

Reply Reaction

# **@PARLIAMENT**

*Analysis of Romanian MP's reactions to emails from citizens*

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This report is the result of an R2 study (Reply Reaction), a methodology developed by eDemocratie.ro in order to evaluate the level of transparency of public authorities' communication with the citizens. This report is the first of this kind in Romania.

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## About eDemoccratie

eDemoccratie.ro's main objective is to bring a significant contribution to the understanding, expanding and implementing of e-democracy and electronic governing concepts. These will bring more transparency and effectiveness to public institutions and will improve the citizen's access to their information, deliberations and services.

## 1. Executive Summary

### **Only one in ten Members of the Romanian Parliament (MP) reply to email solicitations from citizens.**

The results are based on a complex analysis performed over the Internet, between October 1st and November 30th, 2003. Two rounds of emails were sent to MP's, as part of the study, in order to analyze their email responsiveness. The emails asked questions about hot topics of the moment: the referendum for the New Constitution and the conclusions of the European Commission Country Report for Romania.

The poll group was selected based on the email addresses published on the official websites of the two chambers of the Romanian Parliament ([www.cdep.ro](http://www.cdep.ro) and [www.senat.ro](http://www.senat.ro)). The full list contained 123 public addresses of Members of the Parliament, out of a total of 485 active MP's.

For the 123 emails sent each time, we have received 10 replies (8.1%) regarding the New Constitution and 12 replies regarding the Country Report (9.7%).

A few days ago the Minister of ITC, Dan Nica, has shown that according to recent data from the European SIBIS project (Statistical Indicators Benchmarking the Information Society), Romania is in first place in Europe regarding the citizens' willingness to interact online with the public institutions.

Our study has shown that less than 10% of those questioned replied, with an average response time of 6 days regarding the New Constitution and 4 days for the European Commission Country Report.

A very interesting outlook is revealed by comparing the results from Romania (less than 10%) with other results from around the world: Canada with 43% and UK with 22%.

The majority of the MPs that replied tried to clarify the matter based on their own understanding. In one case only, an MP sent not only the answer to the question asked, but also an invitation to visit him at the Parliament for further details. On the whole, the replies can be divided in 3 categories:

- those surprised to be contacted who choose not to answer the question
- those who give a clear, concise answer
- those who give a wide answer and also indicate further sources of information

The transparency indicator for electronic communication between Citizens and Members of the Parliament is only 0.29 (on a scale from 0 to 5), showing that these communication channels are practically shut down at this stage.

## 2. Conditions for the R2 study

### ELECTRONIC AND POLITICAL MEANS OF COMMUNICATION IN ROMANIA

#### What do electronic government and democracy mean?

**Electronic democracy** refers to citizens' use of electronic means in order to influence the political process. Thus, electronic democracy starts from the citizens and gathers all their anxieties, proposals of alternatives and debates over governmental actions. All this takes place over the Internet through emails, websites for personal opinions, forums, chats and groups. Therefore, electronic democracy (or eDemocracy) operates bottom-up, from the citizen to the government.

Unlike eDemocracy, electronic government works top-down (from the state to the citizen). It encompasses the interaction between the government, parliament or other public institutions and the citizens, using new means of communication (especially the Internet). Informing citizens about public consultations and legislative processes, tax payment, part taking in governmental auctions – all these actions become more effective using the Internet, allowing citizens to better exercise their primary rights and duties.

#### Evolutions at a global level and in Romania

Throughout the last years, electronic government and democracy have developed exponentially at a global level and especially in Europe – and their increasing importance is reflected by European development strategies, such as eEurope and eEurope+ (for candidate countries).

Consequently, the main institutions already have a web page and they also offer email addresses for citizen inquiries. Unfortunately, the switch to electronic means of communication failed to bring more interactivity for these institutions as the approach continued to be top-down, focusing more on information transfer and less on the dialogue with the citizens or on the fulfilment of their requests.

#### The Romanian Parliament

The Parliament was one of the first public institutions to go online, offering information about the legislative process, the members and the activities of the two chambers etc. However, it shows the same propensity towards general, forthright and unsolicited information. In order to receive specific information and answers, citizens have to turn to MPs who represent them in the legislative process. And thus, some of the MPs have public email addresses (approximately a quarter, 123 out of 485), posted on the official websites of the two Chambers, showing the MPs' availability to communicate with the citizens via email. However, according to the results of our study, this presumed availability is much dimmer in reality.

