ENDE Project
Policy Recommendations for digitalisation and E-Governance

1. Title and Basic Information

DIGITALISATION OF PARLIAMENTS:

FROM EMERGENCY RESPONSE TO SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE?

This policy brief draws on research conducted within the Jean Monnet Network on Digitalisation and E-Governance in the European Union (ENDE). It is based in particular on findings from a forthcoming special issue "Digitalisation of Parliaments" of the journal *Parliamentary Affairs*, edited by Aleksandra Maatsch and Anna Pacześniak

2. Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered an unprecedented acceleration of digitalisation in national parliaments across the European Union and in the European Parliament. Faced with severe restrictions on physical meetings, national legislatures and the EP adopted digital tools to sustain their core constitutional functions—law-making and scrutiny of the executive in the case of national parliaments, and co-legislation and supervision of the EU institutions in the case of the EP. These included remote and hybrid meetings, online voting mechanisms, digital legislative platforms and, increasingly, early applications of artificial intelligence (AI).

However, this rapid digitalisation has not translated into a uniform or lasting institutional shift. Comparative evidence from EU Member States shows that most parliaments have either reverted to pre-pandemic practices or selectively retained digital innovations. Only isolated cases demonstrate sustained and systemic integration of digital tools into parliamentary procedures and day-to-day functioning.

This uneven trajectory suggests that digitalisation in parliaments remains under-institutionalized and often perceived as a crisis-driven necessity rather than a strategic reform. For the European Union, this raises important questions regarding democratic resilience, transparency and the capacity of parliaments to operate effectively under changing conditions. A more coordinated and forward-looking approach to parliamentary digitalisation is therefore required, particularly regarding hybrid procedures, digital infrastructure and the application of AI tools by parliaments.

3. Introduction National parliaments occupy a central role in the domestic and EU's democratic architecture through their responsibility for adopting legislation and

holding executive actors accountable, and at the EU level, in monitoring compliance with the subsidiarity principle. These functions are traditionally embedded in highly formalised procedures, often anchored in constitutional and legal frameworks that prioritise physical presence, deliberation and institutional continuity.

Prior to the pandemic, digitalisation in parliaments primarily concerned communication, enhancing interaction with citizens and improving access to information. By contrast, the pandemic forced digital tools into the core of parliamentary activity. Legislatures introduced remote participation in committee and plenary work, digital voting systems and comprehensive platforms for managing legislative processes.

This shift raised expectations that the crisis could act as a catalyst for lasting institutional transformation. At the same time, parliaments are widely recognised as path-dependent institutions, characterised by strong procedural traditions and resistance to abrupt change. Furthermore, caution regarding more intensive, widespread, and universal digitalisation, as well as the use of artificial intelligence tools in legislative work, stems from fears of cyberattacks, external infiltration, and, consequently, permanent damage to the system, data breaches, or data loss.

The key policy question, therefore, is whether digitalisation has become embedded in parliamentary practice or remains confined to exceptional circumstances, and what the current trends are in this regard.

4. Conceptual framework

The post-pandemic evolution of parliamentary digitalisation across EU Member States can be broadly grouped into three patterns.

First, in a majority of cases, digitalisation took the form of a temporary adjustment (Poland, Germany, Slovakia, and Greece). Parliaments adopted digital tools during the crisis but subsequently returned to established in-person procedures. In these cases, remote meetings and online voting are now permitted only under formally declared emergencies, often with strict limitations. This pattern reflects a strong institutional preference for traditional modes of operation and concerns about the legitimacy and integrity of digital procedures.

Second, a number of parliaments followed a trajectory of incremental change (Italy, Latvia, Lithuania and Finland). While they resumed in-person plenary sessions, they retained selected digital innovations, particularly at the committee level. Hybrid or remote committee meetings have become more common, and digital platforms introduced during the pandemic continue to support legislative workflows. In addition, some parliaments have begun experimenting with AI tools for tasks such as transcription, summarisation of legislative proposals and data processing. These developments suggest a gradual adaptation of existing institutional frameworks rather than a fundamental transformation.

