

# Democracy Week

## 14-17 September 2020



## Overcoming Adversity, Innovating Democracy

### CONFERENCE REPORT

In celebration of the International Day of Democracy, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, the European Partnership for Democracy, the European Endowment for Democracy, the European Network of Political Foundations and Carnegie Europe co-hosted, together with the European Parliament, a four-day conference that consisted of a series of online events marked as International Democracy Week – Overcoming Adversity, Innovating Democracy.

From 14 to 17 September, the 7 events of International Democracy Week featured more than 30 speakers, including high-level EU and UN representatives, prominent politicians, experts from international NGOs, local activists and academics. The conference constituted a platform where democracy actors from different regions in the world could meet and exchange lessons about coping with challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

14 September

### Global Democracy and the Coronavirus Fallout

To mark the launch of International Democracy Week, this event featured a high-level political discussion exploring the state of global democracy, European foreign policy, and democracy support amid the pandemic.

The discussion kicked off with **Rosa Balfour, Director of Carnegie Europe**, unpacking the threats and opportunities facing democracies worldwide, based on the collective report, [Global Democracy and COVID-19: Upgrading International Support](#), co-authored by Richard Youngs (Carnegie Europe) and Elene Panchulidze (Georgian Institute of Politics) and led by 11 democracy organisations.



Rosa first turned to **Stefano Sannino, Deputy Secretary General for Economic and Global Issues of the European External Action Service (EEAS)**, to discuss the EU. The EU has rallied 'Team Europe' and mobilised 36 billion euros for global response to the pandemic, dedicated to slowing the spread of the virus and mitigating the public health and economic impacts the virus has had around the world. Sannino described the Team's ambitions to help recipient countries recover from the pandemic in ways which boost digital transformations, address climate change, create jobs, and spark other innovations to boost development, cooperation, and sustainability in line with the objectives of the European agenda.

Balfour then brought in **Per Olsson Fridh, State Secretary to the Minister for International Development Cooperation for the Government of Sweden**, who described Sweden's approach to the pandemic as not only a health crisis but also a socio-economic crisis, a humanitarian crisis, and a crisis of rights, information, and democratic institutions, especially in developing countries. Sweden has, together with Team Europe, reprogrammed its own international response to emphasize the importance of a stable health sector while also promoting fundamental rights and protecting fundamental services.

Turning to the **Anu Juvonen, Executive Director of Demo Finland | Political Parties of Finland for Democracy**, they pointed to the impact of the virus on women and other underrepresented groups as it has triggered a drop in women's political participation and leadership as well as a rise in political violence around the world. Juvonen called for greater flexibility in donors' crisis response, as well as better support for democratic governance around the world.

The discussion concluded with each panellist remarking on the greatest threats to democracies at home during the pandemic. They pointed to the problem of gender equality and lack of media literacy in Finland, societal fragmentation as well as the manipulation of information in Sweden – and the rest of Europe, and political, social, and economic polarization as in Italy, Europe, and the world.

For more information go to: <https://carnegieendowment.org/>

15 September

## European and international responses to the COVID-19 crisis and its impact on democracy

The session was opened by the Address of the **President of European Parliament, David Sassoli** who stressed the importance of democratic processes in times of crisis that include involving citizens in decision-making and efficiently responding to their needs. He added that new technologies are essential to ensure this, e.g. by facilitating remote proceedings of parliaments.

**Věra Jourová, Vice-President of the European Commission**, expressed her appreciation for champions of democracy and called for their support. She emphasized that democracy cannot be taken for granted. She underlined a danger of micro-targeting techniques that are moving discourse from public squares to digital basements. The EU is taking steps to make democracy more resilient by introducing its **European Democracy Action Plan** and the **new rule of law mechanism**.

**Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights**, focused on the need for universal health coverage and social protection as the COVID-19 pandemic aggravated inequalities. She highlighted that people have a right to raise concerns and participate in shaping policies that will affect their lives. The public must trust national institutions and laws introduced by them, especially in such difficult times where limiting the spread of the virus relies in big part on people's self-control.



