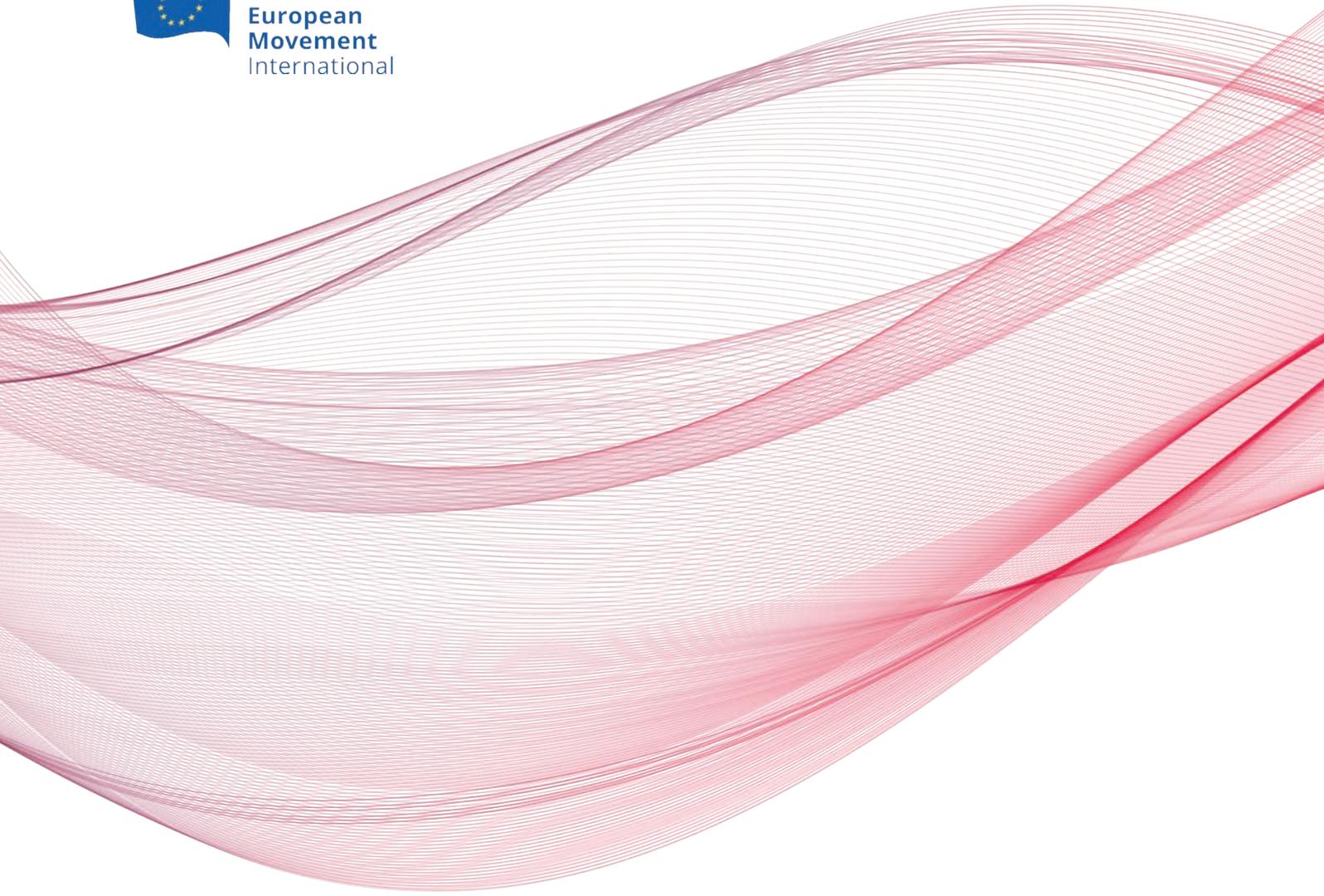


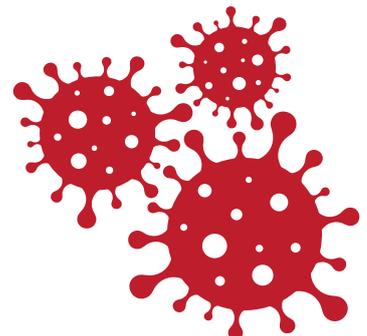


European
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A European Union Response to COVID-19

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Challenging the European Union through at an unprecedented scale, the current COVID-19 pandemic calls for a coordinated response underpinned by collective action and solidarity. Striking a balance between protecting citizens' safety, health and fundamental rights, while ensuring an effective and sustainable recovery plan for the economy is primordial. As the pandemic leaves a lasting impact on societies and economies worldwide, the EU needs to channel lessons learned from the crisis, invest in a both resilient and sustainable political and economic framework that can support the EU's recovery and prepare for future health emergencies.