Third, only a very limited number of cases exhibit features of lasting transformation (Estonia). In these instances, digital tools have been integrated more systematically into both law-making and scrutiny processes, including hybrid plenary participation and sustained use of digital platforms and AI applications. However, such cases remain the exception rather than the rule.

Overall, the evidence points to significant divergence across Member States and confirms that digitalisation has not led to a convergent "digital parliament" model within the EU.

5. Analysis The findings have several implications for the European Commission and the broader EU policy framework.

- First, the persistence of predominantly temporary or incremental change indicates that the potential of digitalisation to strengthen parliamentary effectiveness remains only partially realised. Without further institutionalisation, digital tools risk being underused or inconsistently applied, limiting their contribution to legislative quality and scrutiny capacity.

- Second, the uneven development of digital practices across Member States may contribute to asymmetries in parliamentary capacity. Differences in digital infrastructure, legal frameworks and administrative resources can affect how effectively parliaments perform their functions, with possible implications for democratic accountability at the national level.

- Third, the growing use of AI in parliamentary contexts raises new governance challenges. While AI offers opportunities to enhance efficiency and support evidence-based decision-making, it also introduces risks related to transparency, bias (including gender bias), accountability and cybersecurity. The absence of clear guidelines and transparency regarding the use of AI (for instance, in law-making) may lead to potentially problematic applications.

- Finally, the experience of the pandemic has highlighted the importance of resilience in parliamentary systems. Digital tools can enhance the legislatures' ability to function under crisis conditions, but only if they are embedded within robust legal and procedural frameworks.

6. Policy Recommendations

Section 1: Title

R1

A first priority is to support the institutionalisation of digital tools in core parliamentary functions. This involves encouraging Member States to integrate digital procedures into their operational rules beyond emergency contexts, while ensuring compatibility with constitutional requirements and democratic standards.

R2
Greater emphasis should be placed on strengthening digital infrastructure for law-making, scrutiny, and inter-parliamentary cooperation. Investment in interoperable digital platforms can improve the management of legislative processes, facilitate access to information, enhance the analytical capacity of parliaments, and strengthen interparliamentary cooperation within the EU.

R3

Third, the development of clear frameworks for the use of AI in parliamentary settings is essential. The European Commission, as well as the European Parliament, could support the exchange of best practices and promote common principles regarding transparency, human oversight and accountability in AI-assisted parliamentary work.

R4
hybrid models of parliamentary operation should be further explored and refined. Allowing flexible combinations of physical and digital participation—particularly in committee work—can improve efficiency and inclusiveness without undermining deliberative quality.

Brief comment

The implementation of such solutions would also yield additional positive effects not directly related to parliamentary work, such as energy savings and reduced fossil fuel consumption, i.e., environmentally friendly measures. These savings would be particularly evident in the case of the European Parliament.

R5
Digitalisation efforts should explicitly aim to strengthen transparency and citizen engagement. Enhancing public access to legislative data or, for instance, public

consultations, can contribute to greater trust in democratic institutions and reinforce the link between parliaments and citizens/stakeholders.

R6
The EU can play a role in facilitating cross-national learning and capacity-building. Platforms for cooperation and knowledge exchange among national parliaments can help disseminate innovative practices and reduce disparities in digital readiness.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the capacity of national parliaments in the European Union and the European Parliament to adapt under exceptional circumstances. Nevertheless, this period of accelerated digitalisation has not led to a widespread or uniform transformation of parliamentary practices. Instead, digitalisation remains largely characterised by temporary adjustments and incremental change, shaped by domestic institutional or legal constraints and national specificities. For the European Union, supporting a more strategic, coherent and democratically grounded approach to digitalisation offers an opportunity to enhance the resilience, effectiveness and legitimacy of parliamentary democracy.