Parliamentary archive in the contexts of public relations

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Initially, let me introduce the approach to determining the place of the archive in the parliament and, definitely, its role.

Once a secretary general from a parliamentary office expressed his opinion about the new layout of the phone book of the institution: “The entire structure of the institution is presented in the alphabetical order and starts with the letter A, hence “Archive” coming first, which is not very solid”.

The secretary general was advised: “Enter “Seimas Archive”. The letter S will not only rearrange “Archive” in the phone book so that it looks “more solid, but will also prevent from doubting its place… in the structure of a parliamentary institution”.

You might have already grasped what parliamentary archive is referred to.

However, this funny yet true story gives us an opportunity to actually evaluate where the parliamentary archive is placed and what determines its role.

The aim of the presentation is to answer the question how the parliamentary archive could and should reveal the function of document dissemination.

The Seimas Public Relations Strategy developed in 1998 names “the key principle of the strategy: the Seimas is an open institution of public authority”. It further emphasises that “we need to seek publicity of the institution in deliberating, declaring and passing decisions, transparency of the authority and the authorities, as well as interinstitutional cooperation”.

On the one hand, this primarily implies the preparation of relevant information on events in the Seimas and dissemination thereof to various concerned groups. Certainly, in these cases a politician, an information drafter, a media representative or the audience do not consider how a number of documents originate from one document and how the entire Parliament becomes the media, i.e. the communicator of relevant news.

On the other hand, when presenting the overview of the situation in 1998 from the internal communication aspect in the Seimas, the Office of the Seimas, the above referred strategy also writes about the archive, quote: “The Seimas Archive does not store historical material (does not assign and is not assigned this function); there are not all documents even since 11.03.1990, as well as important act drafting documents, e.g. the documents of the working group on [drafting of] the 1992 Constitution; generally, the archive is not considered to be an important unit in the Office of the Seimas”. This led not only to the decision to develop the concept of the historical interior: precisely the Seimas Public Relations department began to collect the material of Seimas history and presented it in the interior of the Parliament’s building (we can actually see it in this hall). The so-called Seimas Archive contained practically nothing – most material is stored in the National Museum of Lithuania, the Lithuanian Central State Archives, and the stocks of some other museums. Thus, the development of public relations resulted in the parliamentary walls transmitting the Seimas history. However, concerning the principle of openness, it is now worthwhile to note

2 Ibid, p.12
that the Seimas leadership used to be requested whether individual visitors could see the documents kept in the parliamentary archive.

Openness of the archive may constitute a problem for a politician. This should also be discussed with a view to finding an adequate solution.

Politics as a process cannot be imagined without a document. Yet, in order to understand historical, political, legal sciences and, in general, social changes, both a formalised decision and its preparation circumstances are important. Therefore, perception of the result requires the documents reflecting the communication process, which explain why and how a respective legal act or any other kind of decision or agreement has been passed.

More than a decade ago, the problem related to the national Parliament of Lithuania – the most important political institution – came to light: the concept of the archive was basically associated only with the storage of adopted legislation. Certain needs also pointed to this problem.

For example, in 1999, even when preparing a publication on the impeachment proceedings of a parliamentarian\(^3\), the documents (including audio records) for this book were collected from different institutions, various sources, including court and parliament officials; in other words, the parliamentary archive contained not all related documents. The circumstances of collecting documents show that part of them would not have made to the archive, since the servants and officials had no commitment to serve history in the process of document drafting and processing. Thus, in the referred case, the mission of the publisher (publishing house) was close to the functions of the researcher, because it was solely the publisher who collected the documents, published the book, and served the science of politics and law in a certain sense.

Another case is also interesting: every time when the Office of the Seimas would prepare the directory of parliamentarians of each term of office, many politicians expressed a wish to interfere in the editing process. For example, they wished even to change the names of official institutions or agencies, where they had worked previously, because that seemed more attractive. A reference to a document as a source was the main editors’ argument in their discussion with politicians.

In other words, the role of the archive specialist, the “monk” of secrets, in the PARLIAMENT has not been pointed out, whereas the specialist himself could not dare to attend the discussions of political working groups, the sittings of formal and non-formal commissions, not even to mention requesting politicians to transfer all officials’ correspondence to the archive.

Moreover, politicians themselves proposed to publish compendiums on the latest historical issues with no reference to any scientific sources, authentic memoirs or documents. And we have such publications in Lithuania.

