

Coronavirus: A threat to democracy in Europe?

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The European Parliament will hold an extraordinary plenary on 26.03 using a distant voting system, credit: EP

The crisis is not just a threat to the lives and livelihoods of people across the globe but serves also a severe stress test for democracy.

Conspiracy theories are being spread on social media that the virus has been created in laboratories for sinister reasons and that democracy does not work.

EU's anti-disinformation task force, StratCom, wrote today (19 March) that "pro-Kremlin disinformation aims at inducing distrust in national, European and international institutions; distrust in experts, the health care system and the individuals, engaged in the self-less work to help people affected by the virus".

In times of crisis, social cohesion and solidarity are more important than ever, but so is also freedom of expression and democratic oversight of the government. The fumbled response to the outbreak in China, where the authorities in the beginning silenced the voices who warned about the new virus, delayed an effective response to the outbreak. It also affected trust in the government.

In Europe, elections are being postponed and parliaments have been forced to suspend regular work during the crisis. The European Parliament will use a distant voting system for the first time at its extraordinary plenary session on 26 March. This

will allow for the adoption of special measures proposed by the European Commission to address the financial consequences of the coronavirus crisis.

“The European Parliament is doing its duty and will continue to do so. Parliament must remain open, because a virus cannot bring down democracy,” said European President David Sassoli. “We are the only European institution voted in by its citizens and we want to continue representing and defending them”.

Future of Europe Conference

With most EU countries in partial or total lockdown, fears are now growing that plans for a Europe-wide conference to kickstart the debate about the future of Europe may be put on hold indefinitely. The Future of Europe Conference was planned by the European Parliament and Commission, and the Council is also heavily invested in the project.

It was due to be launched on 9 May to coincide with the 70th anniversary of the Schuman declaration and to involve both online consultations and citizens' gatherings or “agoras”.

With EU institutions preparing to conduct all but the most essential meetings remotely, it is likely that the original model for the conference will no longer be feasible. The Brussels-based NGO Europe People's Forum (EPF), has stepped forward with a proposal which would allow much of the conference to be conducted online.

Thanks to its [online platform](#), Europe's People's Forum would potentially be able to consult all EU citizens about the policy areas that were to be discussed during the conference. The model has been developed with support from the Danish Board of Technology.

“The corona crisis will have a lasting impact on how we live together, but so far we have seen a lack of solidarity,” said EPF's Secretary General, Bent Noerby Bonde. “Our platform can be adapted to engage citizens in identifying and developing more resilient policy responses to the corona crisis through actions at the European level.”

“Additional resources are necessary and welcome but when it comes to strengthening the resilience of European societies it is not just a question of money,” commented Roger Casale, EPF's Vice-Chair.

“Democratic societies build resilience by strengthening the engagement of their citizens, because that is the way to build consensus and also to generate new ideas that work. There has not been a time since the second world war when the voice of citizens needed to be heard as much as it needs to be heard today.”

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