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Addressing the Real Problems – How the Open European Dialogue Created Spaces for Dialogue During the Pandemic

Three members of the Open European Dialogue shared their perspectives on how the network enabled conversations during the pandemic in AufRuhr, the magazine of Stiftung Mercator.

To view the original article in *AufRuhr* (in German), [click here](https://www.aufrohr-magazin.de/europa/die-echten-probleme-besprechen/) (<https://www.aufrohr-magazin.de/europa/die-echten-probleme-besprechen/>).

During the coronavirus lockdown, parliamentarians from the European Union could no longer meet. Nevertheless, the Open European Dialogue (OED) brought representatives of the people together—digitally. Three members of parliament report European rapprochement in times of the pandemic.

Miguel Costa Matos | Member of Parliament, Portugal

The coronavirus crisis has not only brought death, illness, and fear into our societies. It also led to a deep economic crisis from which it will take years to recover. This has required governments to develop new policy responses and will mobilize unprecedented levels of spending. Such a reaction would have been unthinkable just a few months ago—and it would certainly have been stopped by Europe’s conservative budget rules.

Diplomats who confront each other with official language often have their own national audiences in mind rather than the urge to build bridges and craft solutions. In contrast to this, the informal meetings organized by the Open European Dialogue have provided a context in which parliamentarians can feel safe to discuss the real issues and, in doing so, sow trust between countries and peoples. The OED took up all functions of the Zoom video platform at an early stage and, with the help of a facilitator, got us talking so much in such little time.

At these conversations, I built working relationships with parliamentarians from Ireland, the Netherlands, Germany, Finland, and many other countries, which have proven themselves useful in writing legislation and strengthening scrutiny of national and European initiatives. I am gratefully endowed to this forum and look forward to how it can help us forge a fast, inclusive and sustainable recovery across Europe.

Àgnes Vadai | Member of Parliament, Hungary

The coronavirus crisis has shown one thing clearly: the EU—after economic and political integration—must focus more on the real needs of its citizens. We therefore need much closer cooperation, for example in the areas of health care, education, or environmental protection.

Beautiful diplomatic statements do not help any European citizen. Only clear statements and strong action will bring our European Union closer to the people—after all, the Union was

created for them.

I have learned an important lesson from the coronavirus crisis, but also from the EU's subsequent steps. If we, the citizens of Hungary, want the rule of law, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, and freedom of speech as well as democracy and solidarity in our country, then we must fight for it ourselves, alone. It is disappointing to see with what lack of solidarity the anti-democratic steps of the government (*Viktor Orbán's*, editor's note) were received. In view of the above, I have to say for Hungary: It was the European parliamentarians who were the most helpful actors during the entire coronavirus crisis. And this was regardless of their political position. They showed solidarity and unity. They made it clear that no crisis can serve as a basis for undermining the democratic foundations of the EU.

Thanks to the Open European Dialogue, I have expanded my knowledge of crisis management in individual countries through formal and informal online meetings. These digital meetings have helped me formulate many people-oriented solutions. I am very grateful to the Open European Dialogue for bringing members of parliament from all over Europe—like me—and experts together. In conclusion, however, I have to say clearly: online meetings are good in times of crisis. But they cannot replace in-person meetings.

Margareta Cederfelt | Member of Parliament, Sweden

A democracy is based on the will of its fellow citizens. As an elected member of the national parliament of Sweden, I have a responsibility to my electorate. Today's challenges do not stop at national borders. International cooperation is needed to address many of these problems.

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic is a humanitarian crisis. The weakest people in our society are affected, especially the elderly. Responses to this serious disease require international cooperation. And not just in protecting against a new outbreak, a second wave, but also in matters of economy, finance, vaccine research, as well as in tackling the impact on the labor market and the business sector.

Our governments naturally maintain international contacts and negotiate with their colleagues. However, if we parliamentarians need to be able to scrutinize the government and pass laws, we must have knowledge of other countries and their legal systems, as well as to have personal relationships with them.

I have noticed that governments in some countries have increased their power in relation to the parliament. As a parliamentarian, you are very lonely when something like this happens. It is positive to be able to build on an established network in which it is possible to discuss such developments and how the situation is in other countries. It can even lead to action plans and support for democracy at the national level. As parliamentarians, we have limited international relations. When we receive contributions from elected representatives from other countries, our ability to act at the national level increases. For me, the most useful exchange in the Open European Dialogue was on Brexit or on migration issues. I also found the discussion about democracy, political theory, and international relations very useful.

I also really enjoyed getting to know parliamentarians across borders in Europe. Despite being connected through the EU, we rarely see each other. The Open European Dialogue made these meetings possible. I look forward to continuing this fruitful dialogue.

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