

PES Group Digest on the EU Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

20 May 2020¹

List of European decisions

Date	Number of cases and deaths ²	European response
18 May	1 311 322 cases 156 734 deaths	<p>EU Ministers responsible for education held an exchange of views on the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on education and training across the EU.</p> <p>Germany and France unveiled a joint initiative to set up a €500 billion European Recovery Fund to help the countries and industries hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic to recover.</p>
19 May	1 317 267 cases 157 312 deaths	<p>The European Commission mobilised an additional €122 million under its research and innovation programme, Horizon 2020, for urgent coronavirus research.</p> <p>The Eurogroup ministers met to discuss the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the fight against money laundering and terrorist financing. They also gave their green light to the SURE mechanism.</p> <p>EU ministers responsible for culture held an exchange of views about the impact of COVID-19 on</p>

¹ This week we are sending this digest exceptionally on Wednesday because the European institutions will be closed on Thursday and Friday for the Ascension.

² European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. The figures concern the countries of the European Economic Area (EU Member States, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway) and the UK.
<https://gap.ecdc.europa.eu/public/extensions/COVID-19/COVID-19.html>

		<p>the cultural and creative sectors and agreed to some common measures.</p> <p>EU ministers responsible for youth met to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on young people and the youth sector.</p> <p>The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) published guidance to Member States for the development of COVID-19 surveillance in long-term care facilities.</p>
20 May	1 324 183 cases 158 134 deaths	<p>The European Commission presented the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 and the “Farm to Fork” Strategy. It also presented the European Semester Spring Package with recommendations for a coordinated response to the coronavirus pandemic.</p> <p>EU ministers in charge of tourism are exchanging views on the recent tourism and transport package presented by the European Commission.</p>

The EU’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the position of the PES Group

The Franco-German initiative for the post-COVID19 recovery

On Monday 18 May, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron presented their joint initiative for a €500 billion recovery fund to help European Union countries face the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. This fund would come in addition to the €500 billion of the emergency measures adopted in April and to the approximately €1000 billion EU budget.

The key points of the French-German proposal are as follows:

- The fund would be fully financed by debt issued by the European Union, marking a change in Germany’s position against common European bonds;
- The fund would be integrated into the European Union’s Multiannual Financial Framework;
- The funds would be disbursed by the European Commission in the form of grants based on regional and sectoral criteria.

The proposal was welcomed by the European Commission, which is due to present its proposal for the recovery and the Multiannual Financial Framework on 27 May, but it would still require the approval by unanimity of the European Council, and it did already meet the reactions of some Member States during the Eurogroup held on the following day (details below).

- <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/975226/1753772/414a4b5a1ca91d4f7146eeb2b39ee72b/2020-05-18-deutsch-franzoesischer-erklaerung-eng-data.pdf?download=1>
- **“Berlin buckles on bonds in €500B Franco-German recovery plan”**, *POLITICO Europe*, 18 May 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/berlin-buckles-on-bonds-in-e500b-franco-german-recovery-plan/>
- **“Franco-German couple sets eyes on EU health sovereignty”**, *Euractiv*, 19 May 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/health-consumers/news/franco-german-couple-sets-eyes-on-eu-health-sovereignty/>
- **“LEAKED: Europe’s draft ‘green recovery’ plan”**, *Euractiv*, 20 May 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy-environment/news/leaked-europes-draft-green-recovery-plan/>

The Franco-German proposal was welcomed by several governments, including Italy and Spain. Iratxe García Pérez, S&D Group President, said on [Twitter](#) that the proposal is an important starting point for discussion in the European Council as it would be based on grants and would fall into the remits of the MFF and thereby, the European Parliament’s scrutiny. However, the European Parliament still expects from the European Commission a bigger EU budget, based on new own resources, and having a stronger social focus.

The Council of the European Union

Eurogroup

During the Eurogroup, Austria, Denmark and the Netherlands were against the Franco-German proposal for a €500 billion recovery fund that would offer grants to EU countries hit by the pandemic and said they will present an alternative.

The Council also adopted SURE, a temporary scheme to mitigate unemployment risks, which can provide up to €100 billion of loans under favourable terms to Member States.

