

In March 2020, the Directorate for Relations with National Parliaments published Spotlight No. 28 on preventative and sanitary measures in parliaments. On 3 November, the Austrian *Nationalrat* and the European Parliament submitted request 4548 to the ECPRD network in order to obtain updated information on those measures. This was followed by Spotlight No. 32, which presented the state of measures up to 14 December 2020. Spotlight No. 33 presents a third update on the state of sanitary measures in place in parliament, as the situation continues to evolve rapidly.

This Spotlight reflects the state of measures up to 15 February 2021. Due to the rapidly changing context of the crisis, the current situation may vary from the one outlined in this document. For updates, please contact the editor.

## General trends and evolution since December 2020

Most sanitary and preventative measures have remained in place over the past two months. Where measures have changed since last December, they have generally been tightened. There was a limited increase in instances of change of parliamentary calendars, which so far had by and large been maintained. More parliaments have started offering online options for both plenary and committee sittings, and stricter rules often apply to ensure staff works from home.

## Compulsory wearing of face mask on parliamentary premises

Parliaments in which <b>wearing a face mask is compulsory</b>	Parliaments in which wearing a mask is <b>recommended</b>	Parliaments in which wearing a face mask is compulsory <b>except</b> for MPs
Albania, Andorra, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canadian House of Commons, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic (both chambers), European Parliament (masks also compulsory for MPs when speaking), Finland, France (both chambers), Georgia, Germany (both chambers), Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Israeli <i>Knesset</i> (but no way to enforce this upon Members) Italy ( <i>Camera dei Deputati</i> and Senate), Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Moldova, Montenegro, Netherlands (both chambers), North Macedonia, Poland (both Chambers), Portugal, Romania (both chambers), Serbia, Spain (both Chambers), Slovak Republic, Slovenia (both chambers), Switzerland, Turkey, US House of Representatives	Estonia, Ireland, Malta ('strongly encouraged'), Sweden ('optional', offered where social distancing is not possible), UK ('strongly encouraged' in both chambers), United States Senate ('optional')	Austrian National Council, Danish <i>Folketinget</i> (face masks are only compulsory for guests when not seated), Norway (mandatory for staff and recommended for MPs when it is not possible to keep 1 meter distance, including in the Plenary)

In the Finnish *Eduskunta* and German *Bundestag*, the use of surgical masks (such as FFP2/FFP3) is compulsory. The US House of Representatives has also taken a strict approach to mask wearing and passed resolution 117 H. Res. 38, imposing fines on Members who refused to wear a mask in the House chamber.

## **Changes in the parliamentary calendar**

Almost all parliaments originally indicated that they had not changed their parliamentary calendar as a result of the pandemic. Since December, a few more chambers have chosen to adopt this strategy. The ones who had already adopted measures to that effect have maintained them (this concerns the French *Assemblée Nationale* and *Sénat*, Hungarian National Assembly, Irish House of the Oireachtas, Dutch *Eerste Kamer*, UK chambers, the US House of Representatives. For more detail, see Spotlight 32).

Bulgaria, Romania and Slovenia have also changed their parliamentary calendar as a result of the pandemic. In Slovenia, there was no regular session previously planned for November. Instead, extraordinary sessions were held because remote voting is only possible during an extraordinary session. Canada has indicated that there are occasional changes to the calendar in both chambers. In Romania, between the start of the pandemic and the election of the new members of the Romanian *Camera Deputaţilor*, the number of plenary sitting was reduced and held only online. Since 21 December 2020, the calendar for the plenary has gone back to normal.

In the German *Bundestag*, compulsory presence for Members on Tuesdays and Fridays has been lifted following an agreement between the political groups. Some plenary sessions have occasionally also been rescheduled depending on the needs of agenda and Parliament's wishes. The Danish *Folketinget* has also reduced the number of proposals for parliamentary resolutions and interpellations, following the Danish government's reduction of the number of bills between 11 January and 7 February 2021. The Irish House of Oireachtas has now reduced sittings, though this restriction is expected to be eased soon.

## **Measures for social distancing in the plenary**

Most chambers have taken measures for social distancing in the plenary, though their detail varies.

A large number of parliaments hold their plenary with a reduced number of members present. This is currently the case in the Belgian *Chambre des représentants*, Canada (both chambers), Denmark, Finland, France (both chambers, de facto for the Senate), Germany, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands (both chambers), Norway, the Polish *Sejm*, Portugal, Romanian Senate, Spain (both chambers), Sweden, Turkey (de facto reduction), the UK (both Chambers) and the US House of Representatives. For those chambers, the measures adopted to reduce the number of members present have mostly remained unchanged (for detail of those measures, see Spotlight 32. The only change concerns the Portuguese National Assembly, where 121 out of 230 members can now be present).

Some chambers have also chosen to adapt their sitting arrangements. Two main measures have been adopted for this purpose. Some parliaments have moved their plenary sessions to larger buildings, such as the ones of Cyprus, Hungary, Ireland, Luxembourg and the Dutch *Eerste Kamer*. Others are using various rooms within the building, often including the gallery, to sit all MPs. This is what Albania, Andorra, Austria, Croatia, French Senate, Iceland, Israel, the Italian Chamber and Senate, and both Polish chambers are doing. There are also special sitting arrangements in place in Denmark, Finland, French National Assembly, Germany (both chambers), Greece Latvia, North Macedonia, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Spain, Slovenia (both chambers), Sweden, Turkey, UK (both chambers), and the US House of Representatives. If the agenda allows, the Czech Chamber of deputies uses a rotation system whereby members are divided in two groups which sit alternatively. The European Parliament has increased the recommended social distance from 1.5 to 2 meters.