The concept of the archive as the unique, indelible system of documents has been developing very slowly. How do a parliamentarian and a servant of a parliamentary institution see their work in this system? Naturally, a servant of a parliamentary institution might and should be obliged to preserve appropriate documents, yet it is much more difficult to inculcate on a politician the role of an archive as a necessary and reliable keeper of the document bank.

And this is not typical of our time only.

Almost every year Lithuanian media has been considering where the Act of Independence passed in 1918 could be placed. Unfortunately, these publications or reportages contain no professional comment on the reasons why the act has not been recorded in Lithuanian archives. Another much more important document in terms of its content is the Resolution of the Constituent Assembly of 15 May 1920, whereby Lithuania was declared the Republic. However, we have neither the original document nor the archives of later elected parliaments, since having dissolved the Seimas in April 1927 – let me put it vividly – the President took the keys from the

Seimas archives. And then the authoritarian regime deleted even the Day of the Republic: only the February 16 document used to be published every year, although it is still not clear where from publishing houses took the original which we don’t have today. Whereas the first and major document of this state, adopted by the first parliament elected by universal suffrage, the declaration of the independent and democratic Republic remained... “buried” somewhere outright.

The approach to the archive as the means of shaping the political image is understandable, though, definitely, unacceptable. What should be done to make politicians view the archive related to their activities not only as the means of their image, but also as the aid of public work? Let us try to answer this question.

Only over several recent years adequate document storage and visitors working conditions have been created for the archive of the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania: it has been relocated to the new premises and provided with necessary equipment. It is a great progress, as compared to the approach evidenced in consideration of the layout of the phone book. It is certainly useful to the students of the archival study programme of Vilnius University, who do their practical training in this and other institutions of public authority. Still, it is not the answer to the question raised. Institutional rather than physical place of the archive in the Parliament is of key importance.

The above mentioned Seimas Public Relations Strategy also states: “To propose to the Board of the Seimas to reorganise the archive of the Office of the Seimas (by renaming as the Seimas Archive), by assigning more functions, namely, searching for, acquiring and storing material (documents, items) related to the Seimas institution...”.

The expansion of the functions of the parliamentary archive should be emphasised in this conference as well. Firstly, it is an argument for highlighting the foundations of the democratic state. The expansion of the Seimas Archive could help to strengthen historical consciousness, since its factor as the media is related to the activities of the Lithuanian Parliament since the times of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The search and storage of relevant documents (including items) of parliamentary history would substantiate the political basis of Lithuanian heritage.

Today the documents related to the Seimas history are stored in the stocks of various state archives – cases of individuals, institutions and agencies. Undoubtedly, they are kept in other states’ archives as well. The problem is that the Parliament in Lithuanian historical sources for decades has been depreciated as the object worth researching, thus the historical value of its documents must be restored. The search also helps to specify entries in state archives. For example, Aleksandras Stulginskis is indicated as the President in the photograph of 1921, although actually he was the Head of the Parliament then. Such an entry leads to an inaccurate entry in an exhibition, and consequently, in a book. Therefore, namely in this context, the work of the Seimas archive specialist would be significant for working at different stocks in both Lithuania and abroad.

The second argument is the prestige of an institution, since the reputation of every subject is determined not only by relevant documents, but also the documents of origin. Lithuanian parliamentarianism has a deep-rooted tradition that must be revealed. The prestige is also determined by an opportunity to become assured of efficient performance of an institution.

I would like to underline that it is important to perceive the role played by the archive for both researching history and considering specific political, cultural or economic problems, issues and topics. Unlike autocracy, democracy needs a documentary basis. An archive can carry out this function of the basis, when it evidences that society is actually participating in the processes of election and governance. Namely an archive can reveal the efficiency of parliamentary scrutiny. Naturally, parliamentary scrutiny has many aspects: from the relations of the parliament and the government to media capacity to present political topicalities. However, let us explore only the archival aspect, in particular, the opportunities of the digital archive.

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4 The referred document, p. 12.
We may perceive the archive in two ways: 1) searching for, storing, keeping and examining documents; 2) helping to see the events, the course of decisions, development and efficiency through the use of modern technologies. In order that parliamentary scrutiny becomes a systematic object of information, the archive must be vested with the right to develop an appropriate information system which will be accessible to virtual visitors of the Seimas Archive.

For example, we may be imposed by the fact that we can find the questions and answers of the members of the United Kingdom House of Commons by choosing the topic in the search system. By using modern technologies we are provided with the opportunity to ascertain not only the history of parliamentary scrutiny, but also efficiency.

