



Spotlight on Parliaments in Europe

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Adjustment of Parliamentary Activity to COVID-19 Outbreak and the prospect of remote sessions and voting

On March 17, the *Israeli Knesset* submitted request 4354 to the ECPRD network in order to get an insight into the impact of the outbreak on parliamentary activity and on the changes that have been made in order to secure continued parliamentary activity. Of interest is also request 4346 submitted by the *Slovenian National Assembly* on March 12, concerning the possibility of using remote sessions and also remote voting in national Parliaments. This spotlight aims to give an overview on the administrative and legislative situation in the NPs in dealing with the outbreak. This is a status report portraying the situation in the national Parliaments on March 26 and the days before. In total, 37 Chambers replied to at least one of the two requests.

‘Democracy cannot be stopped by this virus’¹, says David Sassoli, President of the *European Parliament*. This statement represents a position widely shared in other Parliaments around Europe. But how are democratic principles like transparency and effectiveness of the elected Parliaments maintained in these times?

Preventive measures

Almost every response from the national Parliaments to the ECPRD emphasizes the urgency of new measures to be installed immediately in the Chambers, as well as in the Rules of Procedures. The most frequent measures taken seem to be the cancelation of external visits and the limitation of physical presence in favour of concentrating committee work on remote sessions. The remote sessions, however, are not an option for all Parliaments, with some Parliaments pointing out that they are lacking the technical requirements for remote sessions. Indeed, none of the national Parliaments provide remote plenary sessions so far.

Constitutional challenges

Meanwhile, some Parliaments are facing problems with their own Constitutions. In *Germany*, *Ireland* and *Poland*, Parliaments are not allowed to neither hold the plenary, nor to vote in any other place other than the plenary’s facilities, which means the presence of the Members in plenary is obligatory. In *France*, the procedure of *délégation de vote* is a common procedure in the French Chambers. Parliaments in *Sweden*, *Norway* and *Denmark* use the same kind of delegation. In addition, this is one way of keeping the recommended distance during the voting process by reducing the number of Members present in the Chambers. Some Parliaments provide for Members to vote in turns in extra rooms, like in *Romania*, or to move the plenary to a completely different location, like in *Switzerland* or *Hungary*. It is stated in some responses, that modifications to the Rules of Procedure and the Constitutions have been made and that further changes may be required for the future.

Taking action from the distance

Most Parliaments want to stay active, keep their work up and therefore fulfil their democratic role and constitutional obligation. Some Parliaments are postponing their work completely in order to protect Members and staff. This is for example the case in *Canada*, where plenary

¹<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20200319IPR75330/sassoli-europe-is-showing-the-power-of-solidarity>

sessions are postponed until April 20, in *Latvia* until April 16 and in *Switzerland* until April 19. Another example is given by the *Seimas of Lithuania*, where the Rules of Procedure have been changed to allow remote committee meetings, while plenary sittings are suspended until April 7.

The aspect of remote sessions and votes was the main topic of the *Slovenian* request and while most national Parliaments do not consider installing remote voting, it is possible in both Chambers of the Spanish Parliament where Rules of Procedure allow the participation of Members on maternity or paternity leave or those being absent for serious illness. In the latest *Spanish* response to the ECPRD, it is stated that this option will be used for plenary sessions during the coronavirus crisis. Another national Parliament, the *Belgian Chambre des Représentants*, is considering a similar path. The President of the House tabled a proposal to modify the Rules in order to allow partially for voting remotely. Currently, the first Parliament that has actually implemented remote voting due to the COVID19-situation is the *European Parliament*. The leaders of the European Parliament's political groups agreed to hold an extraordinary mini-plenary session on Thursday 26 March at which a remote voting system allows the adoption of emergency measures to combat COVID-19.

Conclusion

In conclusion, most of the responses to both requests confirm that parliamentary work is being reduced due to the public health situation created by the Covid-19 pandemic. In order to minimise the health risk to Members and staff, while at the same time ensuring core legislative activities, many Parliaments are holding or considering holding committee meetings remotely. Plenary sessions are closed to visitors, including invited guests. Press and media access are also limited to plenary sessions in most Parliaments. Plenary and committee meetings' web streaming is extended in order to make information on debates and decisions available to the public and to comply with the principle of transparency. Some Parliaments do not consider any change to their way of functioning and, for example, the *Congress of the United States* struggles with the instructions given by the government to do so. In the *US*, all announcements made by committees or by Members relating to cancelation or self-quarantine have been made individually so far.

