

European Union response to the COVID-19 pandemic*

Odpowiedź Unii Europejskiej na pandemię COVID-19

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Summary: *The article is based on information available on the Coronavirus response website of the European Commission at ec.europa.eu and Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on additional COVID-19 response measures of 28.10.2020 (COM(2020) 687 final). The article reflects state of play at the end of December 2020.*

Key words: *European Union, COVID-19 pandemic, response, emergency support instrument*

Streszczenie: *Artykuł powstał na podstawie informacji dostępnych na stronie internetowej Komisji Europejskiej dotyczącej reagowania na koronawirusa pod adresem ec.europa.eu oraz na podstawie Komunikatu Komisji do Parlamentu Europejskiego, Rady Europejskiej i Rady w sprawie dodatkowych środków reagowania na COVID-19 z dnia 28.10.2020 r. Prezentowana treść odnosi się do sytuacji na koniec grudnia 2020 r.*

Słowa kluczowe: *Unia Europejska, pandemia COVID-19, reakcja, instrumenty wsparcia*

A year ago, wishing a Happy 2020, one would not have anticipated in the worst-case scenarios what might happen already two months later. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic at the beginning of March 2020 led to a personal, social and economic shock. The EU immediately engaged in responding to this unprecedented crisis at on all fronts and its action resulted in adopting over 1000 measures to date.

At the outset, at political level, the President of European Commission established a Coronavirus response team to coordinate the EU response to the pandemic.

At the start of the pandemics, the Commission activated Emergency Support Instrument¹ involving EUR 2.7 billion to rapidly address the human and economic consequences of a crisis and fund actions in the Member States.

The EU action focused on various areas, from public health, research and emergency support, through jobs, economy and travel to transport, borders and mobility or still, tackling the disinformation. The present article will only outline the selected examples of main action in these fields.

In terms of **public health and research**, the Commission distributed to Member States 10 million masks for healthcare workers, and further, made EUR 100 million available from the Emergency Support Instrument to buy rapid antigen tests. It also invested EUR 35.5 million from the Emergency Support Instrument to the International Federation of the Red Cross to scale up COVID-19 testing capacity in the EU, train volunteers and protect the most vulnerable.

In November 2020, the Commission made first steps towards building the European He-

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¹ Proposal for a Council Regulation activating the emergency support under Council Regulation (EU) 2016/369 of 15 March 2016 and amending its provisions in respect of the COVID-19 outbreak of 2.4.2020, COM(2020) 175.

alth Union² aiming at strengthening the EU's health security framework, and reinforcing the crisis preparedness and response role of key EU agencies.

Of particular interest is the EU vaccine strategy, which aims to ensure fair and affordable access to safe and effective vaccines for everyone in the EU. Delivering on this undertaking requires running clinical trials in parallel with investing in the production capacity needed to produce millions of doses of a successful vaccine. On 21 December, following positive assessment by the European Medicines Agency, the Commission has given the conditional marketing authorisation for the first vaccine. The safety and effectiveness of vaccines, which have received conditional marketing authorisations, are rigorously monitored. In line with the EU vaccine strategy, once authorised and produced, each vaccine will be available to Member States at the same time and at the same conditions.

As to the **economic measures, including jobs protection**, one of the first measures launched in April 2020 by the EU to help Member States financially was the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative. By mobilising unspent existing EU funds, the initiative provided an immediate liquidity boost to Member States' and regions' budgets and helped them to redirect cohesion policy funding to a number of priority areas, including healthcare expenditure, short time work schemes and working capital support for small and medium-sized enterprises.

At the same time, the Commission proposed Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE), a short-term employment support scheme of EUR 100 billion to help protect jobs³ which was adopted by the Council in May 2020.

In May 2020, the Commission proposed the biggest ever package of EU financing to support Europe's recovery from the pandemic, which resulted in EU leaders' agreement to a Recovery Package of EUR 1.8 trillion. This combines the EU budget for 2021–2027 and NextGenerationEU⁴. Under the agreement the Commission will be able to borrow up to EUR 750 billion on the markets on behalf of the EU, thus limiting the immediate impact on Member States' budgets.

Worth underlining are also the Commission's guidelines to on seasonal workers in the EU in the context of COVID-19 outbreak⁵. They provide guidance to national authorities, labour inspectorates, and social partners to guarantee rights, health and safety of seasonal workers, and ensure awareness of seasonal workers of their rights.

