



Electronic Library "Czech Parliament"

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The project of an electronic library is also a significant step towards computerization of services of the Parliamentary Library. This library shall contain complete texts of parliamentary prints (i.e. bills, including explanations and decisions), shorthand minutes (i.e. verbatim minutes of all sessions and all voting) and other parliamentary documents from 1861 until now in an electronic form. It would contain tens of thousands of pages of text which could create a good library with hundreds of volumes.

The Library has already taken some preliminary steps in close cooperation with the Department of Information Technology of the Committee of the House of Parliament. On the basis of a proposal by a private firm ESU Praha in June 1995, the library and the Department of Information Technology submitted a proposal for an electronic library called "Czech Parliament" to the Secretary General of the Office of the House of Parliament. The Secretary general of the Office approved the project and appointed a committee of executive officers from the Office under his leadership for final consideration of the proposal before a selection procedure is announced. The committee was to consider the usefulness of the project, set forth its content and scope and try to find some means in the budget for 1996 to start the project (the budget of the Office for 1996 was already set forth at the time of approval of the project). The committee decided to separate conversion of parliamentary texts into an electronic form from production and distribution of a CD-ROM which the project counted on as a carrier of data, and to hold a selection procedure only for the conversion. At the end of 1995, a survey of prices on the market was conducted which helped us calculate the



expected costs. We came to the conclusion that it is possible to carry out activities amounting to 1,000,000 CZK in 1996.

The objectives of the project are:

- To provide access to information on current and past activities of the Czech Parliament to the public, as is customary in democratic countries. At present, all parliamentary documents (prints, shorthand minutes) are stored in written form only in the Parliamentary Library. This situation is in contrast with the fact that the public is increasingly interested in activities of the Parliament. The library, with limited access for the public, may not satisfy the demand through traditional means (providing copies).
- To provide access to current parliamentary documents with regard to the application of modern technology and methods of information work,
- To preserve the "Golden Collection" of the Parliamentary Library for the future in electronic form, because the paper is slowly decomposing and it is not even possible to make copies of some originals; electronic text on a CD-ROM would mean survival of this legacy of the Parliament for another 80 - 100 years.
- To become one of the first parliaments in Central and South-Eastern Europe to create a such electronic library.

The explanation of the project furthermore argues that the investment return from the texts of the electronic library may not be adequately valued in money terms, but that its main purposes are:

- (1) To increase the prestige of the Parliament, whose activities are still hidden to the public or interpreted (filtered) through mass media.
- (2) To protect against destruction or loss. In case of a possible sudden natural catastrophe, fire, war, and subsequent destruction of the library's collections and archives, the parliamentary documents will be still available for coming generations on a substitute medium in many places, regardless of the original place of their creation and storage (it also applies in case of a destruction of the printed documents as a consequence of natural wear of unavoidable physical and chemical processes).
- (3) To increase the speed and convenience of access for the Members of Parliament and Senators to parliamentary documents as a source of knowledge and inspiration of their legislative activities.

The whole project was planned to be implemented over three years. A decision was made that the so-called "nest-like" method shall be used, i.e. the parliamentary documents will be chronologically converted into an electronic form gradually from key historical periods of our modern history in which there is the greatest interest. In 1996 the following periods of interest were covered by document conversion to electronic format: parliamentary documents from 1989 until now (Federal Assembly, Czech National Council, House of Parliament of the Czech Republic), and from 1968 until 1970, (National Assembly, establishment of the Federal Assembly, establishment of the Czech National Council). In 1997, parliamentary documents from 1945 to 1948 (Legislative Assembly, National Assembly), 1913 (end of the Regional Congress) and 1861 (renewal of activities of the Regional Congress) are being converted into electronic form. The remaining documents shall be converted in 1998. After these activities are finished the texts shall be stored on several CD-ROMs for the purposes of the Parliament of the Czech Republic. Another selection procedure shall be held for production and distribution of the CD-ROMs.

Two private companies won the selection procedure held at the beginning of 1996. They offered the best technical and financial parameters and at the same time carried out the most successful test of conversion of 10,000 pages of text. At present, more than a half of the project has been completed and the work continues. Existing results of the project are available on Internet at the following address - <http://www.psp.cz/eknih/>. The project has found a great favor both in the domestic and international media which can be also proved by a number of registered entries into the electronic library represented for instance by 1326 entries in May 1998 alone. Internationally compared, this project presents a unique scheme with a deep historical span. For most of democratic parliaments make accessible on Internet only those parliamentary documents of the last two or three terms of office. When the whole project is finished next year, the Parliamentary Library of the Czech Republic, at least its special collection of parliamentary documents, will be open 24 hours a day.