Essential events have been taking place in this building in Lithuania. However, an archive specialist needs to be vested with more powers so that he could select and collect events into cases. For example, the new Lithuanian history, the recent decade, witnesses the signing of several National Agreements. How could an ordinary member of society compare these documents where they are accessible in digital space?

A scientist should be admitted to the archive for search and research. I’m talking not about a scientist-visitor, but about a staff member. The search and presentation of historical documents require not only the knowledge of the document system, but also another competence to establish requirements, which should be met in order to evaluate the document as related to the Parliament.

The role of an archive as the media in the context of public relations comes to light when the human relationship with the document is ascertained. The document witnesses the significance of the decision. When documents of different significance and content are put in one box, we don’t know what the object of research and storage is.

Thus, the Office of the Seimas should more clearly specify the field of document storage, since the digitisation project “Lithuanian Statehood Historical Heritage on the Worldwide Web” is basically important, yet it is not a typical project of the Parliament in terms of its content. Similar and bigger projects have been implemented in other institutions. The topic of the Parliament has not been specifically distinguished. The structure of the Office of the Seimas also shows a gap between the document and parliamentary history.

For instance, the Unit for History and Commemoration of Parliamentarianism belongs to the Communications Department, whereas the Archive Unit belongs to the Document Department. This structure implies that the Seimas Archive is not an independent unit. Archive specialists find it clear how the structure of the Office of the Seimas reflects the document concept. The structure also shows that the archive is now separated from the concept of history. Those who decided that history and archives may be separated most probably thought only about public campaigns – exhibitions and commemorations. Maybe it is the reason why the Lithuanian Seimas often reminds of an exhibition hall. However, it is not significant from the point of view of dissemination of a political document: a visitor to the Seimas must see what constitutes the essence of parliamentary work, the idea of democracy. Perhaps it is not surprising then that some documents of international significance from 1990–1992 are only now exhibited to the Seimas visitors. Being the media, the Parliament itself must disseminate what is typical of its functions and related events.

3–4 scientists visiting the Seimas Archive once a year have been searching only for the facts necessary for their research. Yet the archive itself could engage in the search and research of items relevant to the history of the national parliament. The place of research of parliamentarianism history in the structure of the Seimas Archive would be rational. The establishment of the Seimas Archive as a separate structure would consolidate scientific work with documents, their search and research. It would require funds from the annual budget of the Office of the Seimas.
The specified, emphasised and distinguished place of the parliamentary archive in the structure of the institution as well as expanded functions of the parliamentary archive should result in a closer relationship with politicians and make the Seimas much more open and understandable to society. It is important with regard to all political structures of the Parliament, with emphasis on parliamentary factions. It is perhaps one of the most interesting problem issue, since the faction is creative in a way that it separately maintains direct contacts with the media, with external information users. The faction is a closed structure in comparison to parliamentary committees or commissions, but its documents are particularly interesting and relevant to history and political research. The archive of a parliamentary faction may be identified with the archive of a party, but this identification is actually wrong. This interpretation may be generated only by a politician; however, it is wrong concerning the use of the state funds allocated to the Seimas. Therefore, at the end of the parliamentary term of office, the documents belonging to the faction – an integral structural unit of the elected parliament – should be transferred to the parliamentary archive. However, the situation is different: over recent 20 years, the governing factions have not left their documents in the Seimas Archive. We should apply at least the requirement for official minutes of the sittings. MPs could envisage certain conditions for the use of these documents in order to prevent the documents of factions from becoming a tool in the election fight. How could we achieve this? Let’s start with the recommendation of the hosts of this event.

And finally, let me present my recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. It would be useful if the International Council on Archives recommends to the parliaments distinguishing their archives as completely separate and autonomous subjects. This recommendation is particularly advisable to be deliberated by the Lithuanian legislative and the Lithuanian Parliament. It would be necessary to recommend, while attracting the attention of democracies to the aspect of the formation of political culture, that the documents of all parliamentary structures are stored in the parliamentary archive upon closing of the term of office.

2. To recommend to the Seimas establishing the Seimas Archive instead of the Archive Unit so that the Seimas Archive is assigned the functions of document search, acquisition, storage and research.

3. To recommend envisaging funds in the budget of the Office of the Lithuanian Parliament for the search and acquisition of archival documents.

4. To recommend amending the Law on Archives and Documents by stipulating an obligation to the politicians holding the posts paid from the state budget to formalise their relationship with the state archive.