#### The premises of the study

*Romania's Constitution*

*Art. 31 – The right to information*

*(1) A person's right to have access to information cannot be restricted.*

*(2) In accordance with their competencies, the public authorities are bound to assure the provision of accurate information to citizens, about public affairs and matters of national concern.*

#### Conclusion

Considering the resolution ratified in October 2003 by the International Parliamentary Union, calling for the expansion of transparency and interaction with the citizens through electronic means, we aimed to examine the way MP's use their email in communicating with the citizens, that is, the promptitude and conciseness of their replies.

### 3. Methodology

#### Data collecting

The email addresses were gathered from the official sites of the two Chambers of Parliament, [www.cdep.ro](http://www.cdep.ro) and [www.senat.ro](http://www.senat.ro). These 123 addresses made up the target group and these were the addresses to which the two messages were sent.

The themes of the two emails were chosen from public debate topics of that period. The first question referred to the voting the New Constitution and asked for clarifications regarding compulsory military service. The second question referred to the European Commission Country Report and it asked the Romanian MP's whether Romania has been granted the "functional market economy" status or not.

The two rounds corresponding to these two messages encountered similar evolutions: the email messages were individually sent to the addresses in the target group and the replies were awaited for 30 days. Afterwards, the facts (the date the replies were sent and their contents) were archived and studied in order to calculate the R2 indicators (see next chapter).

#### Data analysis: quantitative and qualitative

We used the chart prototype below to calculate the medium feedback interval and to evaluate the content of the answer. The names of the MPs in question were replaced for confidentiality reasons. The examiners were the authors of this report.

Mesaj trimis la: 11 Noiembrie

Nume parlamentar	Data raspuns	Dif.	Nota Evaluator A	Nota Evaluator B	Nota Evaluator C	Media notelor
Nume 1	11 nov	0	4	2	3	3.0
Nume 2	11 nov	0	1	1	1	1.0
Nume 3	12 nov	+1	3	3	5	3.6
Nume 4	12 nov	+1	4	2	4	3.3
Nume 5	12 nov	+1	3	3	5	3.6
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ETC						

Dif. = the difference in full days between the date of reply and the date when the message was sent;

The marks given by the examiners were assigned according to the content of the answer and to the scale displayed on the right side.

In order to assess the

answer, we used the

following scale:

1 – does not answer the question;

2 – answers, but doesn't clarify;

3 –answers and clarifies;

4 –answers and directs to additional sources of information;

5 –answers and offers an invitation for a further discussion.

The R2 indicators were determined on the basis of conclusive data:

- The average reply rate: it expresses the probability to receive an answer for an email solicitation sent to an MP
- The consistency rate: expresses the proportion of those who systematically reply to email messages
- The average interval for the reply: expresses the average waiting time for an email reply
- The answer's relevance considering the solicitation: it evaluates the content of the answer, the manner in which the MP answers to the citizen's request
- The transparency indicator: it estimates the degree of utility for electronic communication between the citizens and MPs, combining the average reply rate and the answer's relevance

For the qualitative processing, an additional interpretation was taken up in order to classify the MPs' answers in categories and attitudes towards the citizen's request for information. The results of this interpretation are only a personal evaluation made on the basis of the 22 answers received during the study.

## 4. The analysis of the results

### R2 INDICATORS

#### 1. The average reply rate

[number of replies : number of addresses in the target group]

The percentage of replies received from the total number of available addresses (on the work list = 123 addresses)

- for the Constitution: 8,1% (10 replies)
- for the Country Report: 9,7% (12 replies)

#### 2. The consistency rate

[the number of persons that answered each time : total of persons on the work list]

How many MPs replied to both solicitations:

- only 4.9% MPs replied to both messages from a total of 123 MPs

#### 3. The average interval for the reply

[number of days passed since the emailing of the message : number of replies]

Total time, calculated in full days, that passed since the emailing of the message till the receipt of the reply, divided by the number of replies:

- for the Constitution: 6 days
- for the Country Report: 4 days

#### 4. The answer's relevance considering the solicitation

The marks were given by a group of examiners from eDemocratie.ro according to the following scale:

- 1 – does not answer the question;
- 2 – answers, but doesn't clarify;
- 3 – answers and clarifies;
- 4 – answers and directs to additional sources of information;
- 5 – answers and offers an invitation for a further discussion.

- for the Constitution: 3,34
- for the Country Report: 3,18

#### 5. The transparency indicator

This indicator was estimated using two of the previous indicators, compiled for both messages according to the following formula:

[common date of reply] x [answer's suitability rate]

This indicator estimates the degree of utility of electronic communication between the citizens and MPs concerning new matters, without any previous physical interaction between the sender and the receiver.

- The processing for the Transparency Indicator reveals the following outcome:  
 $((10+12)/2/123) \times (3.34+3.18)/2 = 0.09 \times 3.26 = \mathbf{0.29}$

On a scale from 0 (when no replies would be received) to 5 (when there would be received 100% answers concerning the subject followed by an invitation for a further discussion) we notice that the Transparency Indicator is extremely low. Consequently, electronic communication channels between MPs and citizens are actually closed in Romania.

