

Public access to the Parliament of Albania, an overview

Ina Veleshnja

Abstract

Institutional transparency is one of the keys of fighting corruption and abusive practices. The Parliament of Albania has for a long time pressed this issue in order to increase transparency and internal democratization. Transparent practices and institutions is also one of the main objectives of various international organizations such as OSCE or the EU for the institutions of Albania.

Keywords: parliamentary transparency, right of information, public access.

Introduction

An Albanian citizen who wants to be informed on the works and proceedings of the Parliament has a variety of tool (technological and legal), that serve this purpose. In the age of internet the access to information is easier and faster than ever. The Albanian Parliament like most of institutions makes use full use of such resources.

All the legal tools¹ available for the information and engagement of the public are available in the official webpage of the Assembly. Almost every legal (Constitution, Regulation of the Parliament, internal regulation of the administration of the Parliament, Labor Code, Law on the Civil Servant System of Albania etc), are all available there. The webpage has been created since 1998 and since that time the information available has been updated year to year. There is also an historical archive where interested people can access reports of plenary sessions from a specific legislature.

Other tools include:

"Today in the Parliament" is an online calendar where are reflected all the sessions taking place, what is going to be discussed and if representatives from different institutions are going to be present in the meeting.

"Info point system" anyone interested on the works of the Albanian Parliament and visitors in the Parliament and the Plenary Session Room have the opportunity to receive fast and very useful electronic information, orienting, updated and transparent through two information points "Info Point" located respectively in these environments. This information system contains inter alia the main information on the country, the time and agenda of the proceedings in plenary sessions, parliamentary commissions hearings etc.

Statistical data

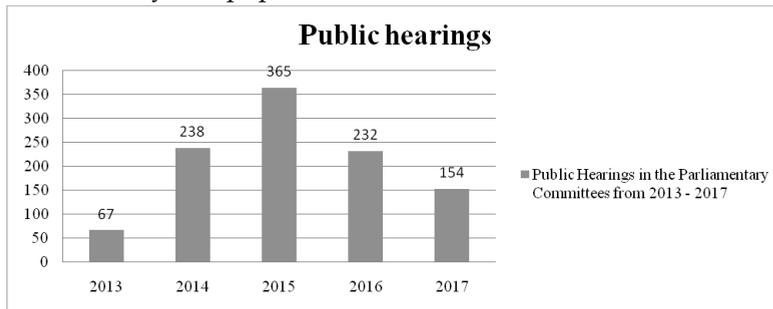
Based on the annual reports on the activities of the Assembly of Albania, published

¹ <https://www.parlament.al/>.

on the official website, from 2013 – 2017 the Parliamentary Committees and subcommittees organized a series of public hearings during their meetings. Draft laws concerning different aspects of the law and right have all been carefully reviewed by the responsible Committee. The Committee on Legal Issues, Public Administration and Human Rights organized more public hearings compare to the others.

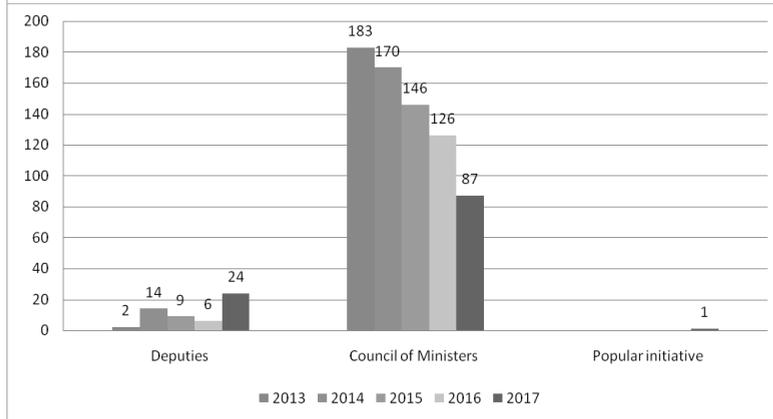
Regarding the legal initiative from 2013 until 2017, it can be easily concluded that the Council of Ministers is the main sponsor of the laws. The number of MPs initiative increased in 2017, but common citizens were not active during these five years in being sponsor of laws.

There is only one popular initiative from 35 000 voters in 2017.