The German *Bundestag* recently adopted a new measure reducing the length of the deliberations in the plenary. Instead of debates lasting 90 minutes, there will be more 60-minute-long debates. They are joined in this emphasis on time by the Albanian *Kuvendi*, where a maximum duration of 4 hours is recommended for each session.

There are also parliaments which have chosen not to change their sitting arrangements. This concerns the Czech Senate, Estonia, Georgia, Lithuania (separation panels added), Malta, Moldova, Montenegro, Norway (separation panels added), Romania (*Camera Deputaţilor*) and the Slovak Republic.

## **Introduction of remote parliamentary sessions and voting**

The parliaments which had already introduced remote plenary sessions have maintained this practice. This concerns the Belgian *Chambre des Représentants*, the European Parliament, Latvian *Saeima*, Lithuanian *Seimas* (exceptions apply depending on the nature of the sitting), Polish *Sejm* and Senate, Romanian *Camera Deputaţilor*, Slovenian National Council and *Državni Zbor* (with a hybrid participation format for the EP and Belgium). In addition, Andorra, Finland, Portugal and the Spanish Congress now offer a possibility to follow proceedings online in addition to the physical plenary. Bulgaria, Canada (both chambers), Croatia, Montenegro and the UK have adopted hybrid formats, or offered self-isolating MPs the possibility to participate online. Romania (except for secret ballots) and Estonia have recently introduced online plenaries.

Remote voting has also become more common. Remote plenary voting is now possible in Belgium, Estonia (provided the plenary sitting is also online), the European Parliament, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland (both chambers), Romania, Spain (both chambers), Slovenia (both chambers, except for secret ballots in *Državni Zbor*), the UK House of Lords. Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro have also made it available for MPs participating remotely, while the Hellenic Parliament allows postal votes. In the Canadian House of Commons, until a remote voting system is ready to use, members participating by videoconference vote through a roll call.

Remote voting in committees has been made possible by Albania, Andorra, Belgium, Canada (both chambers), Croatia, Estonia (ad hoc solutions depending on the committee), the European Parliament, German *Bundesrat* (via written procedure), Hellenic Parliament, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Norway and Portugal (though there is rarely formal voting in the committees), Romania (both chambers, meetings take place in a hybrid format in the Camera), Sweden (no specific technical equipment, but legally allowed), the UK (both chambers) and the United States (both chambers).

The Finnish *Eduskunta* has adopted the temporary amendment of Parliament's Rules of Procedure in force until 30.9.2021, on the basis of which plenary and committee voting may be conducted by remote means if this is necessary to safeguard the functioning of Parliament due to a dangerous and widespread infectious disease. This has not yet been put into practice.

## **Access to the gallery for visitors and media**

Already back in December, most parliaments had taken measures to restrict the access to parliamentary buildings. However, only a minority of parliaments have completely closed their gallery to both visitors and the media. Since then, the general trend has been towards parliaments keeping their gallery closed to the public, but increasing possibilities for media access.

Gallery access for the public and for the media	Gallery access only for the media	Closed to both
Denmark (limited to 35 for general public), Estonia (half capacity for public and media), Germany (restricted access for both in the <i>Bundestag</i> and <i>Bundesrat</i> ), Hungary (restricted access for the public and limited to the state news media for press), Dutch <i>Tweede Kamer</i> (limited access for both), Poland ( <i>idem</i> in both Chambers), Romanian <i>Camera</i> ( <i>idem</i> ), Serbia (open for both), Sweden (normal for press, fewer members of the public allowed), Switzerland (to be decided for public and limited access for press)	Austria, Belgium, Canada (both chambers), Cyprus, Czech Republic ( <i>Poslanecká sněmovna</i> ), European Union, Finland, French Senate, Georgia, Greece, Iceland, Italy (both chambers, with restrictions in place), Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Moldova, Montenegro, Dutch <i>Eerste Kamer</i> , North Macedonia, Norway, Portugal, Romanian Senate, Spain (both chambers), Slovak Republic, Slovenia (both chambers), Turkey, UK House of Commons, United States (both Chambers)	Albania, Andorra, Croatia, Czech Republic ( <i>Senát</i> ), French <i>Assemblée Nationale</i> , Israel (Knesset closed to the public, and press gallery used for sitting MPs), UK House of Lords

## **Visits, tours and events**

As a general rule, tours and events remain cancelled or suspended in all parliaments. In the German Bundestag, there is one exception: up to 20 persons can follow the plenary session from the gallery. In the Italian Senate, tours and events are limited,

and conventions suspended if not held remotely. The Bulgarian Parliament, Icelandic *Althingi*, North Macedonian *Sobranie* and Norwegian Parliament allow virtual tours. In both Polish chambers, tours and events are cancelled but exceptions apply in justified cases. The Danish *Folketinget* also allows up to two guests visiting members of Parliament and employees, provided they are relevant to parliamentary work or other critical functions.

### **Remote working for parliamentary staff**

Remote working for administrative staff wherever possible has remained the norm. Serbia and Turkey have joined five other chambers in using rotation systems for staff presence. The percentage of staff working from home has been further increased in the Hellenic Parliament and Romanian *Camera Deputaților*.

The Albanian *Kuvendi* is an exception: staff has been back in the office since January, excepted for those infected with Covid-19.

See [here](#) for more information.

Directorate for Relations with National Parliaments - Institutional Cooperation Unit

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