- <https://eu2020.hr/Home/OneNews?id=295>
- <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/05/19/covid-19-council-reaches-political-agreement-on-temporary-support-to-mitigate-unemployment-risks-in-an-emergency-sure/>

European Commission

Biodiversity

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen had announced that the EU Biodiversity Strategy would be one of the pillars of the European Green Deal. Today, European Commission Executive Vice-President Frans Timmermans, in charge of the European Green Deal, unveiled the proposal, which includes a number of key elements:

- The Biodiversity strategy is a central element of the EU's recovery plan, crucial to preventing and building resilience to future outbreaks and providing immediate business and investment opportunities for restoring the EU's economy;
- It aims at putting back biodiversity on the path to recovery by 2030, including transforming at least 30% of Europe's lands and seas into effectively managed protected areas and bringing back at least 10% of agricultural area under high-diversity landscape features;
- It also aims to make biodiversity considerations an integral part of the EU's overall economic growth strategy;
- Funding of € 20 billion per year will be unlocked for biodiversity through various sources, including EU funds, national and private funding.

→ Full document:

https://ec.europa.eu/info/files/communication-eu-biodiversity-strategy-2030-bringing-nature-back-our-lives_en

→ **“Brussels bares teeth with launch of new biodiversity plan”**, *Euractiv*, 20 May 2020,

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/biomass/news/brussels-bares-teeth-with-launch-of-new-biodiversity-plan/>

→ **“S&Ds: We welcome the EU Commission's strategy on biodiversity. We need binding conservation and restoration objectives, limits to pesticide use and better mainstreaming of biodiversity”**, Press release, 20 May 2020,

<https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/newsroom/sds-we-welcome-eu-commissions-strategy-biodiversity-we-need-binding-conservation-and>

The European Committee of the Regions is addressing parts of the topic through an opinion on “Stepping up EU action to protect and restore the world's forests”, drafted by PES Group member and ENVE Commission coordinator Roby Biwer, Member of Bettembourg Municipal Council (Luxembourg). The opinion is due for adoption at the 1-2 July plenary session.

→ Link to the draft opinion:

<https://cor.europa.eu/EN/our-work/Pages/OpinionTimeline.aspx?opId=CDR-4601-2019>

Following the proposal, Biwer commented: “The biodiversity strategy is a step in the right direction. The potential of cities and regions to halt biodiversity loss and restore nature

must be fully used. Local and regional governments should play a leading role. We need to be more ambitious in our efforts to put Europe on the path to sustainable recovery.”

Farm to Fork

Also promised within the first 100 days of the new European Commission, the “Farm to Fork” strategy promises to be a revolution. In presenting the proposal, Frans Timmermans stressed the strategy’s strong link with the European Green Deal:

- The Farm to Fork Strategy is also considered a central element of the EU’s recovery plan;
- It will reduce the environmental and climate footprint of the EU food system and strengthen its resilience, protecting citizens’ health and ensuring the livelihoods of economic operators;
- The Strategy sets concrete targets to transform the EU’s food system, including a reduction by 50% of the use and risk of pesticides, a reduction by at least 20% of the use of fertilizers, a reduction by 50% in sales of antimicrobials used for farmed animals and aquaculture, and reaching 25% of agricultural land under organic farming;
- It also proposes ambitious measures to ensure that the healthy option is the easiest for EU citizens, including improved labelling.

→ Full document:

https://ec.europa.eu/info/files/communication-farm-fork-strategy-fair-healthy-and-environmentally-friendly-food-system_en

→ “**Commission upholds highly ambitious targets to transform EU food system**”, *Euractiv*, 20 May 2020,

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/agriculture-food/news/commission-upholds-highly-ambitious-targets-to-transform-eu-food-system/>

European farmers, fishers and aquaculture producers play a key role in the transition to a more equitable and sustainable food system. They will get support from the Common Agricultural Policy and the Common Fisheries Policy through new streams of funding and eco-schemes to take up sustainable practices. Making sustainability Europe’s trademark will open new business opportunities and diversify sources of income for European farmers and fishers.

The European Committee of the Regions rapporteur Guido Milana, Member of Olevano Romano Municipal Council (Italy) and PES Group member, commented: “Tackling the environmental and climate footprint of our food system has become more urgent than ever. Cities and regions will be key in delivering the Farm to Fork Strategy in order to support our farmers and protect our consumers.”

