

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

30 April 2020

List of European decisions

Date	Number of cases and deaths ¹	European response
24 April	1 087 272 cases 120 144 deaths	<p>The European Commission announced a pledging effort – the Coronavirus Global Response – to be launched on 4 May 2020 and called for the world to stand united against the coronavirus.</p> <p>The second round of future relationship negotiations between the European Union and the United Kingdom took place.</p> <p>The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) issued EU guidance for a safe return to the workplace.</p>
27 April	1 073 367 cases 118 479 deaths	<p>The European Commission receives its first preliminary application for support from the EU Solidarity Fund for health emergency from Italy.</p> <p>An informal meeting of EU Tourism Ministers took place to exchange best practices and identify ways to support this sector badly impacted by the COVID-19 crisis.</p>
28 April	1 087 272 cases 120 144 deaths	<p>Two video conferences took place at the level of the Council of the European Union: an informal meeting</p>

¹ 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>of Energy Ministers and a meeting of Interior Ministers.</p> <p>The European Commission adopted a banking package to facilitate bank lending to households and businesses throughout the European Union.</p> <p>The European Parliament's agriculture committee approved a mandate for the transitional regulation to support the agricultural sector.</p>
29 April	1 097 667 cases 122 757 deaths	<p>An informal videoconference of EU ministers responsible for transport took place to assess the measures taken so far to counter the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>The European Commission launched an infringement procedure to safeguard the independence of judges in Poland.</p> <p>The European Commission announced over €3.3 billion of EU financial support for the Western Balkans to address the COVID-19 crisis.</p>

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

The European Committee of the Regions

The Committee will adopt on 7 May a Declaration on "local and regional authorities as actors of the European response to the COVID-19 crisis". Members can submit amendments to the draft declaration via the Members' Portal by 4 May, 9 am. The PES Group Secretariat has already circulated 21 draft amendments for the members' consideration.

New initiatives of the European Commission

The European Commission is working on the new proposal for the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and Recovery Fund, likely to be published on 6 May. The Commission proposal should clarify the link with the MFF to deal with the current crisis and its aftermath. The Commission is said to consider the following proposals:

- to increase the “**Headroom**” between the expenditure ceiling of the MFF and the own resources ceiling (currently at 1.20% of the EU GNI) for at least a number of years up to 2% of the EU GNI to provide extra room of manoeuvre for borrowing additional resources on the financial market;
- to use the money raised on the financial market via a **temporary Recovery Instrument (RI)** that would be created based on Art. 122 TFEU to finance a **European Recovery Fund/Facility/Programme** of around 320 bn EUR (tbc);
- the **repayment of the bonds** could either take place over a long period of time by the Member States that have received loans, or through future additional own resources. The MFF for 2021-2027 would only cover interest payments of around 0.5 bn EUR per year;
- the resources of the European Recovery Fund could then be used to support OR complement EU instruments such as the **Structural Reform Support Programme** and **Cohesion Policy**, to provide additional support for boosting the economy via grants and loans to the Member States.

Overall, the chances for an agreement on the MFF still in June seem to have increased.

For cohesion policy, in an interview with *POLITICO Europe*, Elisa Ferreira, Member of the European Commission in charge of Cohesion and Reforms, confirmed that some cohesion funds should come from money the Commission would raise from the financial markets. There is a discussion on the option that the European Commission could propose extending until 2022 the existing cohesion policy programmes and the rules governing cohesion spending, all set to expire at the end of this year. This approach would allow to use cohesion policy spending under the current (extended) rules for boosting the economy while the future programmes would focus on the long-term development strategies linked to the EU objectives of the Green Deal and digital transformation. The document also calls for new cohesion programmes to start in parallel — allowing new initiatives such as the Just Transition Fund to start — and for the Commission to “temporarily deviate from some rules in favour of some or all Member States in a crisis”.

- **European Commissioner Elisa Ferreira speaks to POLITICO Europe on economic recovery**, *POLITICO Europe*, 27 April, <https://www.politico.eu/podcast/eu-confidential-coronavirus-edition-7-commissioner-elisa-ferreira-on-economic-recovery-critical-seasonal-workers/>

Not related to COVID-19 but to the rule of law this time, is the European Commission’s launch on 29 April of a new formal infringement procedure against Poland. It concerns Poland’s new law on judiciary, approved in December 2019 and entered into force in February 2020. The Polish government now has two months to reply on the judicial independence of Polish judges.

