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The Concept of Internet-voting During Elections and Referendums as the Beginning of the Development of Future Democracy in Lithuania

Dear participants of the Assembly,

Yesterday in his report Prof. Jim Dator stressed that due to new quality economic and social conditions and IT progress traditional democratic system of government becomes inefficient.

Today I would like to discuss democracy and human rights in information society. The forms of e-democracy implemented in Lithuania comprise e-voting, direct consultation, direct interaction between elected representatives of the nation and the electorate, etc. The employment of theoretical and practical means of e-democracy aims at improving existing democratic processes. E-democracy both on its theoretic and practical-political level is still a young area; however many states pursuing the development of information society and e-government envisage the tools for the implementation of e-democracy.

Compared to other states of the European Union, the Baltic States and especially Lithuania witnesses the most rapid development of the sector of information technologies and telecommunications (ITT). This tendency results from a rapid economic growth and investments into IT infrastructure. The breakthrough of information society in Lithuania was greatly influenced by a provision of the Law on Income Tax of Individuals in effect since the middle of 2004 allowing Lithuanian residents to use an income tax relief for purchasing a personal computer and/or obtaining an Internet access for personal use. Due to the income tax relief, individuals

can recover up to 33 per cent of costs spent when purchasing a computer or installing an Internet access. This tax relief without any doubt encourages individuals to acquire goods and services from the IT sector. According to a survey, the number of households possessing a personal computer has increased by approximately 30 per cent in a year (from the 1st quarter of 2005 to the 1st quarter of 2006). In addition to private use of computers the number of public Internet access points has increased in banks, the municipality buildings, labour exchange offices, and social institutions

The computerization of the country opens new possibilities for democracy. Lithuania has already taken its first steps towards the implementation of e-democracy – on 16th of November 2006 the Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania has adopted *the Concept of Internet Voting During elections and Referendums*, in order to provide the citizens with the opportunity to express their civic will at elections and referendums not only by casting a ballot in a traditional way (by early voting or voting at the polling stations on the elections day) but also to use their right to vote via the Internet.

Communication by electronic means is not a new practice in the modern world; nevertheless the use of electronic communication channels and means for elections has been initiated only recently. In 2005 Estonia was the first country in the EU to test Internet voting giving the possibility to around 9 thousand of voters to experience the advantages.

One of the major aims of the legalization of e-voting is to give an opportunity to vote for the electorate unable to vote by means provided for at present.

The adopted Conception comprises the main principles of e-voting, describes the mechanism of such voting, indicates the advantages and drawbacks of the system.

Internet voting:

- Could provide Lithuanians living abroad with the opportunity to take part in the political life of Lithuania and maintain the contacts with their native country, since emigration is a serious problem in Lithuania;

- Could allow voting for those people who are away on the day of elections and are unable to arrive at the polling station;
- Could accelerate the development of information technologies in Lithuania;
- Could facilitate and increase the efficiency of vote counting and the estimation of election or referendum results;
- Could encourage the interest in a modern form of voting; provide the emigrants from Lithuania the opportunity for more active voting;

After the consultations with the experts from different fields e- voting as a an additional opportunity for the electorate to express their will was recognized many times to be not less safe than traditional means of voting.

In Lithuania there are proposals to use a relatively safe and reliable means of Internet voting – the system of e-banking. Around 2/3 of Lithuanian citizens are active users of e-banking. The system of e-banking could be easily adjusted to Internet voting, since voter identification through the systems of e-banking does not require huge investments into equipment or any additional costs for users. Additional reliability of the banking identification systems was also proven by an increasingly popular electronic income declaration system organized by the State Tax Inspectorate and commercial banks.

In a survey conducted in Lithuanian cities and towns in 2006, 52.6 per cent of respondents said that they would use the opportunity if Internet voting during elections. However, in order to legalize e-voting it is necessary to make appropriate amendments to the following legal acts: the Law on the Elections to Local Government Councils, the Law on Elections to the Seimas, the Law on Presidential Elections, the Law on Elections to the European Parliament, and the Law on Referendum by legalizing internet voting as an alternative means of voting. There are plans to make the amendments in March through May.