

Law Factory

This story begins a long, long time ago. My esteemed colleagues had begun the work on software support for the legislative process already in the previous millennium. The result was a wonderful software product which supported all key back-office processes involved in the preparation of new laws in a ministry environment. Unfortunately, the product had one critical flaw - it was developed before its time and the users at the time were simply not advanced enough for a product as complex as this. Today you see an all-new product, whose very skeleton is intertwined with various support systems to the point of being kitschy with all its user-friendliness, and the option of obtaining public opinions is embedded into the system itself.

Assembly line

If we look at it from an adequate distance, the legislative procedure is a relatively straightforward process. The government prepares the guidelines and prepares a work plan. The government's work program always naturally creates the need to change legislation or create new laws. Normally the subject matter of laws is prepared by the relevant line ministry in charge of the area where the subject of the law belongs, whether the law be new or an amendment. Ministries then prepare a draft text and negotiate it with other ministries, the Government Office for Legislation and the interested public. The final product is then delivered to the government for deliberation, following which the government normally presents the bill to the national assembly, which discusses it and if the law is acceptable for the majority of the members, the law is passed and implemented.

The main milestones along the path the law or amendment travels are the following:

- ministries
- Government Office for Legislation
- Government of the Republic of Slovenia
- National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia
- Official Gazette

And the crucial milestone for any democratic society:

- involvement of the general public

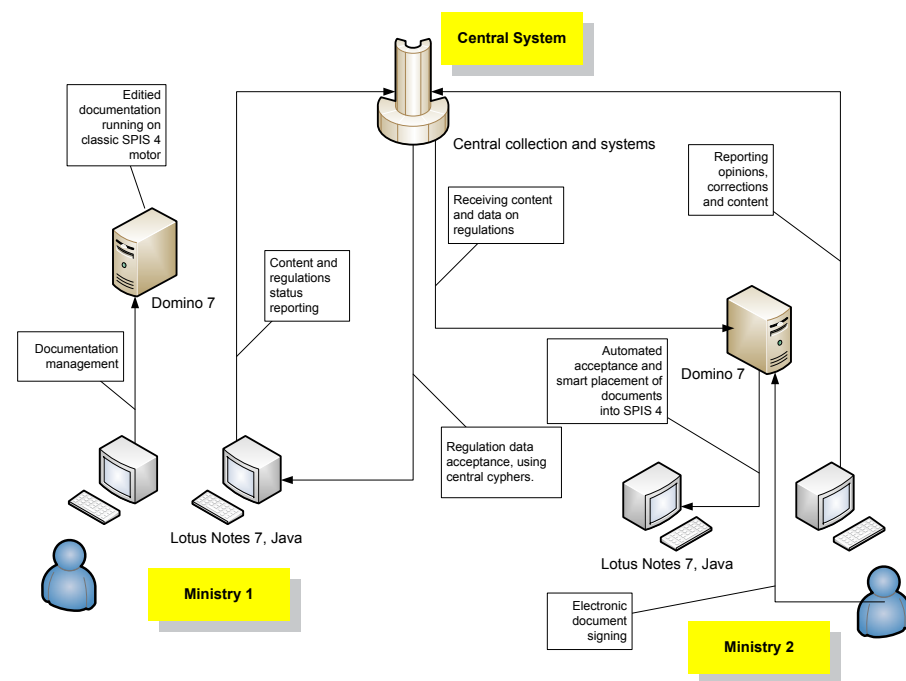
Goals and tools

The main goals of the ZPRS project were:

- to provide centralized software support for users in ministries and the government, which is user-friendly and features automatic processes wherever possible.
- to allow the public simple web access to planned laws and encourage it to actively participate in all stages of the process.

The project is so extensive and diverse in terms of the areas it touches that almost all available modern technology was utilized in the final solution. At the forefront, of course, are IBM Domino/Lotus Notes and Oracle, part of the solution is written in javascript, a web portal was designed for public presentation of individual stages of the legislative process and contents of laws, and web services were written for delivery of information and content.

Picture 1. Function scheme



Preparation of semi-products

The process of adopting new legislation or amendments to existing legislation usually

begins at the relevant line ministry in charge of the field which the law involves. The module ZPRS/M supports users work at ministries.

