
The European Parliament in the time of coronavirus

Protecting Members and staff, ensuring business continuity and implementing practical solidarity

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I. Introduction

Measures taken to contain the spread of COVID-19, including restrictions imposed by Member States, have represented a major challenge for parliamentary democracy. This concerns in particular efforts to safeguard legislative and budgetary powers as well as political scrutiny.

The above is especially true for the European Parliament. A unique multinational and multilingual Assembly made up of 705 members, elected in 27 Member States.

From the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Parliament had to take various, often unprecedented, decisions aimed at minimising the risk for Members and staff, while ensuring that the Institution remains in a position to continue its core activities. This has allowed Parliament to play its full role in adopting any measures required at EU level to respond to, and mitigate the impact of pandemic crisis.

The decisions were taken by the President and Parliament's governing bodies, especially the Bureau. As regards Parliament's administrative operational functions and staff, measures were put in place by the Secretary-General.

In terms of remote participation, the deployment of a complex, multilingual solution which would normally require months if not years was implemented in only few weeks. From March until November 2020 the remote meeting system was used for over 1680 meetings with more than 138 000 participants in total, thus allowing for Members to fully exercise their functions.

A remote voting system was conceived in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Electoral Act and the Members' Statute. The system has been in place since March 2020 and its application is prolonged until the end of March 2021. It has been constantly upgraded and improved. Since March until November 2020, it has allowed for 355 voting sessions and 4575 voting operations.

Next to enabling remote participation and voting, the European Parliament had to cope with the challenges of a multilingual and open Institution. This concerns among others interpretation and the visitors' offer. Plans were implemented to increase interpretation during the pandemic and specific

online programmes for visitors were put in place.

The Institution has overall proven a high degree of resilience and capacity to adapt and transform. Collective efforts by Members and staff allowed keeping the House of European democracy operational and so enabling it to play its full role to respond to the pandemic crisis in the interest of the citizens.

The measures taken during the crisis are structured along three axes and objectives which are further described in the following parts: protecting Members and staff, ensuring business continuity and implementing practical solidarity in the host Member States.

II. Protecting Members and staff

– Immediate measures

With a view to contain the spreading of the virus, avoiding that Parliament (hereinafter “Parliament”) becomes a transmission hub for COVID-19 and assuring business continuity, as of 24 February 2020 the Secretary-General instructed all services to take immediate measures. These concerned among others the following:

- upgraded sanitary procedures and advice to Members and staff, including adaptations of the in-house sanitary system;
- regular updates on the spreading of the virus and communication on preventive measures from the Medical Service (e.g.: physical distancing and hand-washing);
- instructions to Parliament’s staff having travelled to the most affected areas;
- advice to Members planning to travel, or having travelled to the most affected areas.

In order to protect the core functions of Parliament from disruption, on 2 March 2020, the President decided to take a number of urgent measures with immediate effect. On 8 March 2020, the Secretary-General placed all staff belonging to a risk group either on a teleworking scheme or reassignment to a less-exposed post.

On 11 March 2020, all Directors-General were instructed by the Secretary-General to set up a 70% teleworking regime for all staff whose physical presence was not indispensable. In light of the evolution of the pandemic, this measure was revised on 15 March 2020, allowing for 100% teleworking arrangements for all staff whose physical presence was not indispensable. Similar guidelines were sent from the Quaestors to Members, recommending them to put in place teleworking arrangements with regard to their Accredited Parliamentary Assistants (APAs) and other staff, including trainees.

– Risk-mitigation measures

At its meeting of 27 April 2020, based on a proposal from the Secretary-General, the Bureau approved measures aimed at mitigating the risk of infection for Members and staff physically

participating at meetings. This concerned physical distancing and reduction of physical presence on the one hand, and health-security prescriptions on the other.

