A winning system

“The hemicycle is the most important room in the Council of Europe,” says Alain Mielle, and he should know. Mielle is the head of the conference centre at the council’s headquarters at the Palace of Europe in Strasbourg, where country representatives gather to discuss issues of human rights, democracy and rule of law. Its voting system is integral to the legislative work achieved by council members which can accommodate over a thousand people in a space – with 615 places downstairs and 400 places upstairs.

Mielle spent a year putting together the specification for the project, and later selected Paris-based integrator Videlo to install a new system following a tender process.

Planning to install the system presented challenges for the six-person team involved with the project. “We have four sessions per year. We have a session in January, April, June and October, from Monday to Friday every day,” says Mielle speaking on the meetings of PACE (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe). “The problem was we had just two months to change and install the system because the session in June finished at the end of the month, so we had just July and August to install the new equipment to test it in September.”

The replacement for its obsolete voting system – installed in 1994 – had many criteria to fill in delivering an improved system to the intergovernmental organisation. Integrating the new product with the council’s security system was a “big challenge” according to Mielle, with RFID cards providing access to different buildings and the old voting system. After careful deliberation, Mielle chose a Taiden voting system from Media Vision for the installation after seeing them implement voting systems in big capacity spaces.

“We have more flexibility and security with this card and the new system,” says Mielle.

450 out of 620 enclosures were replaced in total, arranged in a daisy chain topology by Videlo. Each Taiden digital voting system delegate unit features three voting keys offering ‘yes’, ‘no’ and ‘abstention’ options for members of the parliamentary assembly to choose when inserting a finger into a voting box.

Every enclosure also features a contactless IC-Card reader to identify and manage the voting rights of the individual. A 256 x 32 LCD screen is programmed to suit the language preference of the parliamentarian and carefully positioned to discretely confirm their choice after...
voting. “We had on the screen the name of the parliamentarian in English or French. We have the possibility to send a message to each box, so if someone has a problem we send them a message to their box and we come and change the system,” says Miele.

A fully customised system had to be specified by Media Vision, conferencing systems provider, to accommodate the structure of the room. “We had to find a replacement solution with exactly the same dimensions of the old system, because we could not change the space [the old equipment installed, or the wood].”

All enclosures communicate with the central system to visualise results in real time on two LCD screens to the right and left of the Presidency of the chamber. The video signal is connected to a Panasonic AV-HS400A video switcher. This same signal is distributed to 12 interpreter booths with two LCD 20-in screens displaying the outcome of the vote, allowing interpreters to clearly see the results and communicate them to members.

The system is fully redundant to ensure continuity of the display of the progress of the votes. Each vote is recorded and securely archived online to be available at any time to the council.

The RFID-controlled system had to incorporate three different databases: one for the parliamentary assembly with voting privileges, one for each member’s substitute (who vote when the parliamentarian is absent), and one only providing access to the building for authorised visitors to the palace.

With the ability to support over 4,000 individuals, the Taiden system met the Council of Europe’s specific requirement for a product that could support at least 1,000 voting terminals at a reasonable price point. “What was very difficult was finding a solution for 600 places, because you have a lot of companies that only give access for 300 or 400. The idea was to find a solution with a short delay to present all this information. The other point was the price, because we work with public money, the cost of the installation had to be low, but use the best equipment available.”

“We have 628 possibilities for voting, and we change the rights every morning and every afternoon to make sure that people can vote or not. It was a big challenge to organise all these processes, but we are sure that we give the correct rights at the right moment.”

He adds: “Taiden also provided the possibility to do a lot of things that others cannot do, like hotplug, and unplugging and plugging live if we have a problem with one box.”

Miele states that installation was finished on time with no extra costs. “The first session was a success, and since then every day during the session we have had precision for over a hundred votes.” He adds, “If something happens, or goes wrong, in 24 hours we have solution from Media Vision and Taiden. It was really a team project between the three - the Council of Europe, Media Vision and the installer Videolo.”

The system can also support any further expansion requested by the Council of Europe. “In the future, I can plug a conferencing system with microphones and headphones on the cable system, so it’s possible to expand the solution,” concludes Miele.