

COVID-19: both a challenge and an opportunity for democracy



The global pandemic has not only challenged our health and economy, but our democracies. As the world took emergency measures to address the crisis, concerns began to emerge that some countries might take advantage of the situation to roll back civil and human rights. Coronavirus is also highlighting and aggravating structural inequalities – from inadequate health systems to social protection gaps, digital divides and unequal access to education; from environmental degradation to racial discrimination and violence against women – that are themselves threats to democracy. Yet, crisis can also be an opportunity to move ahead.

“Across the world, people continue to demonstrate, often at great personal risk, their desire for democracy. From Hong Kong to Lebanon, Belarus to Sudan, behind the headlines and numbers are brave and courageous people from all backgrounds. We pay tribute to them and share their commitment to democracy”, reads the statement jointly issued by the HR/VP Josep Borrell and Commissioner Šuica to mark the date.

Measures to control the flow of information, restrictions on freedom of expression and press freedom, persecution of political opponents, journalists, doctors and healthcare workers, activists and others for allegedly spreading “fake news”, aggressive cyber-policing and increased online surveillance, postponement of elections... Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, many countries have used the emergency as a justification to restrict democratic processes and the civic space.

“This is especially dangerous in places where democracy’s roots are shallow

and institutional checks and balances are weak”, UN Secretary-General António Guterres stated. “As the world confronts COVID-19, democracy is crucial in ensuring the free flow of information, participation in decision-making and accountability for the response to the pandemic”.

People wait in a line at a polling station as they prepare to cast their vote during the Sri Lankan Parliament election 2020.

The pandemic has come accompanied by a global infodemic that poses a direct threat to one of the pillars of democracy: the right to access truthful information. “While new opportunities for political participation have emerged, we witness the far-reaching impact of new forms of manipulation of information and electoral and democratic processes, intensified by digital technology and social media”, reads the EU Joint Statement.

The European Union has recently renewed its commitment to the defence of democracy worldwide. The new [‘Action Plan Human on Rights and Democracy 2020-2024’](#) sets out the European ambitions and identifies priorities for concrete external action for the years to come. In 2019, cooperation projects in support of democracy amounted to €147 million in 37 countries.

In parallel, the EU is also working on a [European Democracy Action Plan](#) that will make proposals to address the challenges to the integrity of European elections, as well as to reinforce media freedom and tackle the impact of online disinformation within the EU borders.

COVID-19 has brought some EU’s shortcomings to the surface. At the same time, it has given us a chance to strengthen our democracy and give Europeans a greater say in EU decision-making. This is the spirit of the [‘Conference on the Future of Europe’](#), which will bring together citizens, in particular young people, civil society and European institutions, this autumn to discuss and decide how to give Europeans a stronger voice in our Union. The only answer to difficult times is always more democracy.