the national parliaments, in the European Parliament and the COSAC secretariat in order to develop and exchange practical experience.

At the meeting of the chairpersons of the European Affairs Committees of the national parliaments and the European Parliament in Copenhagen on 16 September 2002 there was widespread support for a proposal that the Presidency draw up a more detailed description of the options.

2. Options in the field of cooperation

Establishing effective cooperation on the Internet with both an open and a restricted-access area would form the backbone of day-to-day cooperation (cf. point 3).

The COSAC secretariat would coordinate the exchange of information between parliaments, making extensive use of close collaboration with staff attached to national parliaments' European Affairs Committees and officials in the European Parliament.

As is the case between committees, there is also a need for exchange of information, benchmarking and cooperation between EU administrative bodies in the national parliaments and the European Parliament regarding administrative procedures etc.

Regular meetings (e.g. on an annual basis) between these administrative bodies in the national parliaments and the European Parliament would be valuable in order to deepen cooperation. Here, particular topics of common interest could be taken up. Such meetings could be held in connection with COSAC meetings.

3. A new IT strategy for COSAC

At present, the COSAC website contains practical information for participants in the next COSAC as well as documents and information from the most recent meetings. In addition, the site contains the COSAC rules of procedure, the Amsterdam Treaty protocol on national parliaments and contact information for individual national parliaments and applicant countries. The amount of information/documents available on the website is indeed rather limited. This is probably down to the primary purpose of the website, that of "conference homepage".

The present COSAC website is HTML-based. All new documents must be written in HTML or drawn up using HTML editing software and then be uploaded to the website using FTP software. The system is operated by the French Senate which is responsible for maintenance of the system and updating of contact information for the national parliaments, while information about the next COSAC must be updated by the COSAC presidency. Therefore, an important part of the website is being transferred to a new parliament every six months.

As updating the present website requires knowledge of HTML and FTP, it may be difficult for new parliaments to get to know the system. This has resulted in some presidencies being unable to fulfil their IT obligations, leaving it to the French Senate to update the website during some presidencies.

The purpose of a new COSAC IT strategy is partly to improve COSAC's present website by facilitating public access to information about COSAC's work, partly to enable exchange of information between the COSAC secretariat and national parliaments. The new IT system must also ease the secretariat's workload, both as regards communication between individual parliaments and communicating with European institutions and the outside world.

The proposal is for a new holistic IT strategy for COSAC, basing the public website and the secretariat database on one system. System maintenance and continuous updating should also be handed over to the secretariat while retaining the option of the presidency uploading relevant information. Furthermore, the system should be more up-to-date and allow national parliament staff without special IT knowledge to use it.

4. Documents

COSAC's IT system should contain documents on COSAC work in progress and other documents of relevance to COSAC's activities. Documents must be divided up into categories, including website documents which are accessible to the public and internal documents for use by the COSAC secretariat and individual parliaments.

Individual parliaments should also be able to upload relevant documents reflecting their debates and positions on EU matters to the public area of COSAC's website, allowing the

website to collate relevant parliamentary documents on current EU consultation documents, proposals etc. As documents concerning national parliaments' processing of EU matters typically are available in the original language only, it is important to use a common classification system.

5. Language policy

With the website serving both as a public access homepage on COSAC's work and as an internal database where the secretariat and national parliaments may exchange documents, navigation tools must be provided in all the official EU languages. This means that all official COSAC documents (rules of procedure, treaty texts (as is already the case) must also be available in all languages.

It would however suffice for relevant documents which are being dealt with by COSAC to appear only in English or French (as is current practice). Finally, it is proposed that documents drawn up by national parliaments in connection with work in progress in COSAC be set up with only the title translated into English or French.

6. Budget

It is estimated that a complete website/database adapted to COSAC's current needs would cost EUR 100,000. This price includes development of a database, a public website and Intranet for the members of COSAC. Also included in the budget is the adaption of the website design and the purchase of a server. Additional operating costs (hosting, traffic and the required updates) for the system are estimated at approximately EUR 8,000 per annum.

7. Setting up a working group on technical administrative matters

The Danish Presidency has drawn up some proposals for the requirements to be met by a new IT system (cf. annexe). The proposal is for a technical administrative working group to be set up; it should have as its mandate the elaboration of the specifications to be met by a new IT system.

ANNEXE

Proposed specifications to be met by COSAC's new IT system

A COSAC website for the public should fulfil the following requirements

- The website should be user-friendly, both for ordinary users and administrators.
- New documents for the website should be published continuously by the COSAC secretariat.
- Documents should be accessible in several languages. In order to reduce the administrative burden it would be an advantage if the system could handle several language versions of the same document (cf. point 5).
- It must be possible for national parliaments to upload documents directly to the database.
- The system must incorporate an administrator module allowing the COSAC secretary to grant national parliaments the right to update in certain areas of the website.
- The website should have a subscription facility allowing users to join a mailing list to receive COSAC news.
- A debating page where the public can comment on COSAC's work. There should also be provisions for a closed forum where COSAC participants may exchange information/"best practice".
- The system must allow transmission of most known file formats, e.g. pictures, sound, PDF-files etc.
- A search tool where visitors can enter search words and documents will be listed. In addition, it must be possible to limit the search in terms of document type, publisher, classification code etc.
- A calendar publishing information about COSAC's activities.
- A print function where documents can be printed in a printer-friendly format.
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Database requirements - Intranet

- Confidential and internal documents should only be made available on the Intranet. Therefore, national parliaments should be allowed entry to a restricted-access area of the website with password-protection etc.
- A common classification system should be set up to enable retrieval of documents from the secretariat and individual parliaments irrespective of the language of the document. The EU's EUROVAC classification system could be considered as an option in this respect.
- The system must be able to handle correspondence between the secretariat and the national parliaments to enable e-mails sent from national parliaments to the COSAC secretariat and vice versa to be registered in the database. The

advantage of such a system is partly to enable the organising of correspondence between COSAC and the national parliaments, partly to enable COSAC's members to retrieve important information.

- The design should allow searches in internal documents.
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Setting up a Content Management System (CMS)

In order to facilitate the work of the secretariat as regards maintaining and organising the system as well as enabling national parliament handling of the database it is important that a future database/website is based on a technology which is relatively easy to become familiar with, without special experience in IT. COSAC should therefore acquire a new website based on a Content Management System. The term Content Management Systems (CMS) means management/maintenance of content. CMS is not restricted to website management, but offers total database solutions on top.

CMS allows for efficient and user-friendly management and maintenance of websites without previous programming knowledge, with transmission and organisation of documents taking place via a web browser. At the same time, CMS allows users to carry out advanced operations, including HTML coding, in the same fields as those used by more inexperienced users.

This means that Intranet and homepages edited in a CMS environment can accommodate very simple text documents alongside e.g. flash files and complicated tabular structures edited in HTML.

2. Open Source

In order to construct an advanced database adapted to COSAC's needs the proposal is to use open source products when setting up a new website for COSAC. Setting up an open source website can be cheaper than more traditional websites as COSAC will not have to pay for expensive licenses (both setting up and operating licenses). In addition, traditional Internet software solutions often employ source code which the manufacturer does not want the customer or others to modify. However, open source solutions can always be modified and improved.