- **“EU launches judicial freedom case against Poland”**, *Euractiv*, 29 April, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/eu-launches-judicial-freedom-case-against-poland/>
- **“Commission launches 4th infringement procedure over Poland’s rule of law”**, *POLITICO Europe*, 29 April,

<https://www.politico.eu/article/brussels-launches-4th-infringement-procedure-over-polands-rule-of-law/>

The European Parliament

Economy

On Monday 27 April, the economic affairs (ECON) committee discussed the economic impact and response to the Covid-19 outbreak with Valdis Dombrovskis, Executive Vice-President, and Paolo Gentiloni, Commissioner for Economy.

Irene Tinagli, S&D Chair of the ECON committee, called for bold actions at European level to support the European economy after the crisis, otherwise the stability and the cohesion of the Eurozone will be under an unprecedented pressure.

Paolo Gentiloni, Member of the European Commission in charge of Economy, replied that more is needed to preserve the cohesion of our economy, firstly by restoring and deepening the Single Market, working on the sectors of the economy more exposed to the crisis, and secondly by fueling the recovery and modernising the economy with a Marshall-type effort to invest massively in the digital and green transition. Social sustainability will also be crucial.

Agriculture

On Tuesday 28 April, the agriculture (AGRI) committee voted on transitional measures to support the agriculture sector through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund from 1 January 2021. This decision will avoid cuts to the direct payments and the rural development respectively. This is a very important step for protecting a strategic sector badly affected by the COVID-19 crisis. This decision should come into force on 4 May.

- **“S&Ds: In the midst of Covid-19, we ensure certainty and further funds to the EU’s agriculture sector”**, Press release by the S&D Group, 29 April, <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/newsroom/sds-midst-covid-19-we-ensure-certainty-and-further-funds-eus-agriculture-sector>
- **“MEPs agree on two-year bridging CAP divide”**, *Euractiv*, 29 April, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/agriculture-food/news/meps-agree-on-two-year-bridging-cap-divide/>

The Council of the European Union

Tourism

On Monday 27 April, in an informal videoconference, the European Union’s Ministers responsible for tourism stressed that tourism should be amongst the main priorities of the EU’s recovery plan, following a letter by nine EU Member States (Italy, Greece, Spain, Portugal, France, Malta, Cyprus, Bulgaria and Romania). Moreover, they discussed the

need for harmonised policy on matters such as refunds for package tours and liquidity for tour operators. They also discussed the potential for “tourist corridors” between Member States, involving oversight by epidemiologists, and the idea of a COVID-19 passport. Tourism represents 10% of the EU’s GDP and provides jobs for almost 12% of workers in the European Union. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen promised “smart solutions” and “more detailed guidance” to lift controls across Europe in a coordinated matter, but there is no date yet for when they will be published. According to the European Commission, the EU’s tourism sector could lose at least 50 percent of its turnover this year.

- **Press release on the meeting by the Croatian presidency**, <https://eu2020.hr/Home/OneNews?id=259>
- **“Europe’s canceled summer holiday”**, *POLITICO Europe*, 27 April, <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-europe-canceled-summer-holiday/>
- **“Europe’s south says common exit plan needed to save tourism”**, Euractiv, 27 April, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/europes-south-says-common-exit-plan-needed-to-save-tourism/>

The situation of the tourism sector is particularly worrying for many cities and regions represented within the PES Group. It will be important to make sure that there will be financial support for tourism-related businesses, in particular the small ones through the recovery plan. An opinion on sustainable tourism is currently ongoing in the NAT commission of the European Committee of the Regions (Manuel Alejandro Cardente Flores - ES/RE). It should be on the agenda of the online NAT meeting in June.

Internal affairs

Migration was high on the agenda of the General Affairs Council Meeting on 28 April, where EU Interior Ministers debated three main areas: internal and external borders, use of tracing applications, and shift in criminal activities.

The situation is particularly difficult at the border with Turkey, where the [European Commission](#) is working closely with the Greek authorities to help implement an emergency response plan to address risks of a potential outbreak of coronavirus on the migrant camps on Greek islands. The transfer of unaccompanied minors on the European mainland is significantly hampered by the COVID-19 outbreak, even if Luxembourg and Germany have started welcoming the first groups.

As [PES Group](#), we are convinced that Europe has to act now to stop a humanitarian crisis to turn into a social and a public health one. Our firm belief is that a comprehensive reform of the EU’s migration and asylum policy framework is more urgent than ever and should not be delayed by the focus on the immediate health crisis.