**Heidi Hautala, Vice-President of the European Parliament** noted that civil society organisations are direct victims of the pandemic and need sufficient support and resources. The economic recovery must not cut into the funds previously dedicated to them. She explained that, although regimes imposing heavy restrictions claim to have slowed the spread of the virus, in the long-term this is a false narrative. Populations are affected by the crisis unequally and the EU has a responsibility to protect the most vulnerable, including those beyond its borders, e.g. through possible [Human Rights Due Diligence Legislation](#) or the [European Green Deal](#). **Kevin Casas-Zamora, Secretary-General of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance**, called for closer cooperation between the European and international democratic community to support national governments in coping with the COVID-19 challenges. There are clear signs that engaging in evidence-based decision-making, seeking consensus with political opponents, protecting the free flow of information and nurturing open engagement between government and societies are essential in mitigating risks related to the pandemic.

For more information go to: [www.idea.int/news-media/news/celebration-international-day-democracy](http://www.idea.int/news-media/news/celebration-international-day-democracy)

## Democracy and Tech policy – what COVID-19 has taught us?

The session focused on the intersection of autocratisation and tech policy, and the implications this has for European policy processes, in view of the COVID-19 crisis, which has accelerated and intensified the widespread adoption and development of digital technologies, as well as the trend of autocratisation in Europe and around the world.

Panellist **Eliska Pirkova, Europe Policy Analyst from Access Now**, noted that many of the extraordinary measures to limit the spread of disinformation around COVID-19 had infringed on human rights, particularly laws that over-criminalise speech, under the guise of combating “fake news”. **Krzysztof Izdebski, Policy Director for ePanstwo**, stressed that we cannot expect undemocratic regimes to regulate digital technologies with a human rights-based approach. Ultimately the trends of digital technology and auto-crisation are intimately intertwined. **Marietje Schaake, former Member of the European Parliament and current International Director of Policy of the Stanford Cyber Policy Centre**, stressed that regulation over tech giants is nonetheless absolutely essential for safeguarding democracy, and needs to be put in place sooner rather than later. Breaking down common private sector arguments that regulation would stifle innovation, she argued that we are not talking about regulating the internet, but about safeguarding democracy. **Former President of Slovenia and President of the Club de Madrid World Leadership Alliance, Danilo Türk**, echoed the need for holding platforms accountable, addressing current market flaws and articulating a new social contract for the digital era, as detailed in the [call to action by the World Leadership Alliance](#). In order to ensure regulation is rooted in democratic principles, civil society needs to continue advocating to ensure the minimal safeguards for fundamental rights are maintained in future regulation on social media and tech platforms. To this end, organisations like [Access Now](#) and [ePanstwo Foundation](#) continue to demand a user-centric regulation of online platforms, that puts human rights at the core and establishes due diligence requirements for those platforms that have an impact on democracy. The session concluded that the COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated ongoing trends in autocratisation and increased the power imbalance between major tech companies, citizens and governments. Questions of power and regulation need to be dealt with now to safeguard our democratic societies for the future.

For more information go to: [https://epd.eu/2020/09/18/international\\_democracy\\_day\\_2020/](https://epd.eu/2020/09/18/international_democracy_day_2020/)



16 September

## The impact of COVID-19 on media – rise of infodemics?

Speakers from across the world shared powerful stories of their challenging experiences trying to fight the spread of disinformation, debunk fake news and strengthen fact checking.

**Bernard Guetta, Member of European Parliament**, moderated the discussion. He claimed that fake news is global: it can begin in the USA, spread throughout Europe and land in Northern Africa. People are now questioning doctors' opinions, as medicine has become politicised as well. People rally against vaccines and the COVID-19 death toll.