Clearly, the current exceptional situation caused by the coronavirus crisis has an impact on how Parliaments all over the world conceive their ways of functioning. For the future, only one point seems to be certain: more is going to change, more adaptations will be made, day by day.

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Parliament	Adjustments to the plenary			Remote		
	Reduced members	Reduced sessions	Postponed Until	Plenary	Committee	Voting
European Parliament (24.03.2020)	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓ Temporary
Austria (19.03.2020) -Bundesrat	✓	✓		✗	✓	✗
-Nationalrat	✓	✓		✗	✓	✗
Belgium (20.03.2020) -Chambre des Représentants	✓	✓		✗ Being considered	✗ Being considered	✗ Being considered
Canada (19.03.2020) -House of Commons			✓ 20 th April	✗	✗	✗
-Senate of Canada			✓ 21 st April	✗	✗	✗
Croatia -Hrvatski Sabor	✓	✓		✗	✓	✗
Cyprus (19.03.2020) - House of Representatives		✓		✗	✗	✗
Czech Republic (20.03.2020) - Chamber of Deputies		✓	✓	✗	✓	✗
- Senate		✓		✗	✓	✗
Denmark (20.03.2020) - Folketinget	✓	✓		✗	✓	✗
Estonia (18.03.2020) -Riigikogu		✓		✗	✓	✗
Finland (26.03.2020) -Eduskunta	✓	✓		✓	✓	✗
France (18.03.2020) -Assemblée Nationale	✓	✓		✗	✗	✗ Proxy voting
-Senate	✓	✓		✗	✗	✗ Proxy voting
Georgia (19.03.2020) -Parliament		✓		✗	✗	✗
Germany (18.03.2020) -Bundesrat	✓	✓		✗	✗	✗
-Bundestag	✓	✓		✗Being considered	✗ Being considered	✗ Pairing voting extention Remote voting being considered
Hungary (23.03.2020) -National Assembly				✗	✗	✗
Ireland (25.03.2020) -House of the Oireachtas	✓	✓		✗	✗	✗
Israel - requested 4354 (20.03.2020) -Knesset	✓			✗ Being considered	✗ Being considered	✗ Being considered
Italy (23.03.2020) -Camera dei Deputati	✓	✓		✗	✗	✗
-Senato della Repubblica	✓	✓		✗	✗	✗
Latvia (23.03.2020) -Latvijas Reublikas Saeima		✓	✓ 16 th April	✗	✗	✗
Lithuania (22.03.2020) -Seimas		✓	✓ 7 th April	✗	✓	✗
Netherlands (24.03.2020) -Tweede kamer	✓	✓		✗	✗	✗ Proxy voting
Norway (20.03.2020) - Stortinget	✓	✓		✗	✓	✗
Poland (24.03.2020) -Senat		✓		✗	✗	✗
Portugal (25.03.2020) -Assembleia da Repbulica	✓	✓				
Romania (18.03.2020) -Camera Deputatilor				✗	✗	✗
Serbia (17.03.2020) -National Assembly			✓ since 16 th March			

Parliament	Adjustments to the plenary			Remote		
	Reduced members	Reduced sessions	Postponed Until	Plenary	Committee	Voting
Slovakia - requested 4346 (23.03.2020) -National Council		Not yet decided	✓ Opening session on 20 th March after elections	× Being considered	× Being considered	× Being considered
Slovenia (17.03.2020) -Drzavni Svet		✓		×	× Being considered	×
-Drzavni Zbor		✓		×	×	×
Spain (20.03.2020) -Congreso de los Diputados		✓	✓ 24 th March	×	×	✓
Sweden (17.03.2020) -Riksdag	✓	✓		×	×	×
Switzerland (23.03.2020) -Bundesversammlung		✓	✓ 19 th March	×	✓	×
United Kingdom (20.03.2020) -House of Commons				×	×	×
-House of Lords				×	×	×
United States of America (18.03.2020) -Congress				×	✓	×