Objective	Measures
Reducing physical presence / ensuring physical distancing	Continuation of teleworking for the administration albeit at a reduced percentage of staff to reduce physical presence in the buildings
	Only one parliamentary assistant per office
	Physical distancing to be implemented in all areas including meeting rooms
	Linking the electronic voting system of the Chamber to room PHS 3C050 to ensure physical distancing during plenary votes
	Determining the maximum number of people allowed in catering outlets and other common areas
Strengthening health security	Obligatory wearing of community masks by everybody except when being alone in the office
	Mandatory checks of body temperature at all Parliament entrances
	Mandatory checks of external companies' staff, including drivers for deliveries, in relation to the wearing of masks and body temperature
	Wearing of gloves and masks for cleaning staff at all times
	Health and safety protocols for hotel rooms (only hotels or similar establishments complying with the protocols will be recommended to Members)

Next to reinforced physical distancing measures, additional preventive measures were put in place. Such measures complemented and reinforced those already in place, namely: (i) meticulous and repetitive hand hygiene, including avoiding touching eyes, mouth and nose; (ii) cough and sneeze etiquette; (iii) social distancing; (iv) cleaning of frequently touched surfaces; (v) case and contact management.

– Reinforced risk-mitigation measures

As of mid-September 2020 and throughout the month of October, the pandemic situation sharply deteriorated in Europe, especially in Belgium, one of Parliament's host Member States. The total number of confirmed cases in this country increased from 125 605 on 1 October to 442 181 on 31 October.

During that month, Belgium was the EU Member State displaying the worst 14-day cumulative rate of Covid-19 cases per 100 000 inhabitants, corresponding to 1 631. October 2020 was for Belgium by far the worst month since the beginning of the pandemic crisis.

In light of those dramatic developments, the Belgian federal and regional authorities reinforced so-called “non-pharmaceutical interventions” (NPIs). These included, *inter alia*, partial lockdowns

(closure of bars and restaurants, etc.), mandatory teleworking and stricter preventive measures, such as mask wearing in all public spaces.

Against this background, on 26 October the Secretary-General instructed all Directorates-General to apply 100% teleworking for all staff members whose physical presence is not absolutely necessary. On 27 October, the President amended his decision relating to COVID-19 with a view to further reducing physical presence on Parliament premises. Accordingly and until the end of November 2020, all meetings of Parliament governing bodies, plenary, ordinary and extraordinary committees and political groups were held remotely without physical presence of persons other than the chair, and indispensable staff.

During the first weeks of November, the restrictions imposed by the Belgian Federal and Regional governments started showing a first positive impact. In the 7-day period from 6 to 12 November the rate of new confirmed cases decreased by 47%. Hospitalisations also went down by 22%. The reproduction factor dropped in the whole country below 1, i.e. to 0,861.

In light of the above, at its meeting of 23 November 2020, the Bureau approved the following reinforced risk-mitigation measures to enable Members' physical presence at official meetings as from December 2020 while staff continue to telework and all other preventive and health-safety prescriptions remain in place:

- introduction of 100% teleworking also for political group staff. If needed, possibility for political groups to notify a precise numerical exemption list of up to 15% of their staff from this requirement as indispensable ahead of a given week;
- requirement of on average 80% teleworking for Members' staff per month; only one staff member per Member present on Parliament's premises at any given time; invitation to Members to increase the teleworking scheme of their staff up to 100%;
- physical distancing in the Chamber or meeting rooms increased from 1.5 to 2 meters;
- obligation for Members and their staff who have tested positive for COVID-19 to immediately inform Parliament's Medical Service, including on any contacts to ensure proper contact tracing;
- mandatory mask wearing in Parliament's official cars at all times;
- mandatory mask wearing at meetings with physical presence at all times, including when speaking (this provision does not apply to Members chairing meetings and to Members speaking in Plenary if they use the front rostrum);
- in addition to PCR tests, rapid antigen tests were made available as of 1 December as an additional health-security measure for long duration meetings such as trilogues.

– **Testing and vaccination**

As from 13 May 2020, testing in local laboratories was made available for Members who needed a negative SARS-CoV-2 result in order to avoid the obligation to observe quarantine upon return to their country of residence. In addition, and as decided by the Bureau in September, an onsite PCR testing facility on Parliament's premises was implemented in a timeframe of only two weeks. The screening centre started operating as from 5 October 2020, providing for a capacity of 200 up to

350 tests per day.