This module operates in the Lotus Notes 7 environment and uses the Domino server; it also links to web services at e-government, and part of the software code is written in javascript. In addition to documentation management and status of the regulation, the module also allows:

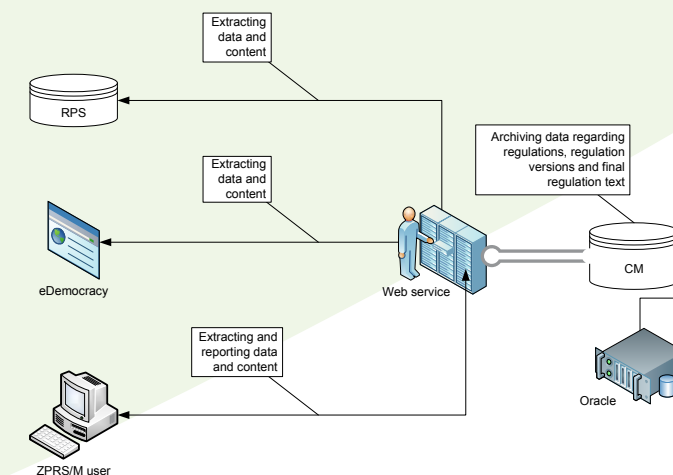
- acquisition of data and contents from central databases and systems such as the RPS (Slovenian Regulations Register), CM (Central Modules) and e-Government
- sending data and contents into the central module
- exchange of documents between ministries
- electronic signing of documents

The figure below shows a simple schematic illustration of the functions supported by the ZPRS/M module.

Coordinator

Collaboration between ministries and the public is coordinated by the central module (CM). The central module is a set of relational tables on the Oracle server. CM

Picture 2. Central modul with connected systems



uses web services for any collaboration with CM applications. Direct entry of data and documents in tables is not supported. The web service which allows communication with CM is therefore the same for all linked applications - for example, information and content used by the ZPRS/M module and the e-Democracy portal are provided by the same server.

The central module used in the legislative procedure can be used by any application within the h-kom network.

The figure below illustrates the functions of the central module and the currently linked systems and applications.

Public Relations Department

From the first draft regulation, the central module and e-democracy keep the public informed about the regulation being formed, and e-democracy also provides tools for involvement of the general public. Each regulation undergoing the preparation stage is ensured a certain period of time during which the public can voice its concerns and participate in public discussion with opinions, comments and recommendations. The e-democracy web portal provides a simple tool allowing website visitors to comment and write suggestions. Since the portal has the information on which ministry is responsible for preparing the regulation, it sends the comments and suggestions directly to the relevant ministry in charge of the regulation. Within the ministry's back-office system, inside the ZPRS/M module,

The features integrated into the system to support the work of the Government Office for Legislation are:

- system integration with the functions of e-HRM modules (another software suite offered by SRC)
- integration with MS Word on the level of preparing and comparing documents

The Government Office for Legislation prepares opinions on the proposed bill. A positive opinion will take the bill forward towards publication in the Official Gazette (some legislative acts will be completed with this process). As a rule, a positive opinion about a proposal or draft law will give the proposing party the green light to send the material to the government review. Of course, this part of the process, including the opinion of the Government Office for Legislation, is logged in the central module.

A negative opinion of the Government Office for Legislation will require the proposing party to carry out the necessary changes to the draft and send the draft for a second review after these changes have been made.

the citizen's comment is automatically filed in the appropriate electronic folder linked to the regulation and the drafters of the regulation are required by law to respond to the author of the comment or suggestion.

Relations between e-government, the central module, the citizens and the back-office system can be seen from the following illustration:

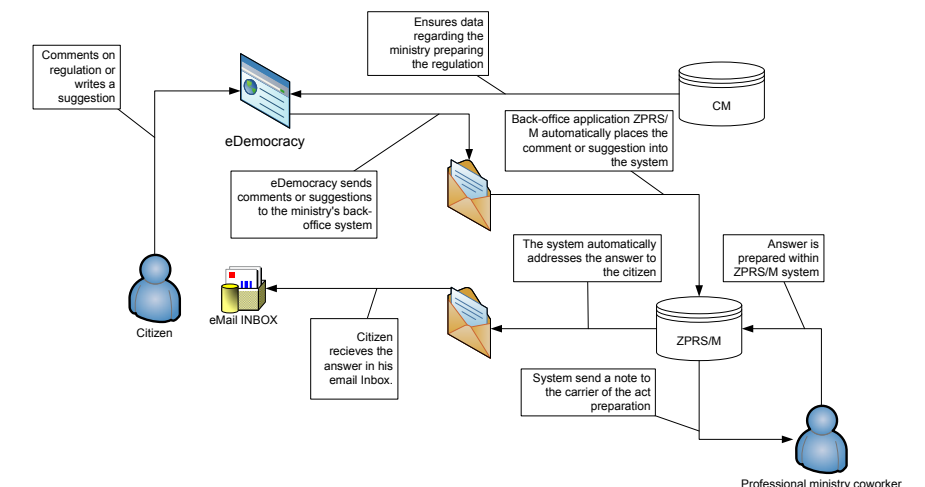
Quality control

After the process of harmonizing the law between the ministries and the interested public is complete, the law must also pass the test of "compatibility" with the Slovenian Constitution and other legislation. This is ensured by the Government Office for Legislation. The ZPRS/SVZ system is actually an upgraded version of the ZPRS/M module.