- **“Permanent solidarity mechanisms on migration and asylum will put an end to slow and unreliable responses”**, S&D Group position ahead of the meeting,

<https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/newsroom/permanent-solidarity-mechanisms-migration-and-asylum-will-put-end-slow-and-unreliable>

- **“Commission experts call for code of conduct on migrant sea rescues”**, *Euractiv*, 27 April, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/commission-experts-call-for-code-of-conduct-on-migrant-sea-rescues/>
- **Press release of the Croatian Presidency after the meeting**, 28 April, <https://eu2020.hr/Home/OneNews?id=262>
- **“Making migrants visible to COVID-19 counting: the dilemma”**, *Open Democracy*, 28 April, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/making-migrants-visible-covid-19-counting-dilemma/>

Energy

On 28 April, EU energy ministers held an informal video conference on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the energy sector, which also covers the issues of preparedness and recovery. The ministers agreed that the energy sector will play a key role in a sustainable recovery plan, in line with the European Green Deal and together with the national energy and climate plans.

- **“EU energy ministers hold ‘crisis’ talks over coronavirus”**, *Euractiv*, 28 April, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy/news/eu-energy-ministers-hold-crisis-talks-over-coronavirus/>
- **Press release of the Croatian Presidency after the meeting**, 28 April, <https://eu2020.hr/Home/OneNews?id=261>

Transport

On 29 April, ministers responsible for transport held an informal video conference to discuss the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic with 90% of European flights grounded. Social distancing measures seem very difficult to implement and many airline companies have already sought and found the support of their national government (Lufthansa/Austrian, Air France/KLM).

Ministers are coming to an agreement to suspend passengers’s rights in these exceptional circumstances, following a [letter signed by 12 Member States](#) that is now getting more support. Some Member States opposed changes to the current rules so as not to frustrate the legitimate expectations of passengers. The 12 States having signed the letter potentially represent a qualified majority in the Council.

Moreover, the European ministers support the securing of Green Lanes in order to facilitate the transport of goods within the EU. They also acknowledge the necessity to strengthen the role of rail freight transport corridors. Last but not least, for shipping, ministers put special emphasis on the necessity to resolve concrete issues to ensure safe working conditions.

On MFF, there is consensus that the MFF and the recovery fund should fully reflect the needs of the transport sector, particularly in terms of liquidity and investments. The need

to condition these investments to the implementation of the European Green Deal has not been mentioned as far as we know.

- **Press release of the Croatian Presidency after the meeting**, 29 April, <https://eu2020.hr/Home/OneNews?id=263>

The European progressive family

In addition, many other positions were adopted by our members and other PES family partners. Please find here some of them:

- **“President of Tuscany Region calls on European leaders to focus on next multiannual financial framework”**, Enrico Rossi, Vice-President of the PES Group and President of Tuscany Region (Italy), 23 April, <https://agenceurope.eu/en/bulletin/article/12473/36>
- **“Il Recovery Fund europeo parta dalle Regioni”**, Enrico Rossi, Vice-President of the PES Group and President of Tuscany Region (Italy), 29 April, https://www.huffingtonpost.it/entry/il-recovery-fund-europeo-parta-dalle-regioni_it_5ea9afc5c5b6a11afc7858e3?utm_hp_ref=it-blog&ncid=other_homepage_tiwdkz83gze&utm_campaign=mw_entry_recirc
- **“Gentiloni: A €1.5T EU recovery fund should be ready by mid-September”**, *POLITICO Europe*, 26 April, <https://www.politico.eu/article/gentiloni-a-e1-5t-eu-recovery-fund-should-be-ready-by-mid-september/>
- **PES Women and Rainbow Rose: EU must act to stop discrimination in Poland**, 27 April, <https://www.pes.eu/en/news-events/news/detail/PES-Women-and-Rainbow-Rose-EU-must-act-to-stop-discrimination-in-Poland/>
- **“Covid-19: Low-paid workers risk lives, let's protect them”**, by Per Hilmersson; deputy general secretary of European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), *EUobserver*, 28 April, <https://euobserver.com/opinion/148176>
- **“A EU budget to ensure intergenerational equity”**, MEP Margarida Marques, Foundation for European Progressive Studies, 28 April, <https://www.feps-europe.eu/resources/publications/724-a-eu-budget-to-ensure-intergenerational-equity.html>

PES Group solidarity project

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 32 contributions from 10 countries, including from some young local leaders of our progressive network.