In line with the reinforced risk-mitigation measures approved by the Bureau on 23 November 2020, rapid antigen tests (RATs) were introduced as from 1 December for on-site long duration meetings such as trilogue meetings. It is important to recall that RATs cannot and should not replace PCR testing. RATs are not as sensitive and accurate as PCR tests, which are able to detect also small amounts of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Nevertheless, RATs can detect potential “super-spreaders” with a very high degree of infectiousness.

Since December 2020, pending the approval of the first vaccines by the responsible European regulatory authorities, Member States are preparing for mass vaccination campaigns. 2021 will be a transition year in which Parliament should focus on vaccination whilst still adhering to health safety and risk-mitigation measures.

Parliament’s Medical Service is following the situation closely and has asked public health authorities to actively participate in the campaigns in the three workplaces. In Belgium, Parliament is in the process of acquiring the status of accredited COVID-19 vaccination centre as one of only four in Brussels. This would enable the Institution to start a vaccination campaign in line and in parallel with federal and regional authorities while reducing the burden on the Belgian health-care system.

III. Business continuity

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, the Secretary-General instructed the services to start appropriate contingency planning and to ensure business continuity, namely that Parliament’s core functions remain operational. Services were tasked to develop solutions to facilitate the participation of Members in Parliament’s activities in situations when they cannot physically attend meetings. These technical solutions had the objective to allow Members to listen to proceedings, ask for the floor, intervene in the meeting with interpretation and vote.

– Remote participation

The deployment of a complex, multilingual solution would normally have taken several months if not years. Parliament services speeded up the required specific technical tests to allow for the immediate deployment of the system which was successfully used for the first time to hold the extraordinary meetings of the Conference of Presidents on 19 March 2020 and of the Bureau on 20 March 2020.

From 19 March until 30 November 2020 the remote multilingual meeting system was used for over 1 680 meetings with more than 138 000 participants in total. Since October 2020, Parliament services are deploying a new version of the platform. It includes improvements in sound quality and a multi-view option to enhance interactivity in the discussions.

Since the second plenary session held in October 2020, Members can also intervene remotely

from Parliament's Liaison Offices (EPLOs) in the Member States. The overall assessment of the first-ever hybrid plenary sessions is positive. No major technical issues were reported as regards the delay of interventions, quality of the streaming or connections.

– Remote voting at plenaries

Article 6 of the Electoral Act provides that Members shall vote on an individual and personal basis. They shall not be bound by any instructions and shall not receive a binding mandate. Likewise Article 3(1) of the Statute for Members provides that votes shall be held on an individual and personal basis.

In accordance with the above, Rule 186 of Parliament's Rules of Procedure (RoP) on the right to vote provides that the right to vote is a personal right and Members shall cast their votes individually and in person. Rule 187 RoP on voting empowers the President to decide at any time that the voting operations be carried out by means of an electronic voting system.

Rule 192 of the Rules of Procedure, on the use of the electronic voting system provides, in paragraph 1, that the Bureau shall lay down instructions determining the technical arrangements for use of the electronic voting system. Accordingly, the Bureau Decision of 3 May 2004 on rules governing voting, as amended, lays down the technical arrangements for electronic voting.

In light of the restrictions imposed by the Member States, including on travelling, at its meeting of 20 March 2020 the Bureau decided to review its rules on voting to allow Members to vote remotely. This was necessary to enable Parliament to adopt the urgent measures proposed by the European Commission as part of the EU-coordinated response to COVID-19.

The new provisions provide for a temporary derogation on public health grounds, upon decision by the President, to enable the vote to take place by an alternative electronic voting procedure, with adequate safeguards to ensure that Members' votes are individual, personal and free, in line with the provisions of the Electoral act and the Members' Statute. Members receive electronically, via email to their official email address, a ballot form, which is returned, completed, from their email address to the relevant Parliament's functional mailbox.

The remote voting system has been in place since March 2020 and its application is prolonged until the end of March 2021. The system was progressively technically upgraded and improved. It made it possible to have a valid tool to ensure the operational capacity of Parliament in the current context of public health emergency.