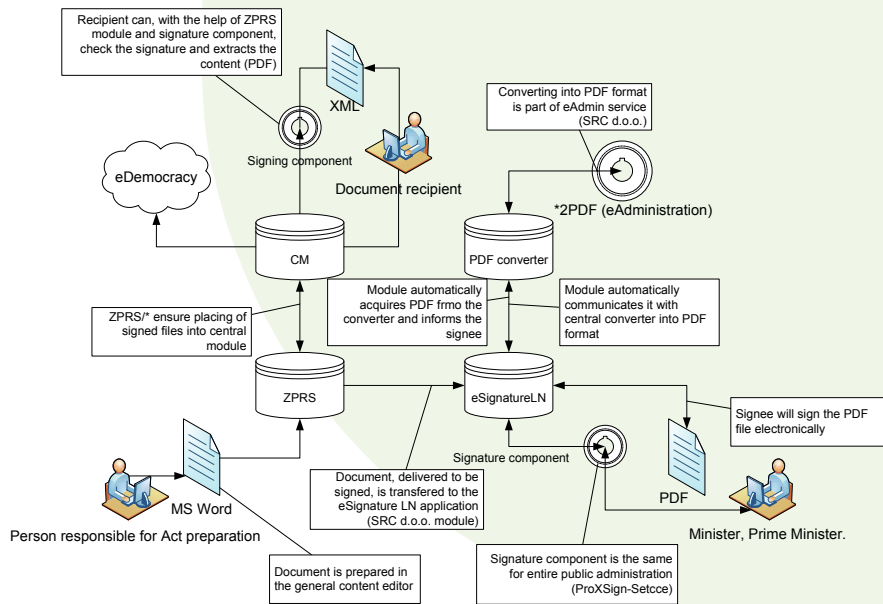
Administration

The law will now "travel" via the central module to the information system, which supports the government's work. Upon delivery of the material, the ZPRS/GSV module will ensure that the user accepting the document in the government system will be advised whether the document had been reviewed by the Government Office for Legislation, and, if so,

Picture 3. Relations between e-Government central modul, citizens and backoffice system



Picture 4. Signature process



what opinion they provided. The system carries out similar checks for opinions prepared by other line ministries. After accepting the draft bill into the back-office system, the government will carry out its own procedures using IT support already at its disposal. After these procedures are completed, the law will most likely be sent to the National Assembly's system, where IT support for the legislative procedures has been used for over ten years (also prepared by SRC). In this final process, it is particularly interesting to mention the software support for e-signatures, which is integrated into all ZPRS modules.

Electronic signing of documents ensures authorization of contents, which is important because it lets us know that the highest representative of any individual public body (e.g. minister, director, prime minister) approved the document, and at the same time this prevents any further changes to the document, as any subsequent changes could have catastrophic consequences if such content were published and implemented. Signed electronic documents must be in PDF/A format, which the signing component wraps into an XML packet. The process resembles a popular chocolate advertisement, except in this process the ZPRS modules play the role of a small army of marmots making sure that the file is properly converted and signed. The signing process is roughly illustrated below.

Providing support for the processes of passing new legislation is an important technologic and organizational achievement of SRC, as it simplifies and standardizes the work process of each individual playing any role in the law's journey from the idea to the publication stage. For us citizens it is important to point out the component of paying attention to public opinion, as we can influence the legislative process through active public involvement. Laws are not only a tool in the hands of legal experts - we have to realize that laws influence our way of life, our rights and obligations, therefore our contribution to the process is important, and each day, each year we will become more and more aware of this.

Summary

The legislative procedure is a complex process which involves any ministry, the public, government offices, the government and the National Assembly. Some of these processes already had some existing IT support. The "Legislative Procedure" project therefore had to cover various aspects, it had to ensure operation on different program platforms, and utilize a multitude of related software products. The result if the project is a "line" of software suites, which cover all the essential steps along the process of passing a law, and great

Tatjana Zupan

The project of IT support in the legislative procedure was started on several occasions in this country. As we have already mentioned, there was an existing software product. However, in this process it is crucial that the legislators want the procedure to be transparent and constantly open to the public. If we consider the sheer number of experts involved in the procedure, how many honorable men and women who need to give their final consent to each regulation and sign it off or approve it, we can see that the procedure is nothing if not complex. Furthermore, all those involved must realize the importance of a quality procedure, as only that can lead to preparation of better legislation. We could discuss the quality of legislation in Slovenia at length. Thus the system is rebuilt using state-of-the-art tools, and the readiness and will of the legislators and decision-makers are the key to successful implementation of the system in everyday operations. If we have that Slovenia will once again be at the forefront of e-administration because e-democracy, which is part of this system, is becoming a more and more important factor in Europe and in the world.

emphasis was placed on paying more attention to the contribution of the interested public to the content of the laws. Electronic signing of documents is supported, and the documents and all essential statuses in the process of preparing laws are centralized.

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