**Natalia Antelava, Co-founder and editor-in-chief of Coda Story**, stated that it is possible to fight fake news. What is hard to fight is the narrative adopted to spread fake news. Russia's narrative blaming the West as 'weak' and 'unable to tackle the crisis' is a clear instrumentalisation of the crisis. Together with Iran and China it tries to undermine public trust in democratic countries. Antelava and her team write articles in Georgian and Russian, taking global stories and explaining how they fit in the local context. It is important to publish in the local language to reach and inform the local audience and engage them in global issues.

**Sami Ben Gharbia, Co-founder of the Tunisian collective blog Nawaat**, highlighted how people fall victim to fake news. Through the hegemony of social media platforms like Facebook, less educated people are easily manipulated. Ben Gharbia strongly believes in the future of independent and constructive journalism; his mission is to give voice to the voiceless and report the truth. Local media can reach the national authorities and reform jurisprudence thanks to whistle-blowers efforts.

**Peter Pomerantsev, Visiting Senior fellow, LSE, Producer, Author of "Nothing is true and everything is possible"**, explained how authoritarian regimes use freedom of expression against civic society and aim to divide people. They do not use censorship but they exploit emotional categories and cultural identity. Something has broken between the freedom of expression, media pluralism and the free self. Pluralism is now divided into sponsorship and polarisation. Pomerantsev stills believes in media pluralism, but it is necessary to regulate disinformation based on the respect of human rights. He argued that the EU should define a clear legislation on cyber space.

For more information go to <https://www.democracyendowment.eu/en/news/1784-event-report-international-democracy-week-2020-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-media-rise-of-infodemics.html>

## Political parties in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

The panel on "Political parties in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic" brought together representatives from opposition parties, coming from three different continents. **Ms Natasha Mazzone, MP Chief Whip, Democratic Alliance South Africa**, **Mr Julio Borges, Chair of the National Assembly of Venezuela** and **Ms Machris Cabreros, Leader of Akbayan (The Citizens' Action Party), Coordinator of the Network of Social Democracy in Asia** gave an overview of the political landscape in their countries and the implication that the global pandemic has had on democratic developments there.



The crisis has created a favourable environment for undemocratic measures, aimed at silencing opposition actors and it has influenced internal party democracy processes. The fight of civil society has evolved beyond political ideologies and has transformed into a fight to protect democracy and human rights. Panellists stressed the importance of acts of resistance, cooperation and solidarity between political parties, which can greatly contribute to opening shrinking space. They called on EU institutions to carefully analyse the situation outside Europe and take an active role in supporting democracy actors.

17 September

## Belarus - A new democracy in the making?

**David McAllister MEP, Chair of Committee of Foreign Affairs Committee and of EED's Board of Governors,** declared that the Belarusian opposition candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya is the real winner of the recent Presidential elections. Tsikhanouskaya consequently had to leave Belarus; she sacrificed her life and family for the sake of the country and became an inspiration for citizens and people outside of Belarus.

**Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, candidate in Belarus 2020 presidential elections,** reminded the audience that President Lukashenko did not gain the majority of votes. She noted that the ongoing protests are the longest ever in the history of Belarus and show that the nation does not want to succumb. She stated that the authorities held the elections illegally and against any international law; the election period was accompanied by torture, harassments and imprisonments. Tsikhanouskaya stated that EU Member States should not be afraid to stand up for democracy in Belarus and be vocal about European principles. She urged for sanctions against the people responsible for the repressions and violent acts against peaceful protesters.

**Thomas Ossowski, Ambassador and Representative of Germany to the Political and Security Committee of the EU,** stated that we are witnessing a change in the history of the country. Belarusians are speaking up for self-determination and governance, as well as fair elections. The EU is fully supporting civil society and wants Belarusians' voices to be heard.

**Miriam Lexmann, Member of European Parliament,** outlined how the EU has already allocated €50 million as humanitarian aid to Belarus.