– Remote voting in parliamentary committees

Parliamentary committees play a key role in enabling Parliament to exercise its legislative and budgetary function as well as scrutiny powers and definition of political priorities for the institution. It is therefore essential to safeguard their operation, especially in times of crisis when sectoral legislation is necessary.

On 8 April 2020 guidelines on remote voting were approved by the Conference of Committee Chairs. This allowed for the adoption of committee positions on key files.

An electronic voting application iVote has been deployed in committees to enable the processing of complex voting lists remotely. The tool enables the creation of a digital voting list and the submission of ballots from remote. The tool relies, however, on an external IT infrastructure. As a consequence, Parliament services started working on an alternative solution, fully developed in-house. The new tool (“EP Vote”) provides a secure, Parliament-owned solution. It ensures full control of the data flows and storage.

EP Vote is being gradually rolled-out prioritising committees which do not have a remote voting application yet (see table below). According to the planning including the first two weeks of December 2020, the application is successfully tested and used in 10 committees.

– Enhancing teleworking capacities and digital workflows

The network infrastructure was immediately strengthened, the roll-out of ‘hybrid’ computers was accelerated and IT support reinforced. These devices enable working from remote as at an office computer. They also work as a phone via a dedicated application. Various tools were made available to Members and staff for virtual meetings. These include: computer-accessible multipoint facilities that can be booked like a meeting room, a multi-device tool where smaller and sensitive meetings can be organised using Parliament’s own infrastructure and a multi-device tool for larger, less sensitive meetings operating in the cloud.

In parallel, administrative workflows were digitised to the largest possible extent. This concerns both applications and services for both Members and staff. In view of the increased needs of teleworking, on 11 May 2020 the Bureau decided to equip all Members with three per office and each staff member with one hybrid computers. As at 9 December 2020, more than 10 000 hybrids were deployed.

To enhance the well-being of staff while teleworking, the responsible services assessed staff needs for additional teleworking equipment. This concerns in particular external screens, keyboards, mice and ergonomic chairs. Staff who needed it most could receive these items from the existing stocks. 2326 screens, 2069 keyboards, 1968 mice and 378 ergonomic chairs were distributed until November 2020.

– Interpretation capacity

A multilingual Institution where 705 Members can freely express themselves in their mother tongue relies heavily on interpretation. Parliament provides interpretation from and into the 24 official languages of the Union.

The ongoing pandemic is hampering the Institution’s interpretation capacities because of several factors. These include, inter alia, the restrictions imposed by the Member States which make it nearly impossible for freelance interpreters to regularly travel to Parliament’s places of work as well as the sanitary measures put in place under the guidance of Parliament’s Medical Service. These measures reduced the capacity of the available interpretation infrastructure by limiting the number of interpreters working in meeting rooms and therefore the number of languages.

In light of the above and with the view to enable Members to fully exercise their mandate while protecting interpreters, several actions are being pursued to increase interpretation capacities during the pandemic. These range from reinforcing the overall technical infrastructure (e.g. installing mobile interpretation booths) to remote interpretation, a field where Parliament is becoming a reference and standards-setter at global level.

– Online visitor offer

Parliament invests considerable efforts in the services it offers to visitors. The return of such investments is invaluable. It has led to a constant increase of visitors from all over Europe and beyond, to increased turnout in the last European Elections. Most importantly, it contributes to reinforcing the citizens' sense of belonging to the European project and thus to strengthening European identity.

Against this background, and in order to compensate for the lack of physical visits while supporting Members in their communication activities, Parliament responsible services have developed a wide-ranging online offer for visitors during the pandemic crisis. The offer includes online lectures to groups at Members' request. The seminars are tailored to the language and the needs of the specific audience. They explain the work and powers of Parliament and provide an opportunity for discussion with Members.