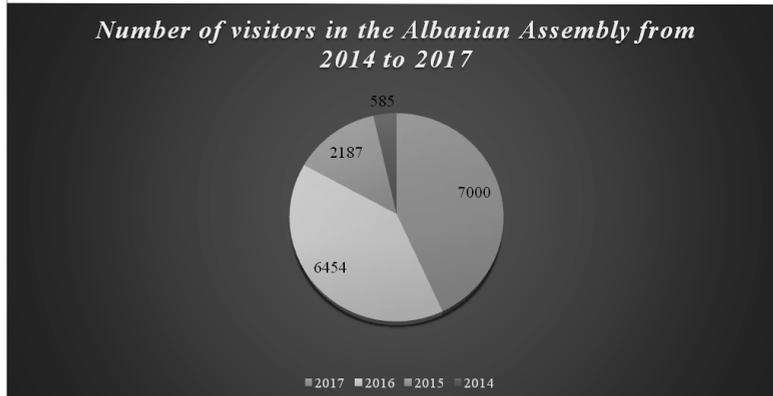
Source: Annual reports of the Assembly of Albania from 2013 - 2017

Legal initiative in the Parliament from 2013 until 2017



Source: Annual reports of the Assembly of Albania from 2014 - 2017

Other means of information for the public



In order for the public to be impartially informed on the various draft laws that will be discussed in the parliament, special attention has been paid to the *in time publishing* of the

legal acts in the official webpage of the Parliament of Albania www.parlament.al. Based on the Regulation of the Parliament and the Regulation on the functioning of the official webpage, specifically, it is published, the text of the draft law along with a report. As of October 2018, the Parliament of Albania also uses what is called “a legislative tracking system”². In other words there is a chronological order of the bills that queued for Parliamentary examination, the law that is being amended (if it’s an existing law), the report of the respective committees, the opinion of civil society or groups of interests, if there is one, etc.

Besides the legislative tracking system, which does an excellent job in increasing the transparency of the institution, the following information is also available in the website, notification in the plenary session (when it is going to be held, what is going to be discussed), the calendar of the workings of the parliament; minutes of the meetings of the Chairmen Conference, committees and councils, and the minutes of meetings of the plenary sessions, the amendments deposited in the commissions and the amendments approved in the commissions, reports of the parliamentary commissions that will assess the draft law, approved laws, notifications on parliamentary activities, statistics, Curriculum vitae-s, video gallery, photo gallery, administrative structure, vacancies, public procurement related information etc..

The Assembly of Albania has a manual “Participation of the public in the decision making process of the Parliament”³. It explains in details all the information that will help the public, NGOs, visitors etc to engage in the legislative process of the Parliament. At the moment the Parliament doesn’t have a designated channel only for Parliamentary activity, but it is considered as a future objective.

Recommendations from international organization on transparency increasing and democratization for public institutions in Albania

*Progress Report of European Commission 2016*⁴ determines that “Transparency and inclusiveness in parliament's work continued to follow an upward trend. A new parliamentary website launched in March significantly improved access to parliamentary documents. However, more transparency is needed at committee level. Parliamentary committees continued consultations with relevant stakeholders, but improvements are required on early notification and follow-up. A law on the establishment of the National Council on Civil Society was adopted in November.

*Progress Report of European Commission 2017*⁵ determines that “As regards transparency and accountability, Parliament has overall ensured access to documents and activities. A two-year communications strategy was approved in May 2017. A review has continued of the internal rules of organisation of Parliament’s administration and training, including activities undertaken under the EU Twinning Project.”

Summary of Findings and Recommendations of the Twinning Project for Strengthening the Assembly of Albania for 2013

²<https://www.parlament.al/ProjektLigje/ProjektLigjeDetails/51180>.

As a result of the Twinning project, recommendations were prepared for improving the transparency of Assembly's work and for introducing a system for structured relations between the Assembly and the civil society regarding the legislative process.

Recommendations related to the communication strategy

– It is crucial that a written communication strategy must be elaborated internally, by the staff and stakeholders of the Assembly and then adopted by its organs, in order to have full ownership on behalf of the Assembly, which also guarantees the implementation of the strategy.

– The process of elaboration of the communication strategy should be managed by an ad hoc Working Group for Communication Strategy, consisting of core staff members of the Service for the Public Relations. This group should be responsible for planning and coordination of the drafting and implementation of the communication strategy.

– It is highly recommended to engage as many people as possible in the planning process:

- the organs and members of the Assembly (in order to set appropriate targets and get the necessary political, administrative and financial support for implementation),
- the staff members of different services and units of the Assembly (that guarantees the drafting of a realistic, feasible communication plan, and – by the commitment and ownership of the staff, being gained during the process of elaboration – its effective implementation),

- the representatives of civil society (such as academic specialists of communication, representatives of different target groups from state organs, media, NGOs, universities and schools) (their contributions help to identify the special needs of the audience of communication and also can improve their affiliation via commitment of their representatives).