→ Link to the working document:

<https://cor.europa.eu/EN/our-work/Pages/OpinionTimeline.aspx?opId=CDR-594-2020>

The European progressive family

Many of our members and PES family partners came up with further proposals to address the COVID-19 crisis. Please find here some of them:

- **Après le Covid-19, l'appel des départements de gauche pour plus de décentralisation et de dialogue**, with PES Group members André Viola and Nathalie Sarrabezolles, 16 May 2020,
<https://www.lejdd.fr/Politique/tribune-apres-le-covid-19-lappel-des-departements-d-e-gauche-pour-plus-de-decentralisation-et-de-dialogue-3968753>
- **PES President urges Commission to support cultural and creative industries**, Party of European Socialists, 18 May 2020,
<https://www.pes.eu/en/news-events/news/detail/PES-President-urges-Commission-to-support-cultural-and-creative-industries/>

PES Group projects

On 19 May, the PES Group took part in a Facebook live event, co-organised by PES Women and Rainbow Rose, on “Women’s rights and LGBTBI discrimination” in Poland. The exchange clearly showed that the current ultraconservative government in Poland uses the pretext of the COVID-19 crisis to further toughen its stance on these societal issues. PES Group member Beata Moskal-Słaniewska, Mayor of Swidnica, reported back about best practices on the ground and encouraged fellow local and regional representatives throughout Europe to step up pressure on their Polish counterparts.

- Watch the event:
<https://www.facebook.com/pescor.eu/videos/2756248521261970/>
- Read the PES Group article on LGBT-free zones in Poland:
<https://pes.cor.europa.eu/zoning-out-fundamental-rights-and-local-democracy-lgbt-free-zones-poland>

Last but not least, you are kindly reminded to join the PES Group project on solidarity initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic:

<https://pes.cor.europa.eu/covid-19-progressive-cities-and-regions-share-solidarity-projects>

So far, we have received a total of 40 contributions from 11 countries from PES Group members and also other local and regional progressive leaders.



If you wish to contribute, you can consult the online form available at this [link](#).

Recently, we also joined the UN Habitat Local 2030 Spotlight Series. You can find here the contributions of some PES Group members (Juan Espadas, Christian Illedits and Pascal Smet), together with instructions on how to share your sustainability story:

→ <https://pes.cor.europa.eu/pes-group-joins-un-habitat-initiative-local2030-spotlight-series>

The fight against fake news

A new research published by NewsGuard confirms the widespread misinformation about COVID-19 on Twitter across Germany, France and Italy. The research identifies 16 “super-spreaders”, among which politicians of right wing parties:

→ <https://www.newsguardtech.com/twitter-superspreaders-europe/>

On Monday 18 May, Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg held a debate with European Commissioner for Internal Market Thierry Breton. Breton warned Zuckerberg that his firm, and others, will face more regulation if they do not step up efforts to take down disinformation.

→ Watch the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZfi6WklfgU>

→ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-eu-tech/eus-breton-tells-face-books-zuckerberg-the-fake-news-buck-stops-with-him-idUSKBN22U2RU>

The following websites, constantly updated, can be helpful to you:

- **EUvsDISINFO**, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/>
- **Scams related to COVID-19**,
- +https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/consumers/enforcement-consumer-protection/scams-related-covid-19_en
- **COVID-19 foreign influence campaigns: Europe and the global battle of narratives**, European Parliament Research Service, <https://epthinktank.eu/2020/04/07/covid-19-foreign-influence-campaigns-europe-and-the-global-battle-of-narratives/>
- **European Solidarity in Action**, European Commission, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/FS_20_563
- **European Commission Corona Virus Response**, https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response_en
- **European Parliament Corona Virus Response**, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/priorities/eu-response-to-coronavirus>
- **“10 things the EU is doing to fight the coronavirus”**, European Parliament, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20200327STO76004/10-things-the-eu-is-doing-to-fight-the-coronavirus>
- **European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control**, <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/novel-coronavirus-china>
- **World Health Organisation**, <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

Initiatives for cities and regions

Transformative Action Award, 2020

The European Sustainability Award, co-organised by ICLEI (Local Governments for Sustainability), the Basque Country, and the City of Aalborg (Denmark) and supported by the European Committee of the Regions and the European Investment Bank, is awarded to a city, region or civil society organisation, which implements the 15 pathways outlined in the Basque Declaration to bring about the socio-cultural, socio-economic, and technological transformation of their community.

The award consists, among other things, of €10,000 to kick-start a Transformative Action in your city, region or municipality. Applicants should complete and submit their application form by 23:59 (CEST), 31 July 2020.

→ <https://sustainablecities.eu/transformative-action-award>

European Committee of the Regions

The first ever online European Committee of the Regions' Bureau meeting was held on 19 May. It adopted, in particular, procedures for remote votings in commission meetings and

in plenary and outlined the agenda of the Committee's next plenary session of 30 June - 2 July. The July plenary session will in particular focus on the Committee's reaction to the Commission proposal for a new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). All together, the agenda foresees the adoption of three resolutions (on the Committee's political priorities 2020-2025, on the MFF and on the Commission Work programme for 2021) and of 8 opinions, among which the following opinions drafted by PES members: Just Transition Fund (Vojko Obersnel), Stepping up EU Action to Protect and Restore the World's Forests (Roby Biwer), Towards a Roadmap for Clean Hydrogen – the contribution of local and regional authorities to a climate-neutral Europe (Birgit Honé). Health Commissioner Stella Kyriakidis and Thierry Breton, Commissioner for the Internal market, are expected to address the plenary session.