The European Youth Seminars, which have been organised since 2016, were transformed into webinars. Moreover, a virtual visit of Parliament's seat in Strasbourg is available in 24 languages on the Parliament's Visitors' website. Likewise, an application is also available for download to guide online visitors through the Parliament in Brussels. On demand, additional online material is also available. This includes, for instance, a presentation on Parliament from the hemicycle in Brussels which was organised for the online edition of Europe Day 2020.

– Online and hybrid events

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe, Parliament's services had to migrate a number of flagship events into the online sphere. This notably included the 2020 iteration of the European Youth Event (EYE), the Europe day events, the events and activities around the State of the European Union debate (SOTEU) as well as a number of events organised by Parliament Liaison Offices (EPLOs) at national level. The reorganisation of these events had to take place rapidly. Their concept and implementation were redefined in order to cater for the specific nature of the online environment, both in terms of technical solutions and implications on content and format. Despite these constraints, the outcome proved overall highly successful.

Sixty interactive activities in different formats were organised for the online edition of the EYE, with 140 speakers. While 13.000 participants were registered for the EYE 2020 in Strasbourg, the EYE online had 3.7 million video views and 29.000 engagements. At EYE 2018, 10.000 participants assisted on average to a minimum of four activities over the two days of the event; for the EYE online, 18% of participants attended two activities and 39% attended three to five activities. The online iteration of the Europe Day event ensured coverage thereof in media outlets in all 27 Member States.

Parliament appeared in almost 1150 news in the EU open online media, and there were images broadcast on 24 TV channels.

IV. Practical solidarity

Several measures of practical solidarity were and are being implemented vis-à-vis the host Member States. The measures enabled to help people in need while sustaining sectors particularly hit by the crisis, in particular the catering and restaurant one.

– Strasbourg

Measures included the following:

- charity food production, up to 500 daily meals were prepared on Parliament's premises for medical personnel and people in need, starting on 29 April until 31 July 2020;
- the charity meals production re-started on 9 November 2020 and is planned until the end of June 2021;
- in agreement with the *Préfecture de la Région Grand-Est* and the Regional Health Agency (ARS) a Covid-19 screening centre in the WEISS building was available on Parliament's premises from 11 May until 3 July 2020.

– Brussels

In the capital of Belgium, the co-operation was implemented on three axes:

- daily provision of up to 1 000 meals to medical personnel and other people in need until end July 2020 and of 500 meals since the beginning of November 2020 until the end of June 2021;
- provision of a separated part of a Parliament's KOHL building as a shelter to 107 women in a vulnerable position until the end of August; and
- transport was provided by Parliament's car service to deliver the meals to the charities as well as driving of Brussels medical personnel who have difficulties to find transport after nightshifts.

In addition, since its opening on 1 September 2020 and until the end of October, lunchtime concerts were organised in Parliament's Citizen's Garden. Besides representing an interesting offer for the local communities, the concerts allowed to support classic musicians during the pandemic crisis.

– Luxembourg

In Luxembourg, up to 500 daily meals were prepared on Parliament's premises for medical personnel and people in need as of 29 April until end of July 2020. The production of charity meals re-started on 13 November and is scheduled to continue until 30 June 2021.

V. Conclusion

Parliament has been remarkably successful in adapting to the dramatic changes triggered by the pandemic. It was able to draw upon existing contingency plans to further build on digitalisation,

allowing for the smooth introduction of large teleworking regimes, remote voting and online debating and participation tools.

On the other hand, in the fast-paced, dynamic, multilingual and multicultural environment that distinguishes Parliament, face-to-face meetings are an essential part of its working processes. Without them, Parliament's unique 'esprit de corps', underpinned by the many Europeans who come from across our continent to work together, is severely narrowed.

This does not mean that the Parliament should and will go back to the way things were before the crisis. The pandemic has revealed how digital tools can expand and even improve dialogue with external partners, as well as with parliamentarians from around the world. Technology has also allowed to open new channels of communication with the citizens. This has brought the Institution closer to them in a time of great uncertainty. During Covid-19 Parliament is showing a remarkable resilience and capability to adapt and transform. Learning from and building on the lessons of the crisis to further reinforce the Institution's capabilities will be a key exercise to prepare for the new normal and to respond to the new crises after the pandemic.