

European Parliaments in Times of Coronavirus

Written by Christine Neuhold

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CHRISTINE NEUHOLD, APR 18 2020

Parliaments perform key tasks in democracies. The Coronavirus disease has led to lockdowns around the world. Measures undertaken by Member States have had an unprecedented impact on public life. Are governments then the main players calling the shots, removing parliaments to the side-lines? A stock-taking exercise shows that in a majority of EU parliaments, MPs are in the process of finding ways to debate – at least the most important crisis measures – and increasingly meet online. It is clear that governments are at the centre stage in this time of emergency. This becomes problematic if there is no clear end to this ‘state of danger’ and when (new) crisis measures are no longer democratically debated.

Parliaments have several key functions in democratic systems. These reach from scrutinising the work of the government to debating issues of the day. The Corona virus disease pandemic (Covid-19) has caused a ‘health war’ that has led to lockdowns around the world. While there is no uniform approach of how to deal with this crisis within the European Union (EU), measures undertaken by Member States have had an unprecedented impact on public life. The following question then comes to mind: how has this health crisis impacted on parliamentary work across Member States? To put it simply: Are governments the main players calling the shots? Are parliaments removed to the side-lines, sitting in the bleachers? This is however not a question of empirical interest only. What are the implications of this (possible) ‘upgrade’ of the executive for ‘democracy’?

This stock-taking exercise will include the European Parliament and the UK parliament, as the UK is still in a transition period in its relationship with the EU. Let us first turn to the practical political process: Not surprisingly, in no parliament, be it in the EU or around the world, is it business ‘as usual’. A very selected number of parliaments – the Swedish Riksdag being a case in point – still hold plenary and committee meetings as before the crisis, but the number of MPs required to vote has been reduced.

A majority of Member States have reduced the number of committee and plenary meetings with a restricted programme, often focusing on crisis related measures. This includes Bulgaria, Denmark, the Netherlands to Slovenia, to give just some examples. Parliaments also increasingly meet online. There is great variation when it comes to the meetings that still *do* take place and how this is organised. To give just three examples: In the French parliament there are different approaches, even across parliamentary chambers. The Senate is holding less plenary sessions – only one plenary sitting a week, limited to 10 questions for the government. The National Assembly has also reduced the number of its meetings and is holding them remotely. Apart from selected urgent bills on the COVID-19 pandemic that empower the government to undertake special measures to combat the pandemic, committees have not been holding meetings on legislative texts.

In the UK, we also see different approaches across houses of parliament, albeit variations of the same theme of holding the account (mostly) virtually. MPs are set to be able to question ministers via Zoom in the House of Commons. 120 MPs are to take part in proceedings virtually, while around 50 could meet with strict social distancing rules in place. This will lead to a hybrid parliament, which is a first in its 700-year history. The measures will still need the approval of MPs when they return from Easter recess on 21 April. In the House of Lords the online tool ‘Microsoft Teams’ will be available to all members after the Easter break. The House will also to meet in a very limited physical presence, but it is not yet clear what exactly this will entail.

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The EP has tried to maintain parliamentary activity by having mini sessions in Brussels, holding e-votes and organising committee meetings via video link. MEPs are in the process of adopting another set of emergency measures at a (predominantly virtual) plenary. As Politico reports an increasing number of MEPs, however, feel they have 'become irrelevant' at a time when they should be holding governments and other EU institutions to account.

On the other side of the spectrum we see parliaments who hold no meetings at all or have been suspended. Notable examples include Belgium and the Czech Republic. In extreme cases, and here Hungary is the most notable example, the Government rules by decree for an indefinite period. Based on a law passed by the Hungarian parliament on 30 March, the government can extend the state of emergency indefinitely. The bill also introduces prison sentences of up to five years for spreading misinformation, hindering a governmental response to the pandemic. This has caused the Chair of the EP Civil Liberties Committee to express his concern. While Member states have a responsibility to take protective measures in these hard times, fundamental rights, rule of law and democratic principles should be upheld.

Where do we go from here? What does all this imply for (parliamentary) democracy? In a majority of EU parliaments, MPs are in the process of finding ways to debate – at least the most important crisis measures – and increasingly meeting online. While they are thus not completely removed from political process, it is clear that governments are calling the shots in this time of emergency. This becomes problematic if there is no clear end to this 'state of danger' and when (new) crisis measures are no longer democratically debated.

About the author:

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