Enhancing the EU's role

The EU can play a stronger role in coordinating Member States' responses to a health crisis by making the best use of its competences laid down in the treaties. To this end, it should promote a regular dialogue between Member States and actively support policies that benefit the health and well-being of all citizens. Any measures taken must be coordinated with agencies and health experts at a European and international lev-

el, including the World Health Organization. Moreover, the EU can support international efforts of monitoring health threats, while taking a leading role in the global fight against the pandemic through increased investment in research, medical equipment, treatments and vaccines.

By procuring, stockpiling and distributing essential medical equipment across Europe, the EU can channel resources to where they are needed and support the communities and regions most affected. In this context, the rescEU programme, as a European reserve of resources for disaster risk management, should be extended to also include medical and other crisis-related supplies. At the same time, the EU and Member States must show solidarity with the rest of the world and assist especially countries in need of health and financial support, through enhanced short-term as well as longer-term structural aid.

Investing in health

As the pandemic puts citizens' lives and wellbeing at risk, we are reminded of the importance of strong and effective health-

care systems. Enhancing investment in the health care sector and health workers will not only save lives and protect citizens, but can make our health care systems more resilient while allowing us to better prepare for future waves of infections. The EU must therefore work closely with Member States to bring national health systems to a comparable level, while increasing investment in health care and research and ensuring that best practices, intelligence, technologies and stocks of health equipment are shared.

Keeping borders open

The freedom to travel, live, study, work and retire anywhere in the EU is one of the most important rights enjoyed by EU citizens. We tend to take these freedoms for granted, only realising their value when they are taken from us. The extraordinary health risks presented by the current pandemic require extraordinary actions. However, a health crisis cannot be banished behind borders, and any restrictions to the freedom of movement in the EU should be proportional, time-limited and exclude essential travel and commerce. This way, Schengen and the internal



market can continue to perform the flow of goods, services, capital and people that can help the EU deal with the pandemic. Moreover, a coordinated de-confinement policy, paired with EU-wide safety standards, can help build mutual trust among countries and citizens, reduce nationalist and protectionist sentiments and avoid unnecessary checks at internal borders of the Schengen area and the single market.

Building a resilient economy

The pandemic is leaving long-lasting marks on the global economy. A comprehensive EU strategy must be built around measures of financial and budgetary solidarity so as to help Member States weather the immediate effects of the economic slowdown in the EU and its neighbours, while also preventing the deepening of the recession in the medium and long run. By ensuring that governments have the necessary fiscal capacity, the EU can help tackle effects of the crisis and support emergency spending at a national level. Coordinated fiscal and monetary policies can serve as a protective shield by preventing bankruptcies, keeping prices stable and

saving jobs, while kick-starting the economy. However, the governance and distribution mechanisms for emergency and recovery funds must be underpinned by fair and transparent conditions, should be open to scrutiny from the EU institutions and national parliaments and should follow a viable economic rationale to ensure that financial resources are invested efficiently and effectively.

To help counter any delayed effects of the shock and support sustainable development, short- and medium-term crisis support must be followed by more structural measures. While both public and private investment can be the drivers of recovery, any financial tools and EU funds made available need to support the implementation of the European Green Deal and the digital transformation, not least by putting the focus on small and medium-sized companies, as the EU economy's backbone. Moreover, direct investment in public services, particularly in the healthcare systems, both in the EU and in third countries, will prove to be crucial in the long run.

As the crisis puts the EU's eco-

nomical resilience to the test, leaders should take the opportunity to rethink the current economic and monetary governance structures of the EU, with the aim of improving the EU's ability to respond to such symmetrical shocks.

Budgeting for the future

The EU's economic recovery will be a gradual one. With this in mind, a well-designed EU recovery, embedded in the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), offers a much-needed European response to a health crisis that will have an impact in the years to come. The EU can play a key role in promoting and coordinating fiscal stimulus to overcome the crisis by creating a fully-fledged investment plan, with sufficient room for manoeuvre to adapt to unforeseen health crises in future. A comprehensive recovery fund within the MFF must embody the principles of cohesion, solidarity and up-ward convergence, and should refrain from reducing the funding of both existing and prospective EU programmes. Moving forward, both the expenditure and revenue sides of the EU budget must be optimised, to include a new scheme for own resources.

Paving the way for a green recovery

The pandemic has not changed the fact that we continue to face a climate crisis and environmental challenges of unprecedented urgency. The recovery of Europe's economy must therefore prioritise the transition to a just and sustainable future while ensuring that all sectors are on a path towards climate neutrality. The European Green Deal, as the EU's growth strategy, should guide the EU's recovery from the health crisis. As spending priorities of national governments may change as a result of the crisis, the EU should continue to pursue the full decarbonisation of our societies and strengthen investment in renewable energies. Moreover, with an EU budget that is increasingly financed through a set of new own resources, carbon taxes and other environmentally ambitious levies can present a way for the EU to speed-up its climate efforts and promote the use of renewable energies.