With regard to **borders, mobility and travelling**, to limit the spread of the pandemic outbreak, Member States adopted different measures restricting citizens' free movement rights, such as closing of borders, strict or undergoing quarantine.

To protect transport workers and maintain the flow of goods, the Commission issued guidelines for border management measures to protect health and ensure the availability of goods and essential services⁶. In parallel, it provided guidance to ensure the free movement of workers⁷, especially in the healthcare and food sectors.

New risks in the workplace and additional protection to all workers, particularly those working in direct contact with the virus were ensured through necessary updates of EU law.

The Commission worked closely with Member States to ensure a gradual return to the free movement and made a proposal for

² Communication "Building a European Health Union: Reinforcing the EU's resilience for cross-border health threats" of 11.11.2020, COM(2020) 724 final.

³ Council Regulation (EU) 2020/672 of 19 May 2020 on the establishment of a European instrument for temporary support to mitigate unemployment risks in an emergency (SURE) following the COVID-19 outbreak, OJ L 159, 20.5.2020, p. 1.

⁴ See https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/eu-budget/long-term-eu-budget/eu-budget-2021-2027_en

⁵ Communication 16.7.2020, C(2020) 4813 final.

⁶ COVID-19 Guidelines of 16.3.2020, C(2020) 1753 final.

⁷ COVID-19 Guidelines of 30.3.2020.

a coordinated approach. On 13 October 2020, the Council adopted a Recommendation⁸ on coordinated approach to the restriction of free movement to provide for clarity and consistency in defining the risk level in the regions. The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control started publishing the common map to serve Member States as a basis for risk assessment⁹.

The Communication of 28 October 2020¹⁰ underlined the need for the national restrictions to be proportionate and non-discriminatory for the citizens of different Member States.

Finally, in **fighting disinformation**, the Commission remains in contact with social media platforms regarding measures to promote adequate content, improve users' awareness,

and limit coronavirus disinformation and advertising related to it. This is particularly important to address the risk of increasing unwillingness to respect the preventive measures, the lack of trust in the vaccine and the overall pandemic fatigue. The Communication of 28 October 2020¹¹ called upon Member States to relaunch adapted communication campaigns at the national level.

As set out at the outset, the EU adopted over 1000 measures and will not stop its efforts in the challenging period to come. These efforts cannot go alone and the coordinated and solidary response at the Member State level will be crucial to combat the crisis and come out of it stronger. Wishing the reader a Happy 2021, let us hope that by its end the pandemic will only be a song of the past...

LEGAL ACTS

Communication from the Commission "Guidelines concerning the exercise of the free movement of workers during COVID-19 outbreak", OJ C 102 I, 30.3.2020, p. 12–14.

Communication from the Commission Guidelines on Seasonal Workers in the EU in the Context of the COVID-19 Outbreak, European Commission, Brussels, 16.7.2020 C(2020) 4813 final.

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions "Building a European Health Union: Reinforcing the EU's resilience for cross-border health threats", European Commission, Brussels, 11.11.2020, COM(2020) 724 final.

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on additional COVID-19 response measures, European Commission, Brussels, 28.10.2020, COM(2020) 687 final.

Council Recommendation (EU) 2020/1475 of 13 October 2020 on a coordinated approach to the restriction of free movement in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, OJ L 337, 14.10.2020, p. 3.

Council Regulation (EU) 2020/672 of 19 May 2020 on the establishment of a European instrument for temporary support to mitigate unemployment risks in an emergency (SURE) following the COVID-19 outbreak, OJ L 159, 20.5.2020, p. 1.

COVID-19 Guidelines for border management measures to protect health and ensure the availability of goods and essential services, European Commission, Brussels, 16.3.2020 C(2020) 1753 final.

Proposal for a Council Regulation activating the emergency support under Council Regulation (EU) 2016/369 of 15 March 2016 and amending its provisions in respect of the COVID-19 outbreak, European Commission, Brussels, 2.4.2020, COM(2020) 175 final.

WEBSITE

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⁸ Council Recommendation 2020/1475 on a coordinated approach to the restriction of free movement in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁹ <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/>

¹⁰ COM(2020) 687 final.

¹¹ Idem.