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

PES Group event with young local leaders, 7 May, 18:30 (Brussels time)

In addition, we would like to invite you all to the PES Group's first online event that we will be hosting with our network of progressive young local leaders, moderated by our PES Group Vice-President Kata Tutto, from Budapest and with the participation of our member Fernando Medina, Mayor of Lisbon. The event will take place on 7 May, at 18:30-19:30 (CEST) via Zoom. Ahead of Europe Day, we will be debating solidarity examples implemented at local and regional levels as well as ideas for the future of Europe. You can register by clicking on this link:

→ <https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZAoc--vqz8oEt26aGY94-GIJpji9PAiTyl>
[S](#)

The fight against fake news

The European Union has been at the centre of a campaign of disinformation and fake news related to the COVID-19 in recent weeks. After initial pro-Kremlin attacks, this week the media widely reported on the new Chinese propaganda campaign, which is critical of Western democracies and their handling of the coronavirus.

- **“Beijing doubles down in EU propaganda battle”**, *POLITICO Europe*, 27 April, <https://www.politico.eu/article/beijing-doubles-down-in-eu-propaganda-battle/>
- **“EU ‘watered down’ report on Chinese disinformation about Covid-19”**, *The Guardian*, 27 April, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/27/eu-watered-down-report-on-chinese-disinformation-about-covid-19>

- **“The Cost of Europe Bowing to China’s Disinformation and Pressure”**,
Carnegie Europe, 28 April, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/81663>

New sources are also being put together by various organisations for the fight against fake news. AEJ Belgium has created a list of activities, tools, best practices and expert advice that could be used for opposing fake news on COVID-19.

- <http://aej-belgium.eu/identifying-fake-news-in-coronavirus/>

Moreover, Google News Initiative has just announced the Journalism Emergency Relief Fund, which is focused on small and medium sized news organisations across the world, and applications opened on Monday for the Facebook Journalism Project COVID-19 Local News Relief Fund. These two initiatives could provide some much-needed support during this time of crisis.

- <https://newsinitiative.withgoogle.com/journalism-emergency-relief-fund>
→ <https://www.facebook.com/journalismproject/programs/grants/coronavirus-local-news-relief-fund>

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

We are sure that you are all preparing for some - different - Labour Day celebrations this year. From our side, we would like to draw your attention to the event organised by the Party of European Socialists on Friday, 1 May, from 17:00 CET, which will see the participation of our PES Group President Christophe Rouillon, Sergei Stanishev, President of the PES, European Commissioners Frans Timmermans, Helena Dalli, Paolo Gentiloni, Josep Borrell, Maroš Šefčovič, Ylva Johansson, Elisa Ferreira, Nicolas Schmit, Jutta Urpilainen, David Sassoli, President of the European Parliament, Iratxe Garcia Perez, President of the Socialists and Democrats Group in the European Parliament, Luca Visentini, General Secretary of ETUC, and many more.

→ <https://www.facebook.com/events/1088952914824471/>

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/>
- **State of the Union, 6-8 May, Florence**
<https://stateoftheunion.eui.eu/>
- **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:

- **“Le Grand Continent: Organisation du territoire européen en temps de Covid-19, entre coopération et repli”**, 1 April 2020, <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2020/04/01/organisation-du-territoire-europeen-en-temps-de-covid-19-entre-cooperation-et-repli/>
- **“A Green Deal for All: How to achieve sustainability and equity between the people, regions, countries and generations of Europe in a post-COVID-19 era”**, 27 April, Foundation for European Progressive Studies, <https://www.feps-europe.eu/resources/publications/731-a-green-deal-for-all.html>
- **“All eyes on ECB for further virus-fighting moves”**, Euractiv, 27 April, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/all-eyes-on-ecb-for-further-virus-fighting-moves/>
- **“Dutch spell out green ideas for EU recovery fund”**, Euractiv, 27 April, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy-environment/news/dutch-spell-out-green-ideas-for-eu-recovery-fund/>
- **“State Aid And The Pandemic: How State Aid Can Back Coronavirus Economic Support Measures”**, European Parliament Research Service, 28 April, <https://epthinktank.eu/2020/04/28/state-aid-and-the-pandemic-how-state-aid-can-back-coronavirus-economic-support-measures/>
- **“Coronavirus Crisis Support For EU Farmers”**, European Parliament Research Service, 28 April, <https://epthinktank.eu/2020/04/29/coronavirus-crisis-support-for-eu-farmers/>
- **“The next phase of Brexit negotiations”**, European Policy Centre, 28 April, <http://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/The-next-phase-of-Brexit-negotiations~325e88>
- **“Coronavirus: globalisation is not the cause but the remedy”**, Robert Schuman Foundation, 28 April, <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/doc/questions-d-europe/qe-556-en.pdf>
- **“A Federal Europe: the way out of the crisis”**, Spinelli Group in the European Parliament, 28 April, https://www.federalists.eu/fileadmin/files_uef/press_releases/Spinelli_Group_Way_out_Crisis_20200428.pdf