Young local leaders have a last chance to apply for the Young Elected Politicians programme! The final deadline is now set for 31 May:

→ <https://cor.europa.eu/en/engage/Pages/Yeps.aspx>

There are also two interesting stakeholders consultations with CoR rapporteurs from the PES Group :

- A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, with PES Group Vice-President Concha Andreu (deadline 22 May)
<https://cor.europa.eu/en/events/Pages/SEDEC-wsc-union-equality.aspx>
- A Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions, with SEDEC Chair Anne Karjalainen (deadline 26 May)
<https://cor.europa.eu/en/events/Pages/SEDEC-wsc-strong-social-Europe-for-just-Transitions.aspx>

Useful links to monitor

Please find here a list of sources that we have already shared. All these organisations are regularly publishing updates and online events, so we recommend you to check their websites:

- **Bloomberg Foundation**
<https://cities4health.org/>
<https://www.cityleadership.harvard.edu/resources-sessions>
- **C40**
https://www.c40knowledgehub.org/s/cities-and-coronavirus-covid-19?language=en_US&tabset-5cf81=42fb1
https://www.c40knowledgehub.org/s/article/Cities-and-Coronavirus-COVID-19?language=en_US
- **European Commission's Intelligent Cities**
<https://www.intelligentcitieschallenge.eu/covid-19-webinars>
- **OECD**
<https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/en/>

- **United Cities and Local Governments**
<https://www.uclg.org/en/issues/live-learning-experience-beyondtheoutbreak>

Useful readings

Please find below a series of useful articles, published by various think tanks and organisations:

- **“Resilient People and Places: Why cities should embrace the circular economy to shape our post-COVID-19 future”**, OECD, 5 May 2020,
<https://www.oecd-forum.org/users/396052-oriana-romano/posts/resilient-people-and-places-why-cities-should-embrace-the-circular-economy-to-shape-our-post-covid-19-future>
- **“The EU minimum wage initiative in times of COVID-19 crisis”**, Foundation for European Progressive Studies, 8 May 2020,
<https://progressivepost.eu/debates/next-social/the-eu-minimum-wage-initiative-in-times-of-covid-19-crisis>
- **“What kind of post-corona world do Europeans want?”**, Timothy Garthon Ash, European Council on Foreign Relations, 11 May 2020,
https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_what_kind_of_post_corona_world_do_europeans_want
- **“Coronavirus: navigating a new storm with an old boat?”**, Foundation for European Progressive Studies, 12 May 2020,
<https://www.feps-europe.eu/resources/publications/736-coronavirus-navigating-a-new-storm-with-an-old-boat.html>
- **“Democracy Is the Missing Link in EU Coronavirus Recovery Plans”**, by Richard Youngs, Carnegie Europe, 13 May 2020,
<https://carnegieeurope.eu/2020/05/13/democracy-is-missing-link-in-eu-coronavirus-recovery-plans-pub-81821>
- **“How Does Creating LGBTI Inclusive Regions And Cities Matter To Their Development?”**, European Parliament Research Service, 15 May 2020,
<https://epthinktank.eu/2020/05/15/how-does-creating-lgbti-inclusive-regions-and-cities-matter-to-their-development/>
- **“The enduring influence of Kraftwerk”**, Charlemagne, *The Economist*, 16 May 2020,
<https://www.economist.com/europe/2020/05/16/the-enduring-influence-of-kraftwerk>
- **“Is history repeating itself? The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on youth”**, Eurofund, 18 May 2020,
<https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/blog/is-history-repeating-itself-the-impact-of-the-covid-19-crisis-on-youth>
- **“Exceptional coronavirus support measures of benefit to EU regions”**, European Parliament Research Service, 19 May 2020,

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/651921/EPRS_BRI\(2020\)651921_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/651921/EPRS_BRI(2020)651921_EN.pdf)

- **“Polls show Europeans losing patience with governments”**, *POLITICO Europe*, 19 May 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/europeans-losing-patience-with-governments-coronavirus-covid19/>
- **“Merkel’s milestone moment”**, *POLITICO Europe*, 19 May 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/angela-merkel-milestone-moment-europe-coronavirus-response/>