

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

3 April 2020

List of European decisions¹

Date	Number of cases ²	European response
28 January	4 cases	Activation of the EU Crisis Response Mechanism (ICPR) in "information sharing" mode.
31 January	17 cases	Shipment of 12 tonnes of protective equipment to China.
1 February	21 cases	Mobilisation of €10 million for research against the virus under the Horizon 2020 programme.
24 February	177 cases	Announcement of financial support of €232 million for the WHO, partner countries in Africa and China, vaccine research, and to help Member States repatriate their citizens.
2 March	2 166 cases	Transition to "full activation" of the ICPR scheme.
6 March	5 544 cases	Mobilisation of a further €37.5 million for vaccine research, treatment and diagnostics bringing the total to €47.5 million.
10 March	14 890 cases	Lifting the obligation for airlines to use their airport slots and fly empty during the pandemic.
		Mobilisation of €140 million of public and private funds (Horizon 2020 and pharmaceutical industry) to finance research on vaccines, diagnostics and treatments.
		Proposed €25 billion investment plan to counter the economic effects of the epidemic.

¹ Robert Schuman Foundation, 26 March

<https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/doc/divers/covid-european-decisions.pdf>

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

12 March	22 105 cases	Release of €120 billion by the ECB by the end of the year for asset purchases to support the economy.
13 March	28 297 cases	Announcement of fiscal easing for Member States. Increase in the investment plan to a total of €37 billion under cohesion policy, including €8 billion of unspent structural funds in 2019. Unblocking access to the EU Solidarity Fund. Launch of a joint fast-track procurement procedure for medical protection equipment and medicines.
15 March	39 768 cases	Restrictions on non-EU exports of personal protective equipment (masks, visors, etc.).
16 March	51 771 cases	Financial support of €80 million to the German company CureVac for vaccine research. Mobilisation by the EIB of up to €40 billion in potential financing for European companies affected by the crisis, in the form of bridging loans or suspension of loan repayments.
17 March	61 098 cases	Introduction of restrictions on entry into the Union from third countries for non-essential travel for 30 days. Launch of an advisory committee of epidemiologists and virologists to formulate guidelines.
18 March	70 989 cases	The ECB launches a new Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme, allowing for the repurchase of up to €750 billion of securities by the end of 2020.
19 March	82 869 cases	Creation of a Europe-wide pool of medical equipment (rescEU), dedicated to the procurement of protective respirators and masks, with a budget of €50 billion.
23 March	160 233 cases	Member States approve the general derogation clause to suspend the obligations of the Stability and Growth Pact.
24 March	182 470 cases	Conclusion of the joint fast-track procurement procedure launched on 13 March. Medical protection equipment and ordered by 25 countries will be delivered within 2 weeks after contracts are signed.
26 March	232 470 cases	Vote in the European Parliament on the €37-billion investment plan and the extension of the EU Solidarity Fund with €800 million for 2020.
1 April	421 808 cases	European Commission launches a new short-term unemployment insurance mechanism, SURE
2 April		European Commission presents new 'CRII 2' measures in the framework of the structural and investment funds with a view to introducing additional flexibilities: - the possibility of a co-financing rate of up to 100% for regions affected

		by the pandemic; - the possibility of transfers between ERDF, ESF and CF; - the possibility of transfer between categories of regions, from the richest to the poorest regions and vice versa.
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What the EU has done in the past weeks in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic and the position of the PES Group

Cities and regions, and in particular those led by progressive forces, have initiated - in addition to measures taken at national and European level - concrete actions to support the hospitals and elderly care structures and to support the economy and in particular SMEs. Cities and regions have come up with new forms of public services to alleviate the burden on those impacted by the consequences of the pandemic.

There has been a lot of solidarity between cities and regions too. Sometimes this support was even cross-border such as the French patients from Alsace taken to hospitals in Rheinland-Pfalz, Baden-Württemberg and Saarland.

The PES Group launched a project online to try to map all these initiatives of solidarity within and among regions and cities to which all members have been invited to contribute.

[Find out more about this project by clicking here](#)

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

The European Committee of the Regions is currently trying to map these initiatives and also put in place a sort of “exchange of stocks” or platform in order to allow solidarity requests to meet offers of solidarity. You will receive more information by the administration on this.

On the political level, the PES Group calls for:

1. a lasting relaxation of the fiscal rules of the Stability Pact where the national or regional co-funding would be excluded from the debt calculation
2. an increase of co-financing rates for Structural Funds such as in the previous crisis
3. a swift agreement on an ambitious MFF as part of the response to the COVID-19
4. if a deal on the MFF cannot be found, the Council should quickly adopt a contingency plan prolonging the current programmes to 2021 with fresh funding
5. the creation of European bonds or “Corona bonds”

Christophe Rouillon, president of the PES Group, presented these points to the Party of European Socialists’ Leaders meeting on 26 March, ahead of the European Council.