**Hanna Liubakova, Journalist,** explained that people have been discontent for years but they have only now found the courage to express it. She stated that we cannot ignore the authorities' violence against protestors and that a unified and strong position of the EU is crucial for Belarus. Now the EU must act and put pressure on Belarus through targeted economic and political sanctions.

**Ales Bialiatski, Civil society expert,** argued that the situation in Belarus has changed as people throughout the country are facing the hardships of the economic crisis and are realising that Lukashenko was lying. He reported that independent media are investigating the abuses and the inhuman treatments in prisons, and are documenting human rights violations. International organisations are assisting them but Lukashenko's government may interfere in this work. He believes that the EU should be aware of this and express more solidarity to both civil society and the Belarusian media.

For more information go to <https://www.democracyendowment.eu/en/news/1788-event-report-international-democracy-week-2020-belarus-a-new-democracy-in-the-making.html>



## Parliaments' responses to the pandemic: are virtual parliaments here to stay?

**Kevin Casas-Zamora, Secretary-General of International IDEA**, opened the conference and the high-level part of the webinar highlighting how well-functioning parliaments are essential for democratic development and how assistance providers like International IDEA can strengthen them.

**Henriette Geiger, Director of Directorate People and Peace in the Directorate General for Development and Cooperation of the European Commission (DG DEVCO)** pointed out that parliaments are the oldest of any democratic institution. They reflect pluralism and diversity in our societies, they legitimize the rule of law through their legislative function, and they are pivotal in assuring accountability of the executive to the people.

**Fabio Castaldo, Vice-President of the European Parliament**, referred to the importance of finding new ways to lead democracy and face the obstacles caused by the pandemic. The European Parliament moved fast to ensure a hybrid parliamentary democracy. In his opinion, the digitalisation of the decision-making process could be the first step to explore new forms of participation in the democratic life of a country.

**Mohamed Nasheed, Speaker of the People's Majlis and former President of the Maldives**, underlined that the People's Majlis was the first Parliament to start its sessions virtually and resumed the sessions with physical presence after 1.5 months. He insisted that in emerging democracies where forces are trying to suppress democracy, it is very volatile to rely on virtual meetings and stressed the need for peer to peer exchange.

**Tomas Tobé, Member of the European Parliament, Chairman of the Committee on Development and Co-Chair of the Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group (DEG)**, outlined that despite the difficult circumstances, the European Parliament's commitment is active. He also explained that most policy-making is done during meetings between politicians and in informal interactions and stressed the need to find a balance between the need for virtual Parliament and the possibility to exchange and attend meetings physically.

**Jonathan Murphy, Head of the INTER PARES | Parliaments in Partnership - EU Global Project to Strengthen the Capacity of Parliaments**, was the first speaker of the practitioner part of the event. He examined how parliaments have been shown to be crucial during the crisis. He insisted on the three leading roles of parliaments in terms of legislation, providing proper scrutiny of the bills adopted to give governments special powers and promoting government programs to help citizens financially impacted by the pandemic.

**Piedad García-Escudero Márquez, Clerk and former Secretary-General of the Cortes Generales, professor of Constitutional law at Universidad Complutense de Madrid**, began her intervention outlining that the Spanish Constitution requires the Congress of Deputies to be present throughout the emergency. Therefore, the autonomous parliaments opted for activating the permanent committee and maintaining the presence of a limited number of MPs in session while other MPs could vote remotely.

**Keiba Jacob, Procedural Clerk and Head of the Financial Scrutiny Unit of the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago**, reaffirmed the importance for the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago to continue its work, hold debates, and maintain its oversight function. The Parliament did not have virtual meetings or plenary sessions, but they implemented a number of measures to ensure the safety of its members. **Brian Caesar, Clerk of the Senate, Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago**, has also contributed with his valuable insights to the practitioner session discussion.

For more information go to: <https://www.inter-pares.eu/events/international-democracy-week-2020>