### TYPES OF ANSWERS

A. The “**why did you turn to me for this request**” message is actually found in only one situation (if we choose not to take into account the refusal to reply to the emails). According to this sort of answer, the MP is surprised to be contacted and does not offer any answer to the email request. Odds: 1/20

B. The “**what I can tell you is that...**” message is the most frequent one. In this situation, the MP offers a concise answer and adds personal approach to the matter. The most general tendency is to specify a number of actual facts and afterwards to draw a conclusion that is also influenced by the MP’s political position. Odds: 14/20

C. The “**I’m always available for you**” situation is rarely encountered. The MP seems content to be contacted and offers a wide answer, using a friendly tone. In this case, the answer usually includes directions towards additional sources of information. Odds: 5/20.

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

Electronic communication is a complex system with a wide range of advantages and disadvantages. Definitely the most important advantages of electronic communication are its availability and low cost. Thus, our world has become “a global village” where past impossible or ineffective interactions are now blooming everywhere. Yet, this precise utility can easily turn into abuse that can lead to information overload.

Certainly, it is impossible for an MP to communicate with more than 20 million citizens only through electronic channels (email). He could not even interact with all his constituents, which are more than 100.000 in most districts. However, when an MP reveals his/her email address on the official site of the institution, every citizen who sees it expects that specific MP to be reachable by email. Unfortunately, the low level of the Transparency Indicator (0.29 out of a maximum of 5) clearly shows the low degree of consistency in electronic communication between MPs and citizens at the end of 2003.

However, our goal is not to ridicule the low level of email usage in communicating with with the citizens, but to recommend useful solutions:

The first step consists in understanding that, at an institutional level, revealing an email address that proves inactive is equivalent to publishing a phone number that nobody ever answers – this situation may erode the citizens’ confidence in that institution (the Romanian Parliament in our case) and in the near future constituents’ vote could change based on the MP’s ability to communicate with his/her voters.

A simple solution is to activate an automated reply on the email servers of the Parliament – thus, when an email is sent to a public person, an automated response is generated including a message of appreciation and additional information, concerning:

- the maximum reply period
- the email communication policy of the Romanian Parliament (the type of messages that do not receive reply, but which can be clarified using other communication channels etc.)
- alternative ways to reach that specific person

This particular implementation would first of all show the Romanian Parliament’s consideration for the citizens it represents.

However, this issue does not remedy the essence of the matter. The basic solution is for the Romanian Parliament to conceive **standards** regarding the use of email by its members. These standards should include pertinent norms referring to:

- the obligation for each member of the Romanian Parliament to use and announce a public email address (wether it is used by the MP himself or an assistant)
- the type of messages that require a reply and those that do not
- the maximum reply period
- the obligation to activate an automated reply
- rules to sustain an effective electronic communication process

These simple norms may improve the image and bring more effectiveness to the communication with the citizens, to the acknowledgement by the MPs of the significance of electronic communication environment by using emails (already heavily used in the Romanian private sector) and to the approaching to a 21<sup>st</sup> century democracy demands.

Thereafter, **email templates** can be used to answer simple questions, as well as **utility programs** like spam filters (used to eliminate unsolicited commercial email). Moreover, the Internet may be used on a larger scale to implement applications for national and local public institutions in **order to guarantee a fast, cheap and reliable connection** with the citizens. These applications may also include complex management systems for electronic

communication between the institutions' members and citizens. These could be based on CRM systems (Customer Relationship Management) from the commercial domain.

In our opinion, taking up a standard for the electronic communication for MPs represents an essential step for the improvement of public access to Parliament's activities. In the year of general elections, the MPs are given the chance to gain credit and show more transparency towards the Romanian citizen who is increasingly interested in communicating with his representatives.

For additional information, please contact us by email at:  
[info@edemocratie.ro](mailto:info@edemocratie.ro)

## APENDIX

### **1<sup>st</sup> message**

Subject: The New Constitution  
Sent: M 13.10.2003

Hello!

My name is-----, I am a third year student at the Polytechnic University and I wish to find out more information about the suspension of compulsory military service in Romania.

I understand this is guaranteed by the New Constitution; however the article seems subject to interpretation. As much as it is possible, please let me know about the effect the New Constitution would have on the waving of the compulsory military service.

### **2<sup>nd</sup> message**

Subject: Europe  
Sent: M 10.11.2003

What is the truth about the European Commission Country Report for Romania – were we granted the status of functional market economy or not? Could you please send me a brief answer to clarify this matter?