The available recommendations of international organizations and proposals of external experts should be taken into consideration during the strategic planning. They provide requirements and proposals, theoretical and practical basis for the strategy, but, as it was previously stated, the process of drafting should be done internally.

The main steps of communication planning include:

- setting the goals and objectives for the communication,
- situation analysis: examination of the current situation,
- identifying and prioritizing the audience,
- planning the activities (in accordance with the target groups' specifics),
- implementation,
- evaluation of the achieved results.

Recommendation related to public relations

One of the most important recommendations (establishing a parliamentary document management system – the e-parliament project) has been already in the process of

realization.

– The on-going e-parliament project will serve as an effective tool for improving the transparency of the Assembly. This will make it possible to publish the information about the Assembly's activities in the Assembly website in real time. (See Component 4 -- Mandatory Result 5, for more details.)

– Further efforts need to be made to make it easier for the public to find and get information on the Assembly and its activities.

– In the short-term, it is recommended to publish in the central part of the Assembly website the current information (e.g. *"This week in the Assembly"*), a guide on how to find information on the website, and also the availability of the information service for further questions. (See Component 4 -- Mandatory Result 5, for more details.)

– In the medium-term, it is proposed to institutionalize the information-providing activity in the form of a separated unit (e.g. *"Information Service for the Public"*) which is integrated with the legal counselling unit or in the framework of the Library.

– It is recommended to establish a suitable reception space for the public (e.g. *"Visitors' Centre"*) in the planned new building of the Assembly which integrates the different existing and the future public services of the Assembly. The open access area for the public can serve as:

- an information center for the public,
- as a point to manage the admission procedure to the Assembly,
- as a bookshop of Assembly publications,
- as a shop of Assembly souvenirs,
- an entrance to the open access public reading room of the Library,
- a contact point for NGOs.

– The planned new building for the Assembly is itself a communication challenge.

• The citizens need to be informed regularly on the plans and the phases of this investment.

• The Assembly's PR Service needs to play a key role in this process and should prepare a communication strategy concerning this issue well in advance (including the change of the Assembly logo and elaboration of a new visual identity).

– Concerning the media relations, particularly the plans on the creation of a parliamentary TV channel, considerations need to be given to the expected costs. It is a rather costly communication tool, for a result not much higher than that obtained by broadcasting in the Assembly website or by the existing public or private television channels.

– Concerning the openness of the Assembly, it is recommended to not just ease and broaden public visits to the Assembly, but also to promote the opportunity of such public visits, in order to increase the number of visitors. A more pro-active approach seems to be needed, and also, in the medium-term, additional human resources need to be provided.

– It is important to emphasize that information and educational programmes provided for the children and youth need to be adequate to their generation's specifics.

• The form should be attractive and interesting, the content easily understandable, using the tools which are intensively used by them (internet, social media).

- The presented national models of parliamentary websites and educational programmes for youth can serve as good examples.
The online social media provides new tools for parliaments to communicate and engage with the public, consult on legislation, deliver educational resources and promote transparency.
 - The recent resolution and Guidelines of IPU on social media can serve as a theoretical and practical basis to implement the plans to establish a Facebook account for the Assembly.
 - In order to ensure better involvement of NGOs in the legislative process, a more frequent and institutionalized cooperation with the NGOs is recommended.
- This can be implemented through the well-functioning parliamentary register of NGOs, preferably by the fields of responsibilities of standing committees.
- In order to provide timely and relevant information for interested NGOs, the Assembly needs to provide them with regular and special information, in addition to the Assembly website, via a newsletter, which is specialized for the needs of NGOs.
 - The registered NGOs need to be not only informed, but to be invited to the particular activities of the Assembly.
- Despite the lack of space in the committee meeting rooms, consideration should be given to find an opportunity to increase the number of attendees of committee meetings, for example, by changing the committee's meeting room.
 - The Assembly is recommended to take the initiative and be pro-active in contacting NGOs, by organizing different events with NGOs and involving them into the parliamentary work (open days, joint committee meetings, conferences etc.).

The text of draft bills and amendments as well as their subsequent progress in the legislative process should be easily available on the Assembly website.

Invitations to and the agenda of the planned committee sessions should be posted and updated on the website. An important component that affects transparency is the publication of the minutes of the Committee meetings on the website. This would result in an important increase of the transparency of the institution.

References

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