On 26 March, the European Parliament approved the European Commission's proposal to allow the use of the so far unspent budget funds of the cohesion policy in the fight against the Coronavirus. The Commission for Territorial Cohesion Policy and EU Budget (COTER) of the European Committee of the Regions, led by the PES Group member and Vice-President of the Nouvelle-Aquitaine Region (France), Isabelle Boudineau, fully supported this via a written procedure, given the urgency of the case. The text of the letter is available [here](#). The PES Group reacted with a press release that you can find [here](#).

Cohesion policy shows once more its potential in this crisis, thanks to European Commissioner Elisa Ferreira (PES, Portugal) who submitted this proposal. During a meeting of the PES Network on Cohesion Policy, Ferreira said that cohesion policy shows once more its potential in this crisis, since the financial means available in the last year of Multiannual Financial Framework are very limited. The decision by the European Parliament and the Council to support the use of unspent cohesion policy funds is a step in the right direction but more flexibility in the implementation of cohesion policy is essential. Speeding up negotiations for the next EU budget is now more important than ever, because we cannot afford another breakdown for the economy in the aftermath of the coronavirus crisis.

The European Council of 26 March also gave new guidelines, including tasking the Eurogroup to come up with new proposals. Nine countries suggested [European Recovery Bonds](#) (this is the last chance for the EU to show solidarity, they said). The final statement of the European Council is available [here](#). The European Commission is tasked with preparing a coordinated "exit strategy" for lifting social isolation measures. More information is available [here](#). The Eurogroup will be held on April 7 and several voices are speaking up in favour of the Eurobonds idea:

- **"Klaus Regling's interview for the Financial Times"**, 31 March 2020, <https://www.esm.europa.eu/interviews/transcript-klaus-reglings-interview-financial-times>
- **"Dutch 'no' on corona bonds undermines European project"**, by Lodewijk Asscher, leader of the Dutch Labor Party (PvdA), 31 March 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/dutch-no-on-corona-bonds-undermines-european-project/>

The European Commission launched on 1 April a new short-term unemployment insurance mechanism, SURE, proposing a new short-time work scheme to help the most affected EU countries, including Italy and Spain.

- **Video [#COVID-19: President von der Leyen on an initiative to support short-time work](#)**
- **["EU makes new push for solidarity with €100B unemployment scheme"](#)**, POLITICO Europe, 31 March 2020

As PES Group, we support the proposal of Commissioners Nicolas Schmit and Paolo Gentiloni, in charge of Jobs and the Economy respectively. This temporary instrument

should be the basis for a proper unemployment reinsurance scheme, as explained by Iratxe García, President of the S&D Group:

→ <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/newsroom/eu-temporary-instrument-support-workers-should-be-basis-proper-unemployment-reinsurance>

Moreover, after its first proposals made on Friday 13 March on financial aid of €37 billion through the structural and investment funds, the European Commission presented on Thursday 2 April a second initiative mobilising EU structural and investment funds to boost the European response to the coronavirus and its socio-economic consequences.

In response to the criticisms made by some Member States on the measures of 13 March, the Commission is considering further amendments to the Regulation (1303/2013) laying down common provisions between the Structural and Investment Funds, in particular the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF) and the Cohesion Fund (CF).

The proposed measures go in the direction of certain requests made by the Member States and the European Parliament, and include: - the possibility of a co-financing rate of up to 100% for regions affected by the pandemic; - the possibility of transfers between ERDF, ESF and CF; - the possibility of transfer between categories of regions, from the richest to the poorest regions and vice versa.

The European Parliament (EPP) will adopt a resolution on a comprehensive EU response to the COVID-19 pandemic at the next mini-plenary session of 16 April. As PES Group, together with the S&D Group in the European Parliament, we will strive to influence this proposal.

The European Commission announced that it will work on a revised proposal for the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). It will include new tools for Europe's recovery plan after the COVID-19 crisis. An adjustment on the figures is also expected, taking into account the lower expected Gross National Income and also possible new direct resources for the EU budget, in line with the European Investment Bank and European Central Bank new instruments. The proposal should come by the end of April, but it is not clear whether the crisis has really changed the mind of national governments on the need to approve a new MFF fast. Moreover, a European Council that would decide on the MFF cannot be held via a video conference, hence possibly not before June.

Flexibility in cohesion policy is still being discussed. As demanded by France and Spain already, there could be the possibility to allow moving resources among regions. Italy is urging for an extension of eligible expenses and for the possibility for temporary adjustments to be reabsorbed by the new MFF.

Until the new MFF entries into force, the provisional exercise would continue under the current MFF, but there are no meaningful amounts left from the 2014-2020 envelope. The idea could be to freeze new commitments and payments under cohesion policy, allowing the Common Agricultural Policy to continue, while freezing rebates.

As PES Group, we wrote a letter to President von der Leyen asking that the new MFF not only strengthens cohesion policy - which has proved also in this crisis to be the key tool to help cities and regions deal with the consequences of COVID-19 - but also makes sure that the objectives of the European Green Deal are met. This is an opportunity to create a new European economy based on sustainability and just transitions.

In addition, our political family has published their positions:

- [“25 proposals to overcome the crisis”](#), by the S&D Group in the European Parliament
- [“Action Plan”](#), by the S&D Group in the European Parliament
- [“Europe needs a Recovery Plan to overcome the corona crisis”](#), by the Party of European Socialists
- [“Women are on the front line of the corona-crisis, yet gender-issues are being ignored”](#), by PES Women
- [European Trade Union Confederation Declaration about COVID-19](#), 10 March 2020
- [Statement of the European Social Partners ETUC, BusinessEurope, CEEP, SMEUnited on the COVID-19 emergency](#), 16 March 2020

A new initiative by the European Committee of the Regions

The Conference of Presidents decided on 24 March to launch an Action Plan with five actions to help regions and cities in their efforts to combat COVID-19:

1. foster EU support to local and regional authorities in the health sector, via the call for an EU Health Emergency Mechanism;
2. become a platform to exchange, cooperate and facilitate mutual support between cities and regions across Europe;
3. provide through CoR mechanisms concrete feedback from the local and regional angle on how to address the health, emergency response, social and economic aspects of the pandemic and their impact on people and their local communities;
4. provide regular and practical information to local and regional authorities about EU measures to address the crisis;
5. facilitate a reality check on the ground of the EU's measures to fight the pandemic; gather evidence to improve EU policies based on the experiences of the local and regional level (policy health check).

These actions and measures will be accompanied by targeted communication actions to explain what the EU is doing to support local communities in their fight against the Coronavirus pandemic.

- More information: [Helping regions and cities fight coronavirus](#)
- To contribute to the new exchange platform, please write to: covid19@cor.europa.eu

The fight against fake news

The European Union has been at the centre of a campaign of disinformation and fake news in recent weeks. As EU Commission Vice-President Josep Borrell (PES/Spain), head of the European External Action Service, said at a press conference earlier this week: “Disinformation is playing with people’s lives. Disinformation can kill.”

Pro-Kremlin disinformation outlets launched a strong attack to sow distrust wherever possible: in the healthcare system, national institutions, the EU, and the World Health Organisation. They also spread fake news about the virus and how it is not dangerous and how it can be cured at home. This is very dangerous because it puts people’s lives at risk. It is important to remind everyone to rely only on authoritative sources to get updated information on the COVID-19 outbreak.

On 31 March, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, shared a video message about the danger of fake news and about the work the EU is doing with online platforms to facilitate access to trustworthy sources (click on this link to watch the video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jZooWOdU1xg&t=11s>).

As local and regional politicians, you are on the frontline of fighting also this type of battle. Here are a few instruments to help 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
- **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>
- **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>

This infographic by the European Commission shows what the EU did for solidarity ([Link Twitter](#) - [Link Facebook](#)):



France and Germany combined have donated to Italy more masks than China

Germany announced that it would send 1 million face masks to Italy still this week

Last Friday, France sent 1 million masks to Italy and 200,000 protective suits

Austria is flying 1.6 Million masks to Italy

Germany is taking patients from France and Northern Italy

••• and much more will follow

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Initiatives for cities and regions

European Commission’s Intelligent Cities Challenge Webinars

To help cities navigate through the current crisis and implement appropriate responses, the European Commission is launching a wide support package for COVID-19 to facilitate peer learning and sharing of best practices from European and global cities on effective city-led interventions. As a first step, the Commission is organising two city-focused interactive webinars to learn, exchange practices and support city administrations. The first one is taking place on 4 April at 4 PM CEST.

→ More information: <https://www.intelligentcitieschallenge.eu/covid-19-webinars>

Useful readings

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

- [“Chronicle of a Pandemic Foretold”](#), by Andrea Renda and Rosa J. Castro, by Center for European Policy Studies
- [“Corona Virus, the greatest test to our values and choices”](#), by FEPS President Maria João Rodrigues
- [“Coronavirus: Impact And Reaction \[What Think Tanks Are Thinking\]”](#), by European Parliament Research Service
- [“Covid-19: European responses, a complete picture”](#), by Robert Schuman Foundation
- [“Covid19 impact on caring for the most vulnerable”](#), by European Social Network
- [“The economics of a pandemic: the case of Covid-19”](#), by London Business School
- [“What can the EU do to alleviate the impact of the coronavirus crisis?”](#), by European Parliament Research Service
- [“Coronavirus: l’Europe, un coupable idéal”](#), Telos, 31 March 2020
- [“Coronavirus: sans un nouveau patriotisme européen, le déclin de l’Union sera inévitable”](#), by Maria Joao Rodrigues, ancienne ministre portugaise du Travail et présidente de FEPS (Foundation for European Progressive Studies) and many other scholars, 1 April 2020
- [“Cop26 climate talks in Glasgow postponed until 2021”](#), The Guardian, 1 April 2020
- **Commission publishes Q&A on Erasmus and Solidarity Corps in COVID-19 times**, <https://agenceurope.eu/en/bulletin/article/12459/6>
- **SPD MEPs set out vision for European response to crisis that goes beyond national egoism**, https://pes.cor.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020-03-31%20Whatever%20it%20takes%20SD_German%20Delegation.pdf