Reducing our ecological impact and the loss of domestic and global biodiversity is key to preventing the emergence of pandemics such as COVID-19. The EU, together with its key international partners and allies, should therefore design and im-

plement policies in a way that ecosystems are restored and best-protected.

Protecting jobs

The pandemic has impacted the labour market hard-hitting a number of sectors in particular that account for a large part of GDP and jobs throughout the EU. As millions of Europeans temporarily or permanently lost their jobs as a result of the health crises, the EU and Member States must focus on safeguarding employment in the most heavily affected sectors. The transport and tourism sector should be supported through investments in sustainable transport and the promotion of eco-responsible practices. The cultural and creative sectors can be supported through the Creative Europe Programme and additional available funds. Furthermore, a substantially strengthened cohesion policy, as well as non-discriminatory support within the Common Agricultural Policy to sustainable farming, are both key instruments for mitigating the consequences of the crises.

To make sure that no worker is left behind, social dialogue and consultations with civil society are crucial during the crisis to identify the risks of certain groups. Young people are con-

sidered particularly vulnerable and the EU should therefore dedicate increased support for youth employment, training and social inclusion. Moreover, the COVID-19 crisis is having a big impact on the socio-economic situation of migrants. To ensure they are protected, administrative adjustments to facilitate their integration process and access to the labour market are needed.

As the pandemic is likely to have a long-lasting impact on the EU's labour market, Member States must coordinate efforts to strengthen workers' rights while supporting those left out of the labour market. New measures such as a European unemployment insurance, a European minimum wage and a European employment contract can help bring workers' rights in Europe to the same standards. The EU should also ensure that frontline workers fighting this crisis are rightly protected, safeguarded and remunerated. As ensuring job quality should always be paramount, Member States should refrain from relaxing labour legislation in order to stimulate high employment.

Supporting those in needs

COVID-19 has affected people and communities differently, and without the necessary investment, Europe risks leaving



the most vulnerable citizens behind as inequalities continue to widen. Women, young people, precarious workers, unemployed, homeless, low income families, ethnic minorities, LGBTI people, refugees and undocumented people, migrants at Europe's borders, and people with disabilities and chronic illnesses especially can be disproportionately affected by the health crisis and tend to face greater safety risks as well as marginalisation. Care and support should be accessible to all citizens during and after a health crisis, and fundamental rights need to be respected. Throughout the crisis, millions of Europeans have volunteered to help those in need. To ensure a recovery that leaves no one behind, leaders should meet the efforts of citizens and civil society across Europe by strengthening their support and providing the necessary structures and investment for these initiatives.

Investing in technologies

Technology can help citizens, governments and businesses to stay connected in these challenging times and can help provide some of the services needed during a health crisis

and beyond. Mobile applications and gathered data also hold the potential to assist authorities in understanding how diseases spread and help prepare for future outbreaks. However, any tools used to contain or monitor the pandemic must respect EU transparency rules as well as citizens' rights to privacy and data protection, as well as fundamental European values. Moreover, technology is most helpful for adequate decision-making and can give a clear picture when it is used by a majority of citizens. The EU should therefore facilitate the exchange of information between countries and invest in companies, especially start-ups and SMEs, working on innovative technologies that can help test and monitor the spread of a virus.

Strengthening democracy

Public health crises can prompt governments to adopt radical measures and speed up decision-making and policy processes. However, any emergency measure must be taken within the democratic, constitutional and legal framework and must respect fundamental rights, democratic principles and the rule of law. Sovereign parlia-

ments, whether national or European, as well as fair elections, independent courts, free press and unshackled civil society are integral elements of every democracy, and a crisis should not be used as an excuse to undermine them. Any measures adopted during a health crisis must be decided and communicated in a transparent manner, need to be proportional to the threat of the crises and should be of temporary nature.

As health emergencies can put the spotlight on some of the weaknesses of democratic systems, the pandemic can be an opportunity for the EU to rethink the mechanisms it has in place to protect the respect of the values enshrined in Article 2 of the TEU and enhance them by creating one single framework of a fully-fledged rule of law mechanism. Moreover, the EU should pursue steps towards legislation that links the EU structural funds to the compliance with the EU's founding principles.

Making citizens' voice heard

Citizens need to be involved in the responses to a health crisis, and their perspectives must be heard in debates that shape Eu-



Europe's recovery. In cases where participation of civil society in decision-making processes cannot be guaranteed, authorities should ensure engagement in different ways or postpone decisions-making processes. Moreover, the EU's budget should be adapted and made more flexible to allow civil society organisations to continue to operate during the crisis. As Europe enters the phase of recovery from the health crisis and civil society risks a delayed effect of funding cuts, the EU can strengthen support through adequate financial support via its budget.

COVID-19 leaves a void that should be filled with open and inclusive debates about the EU's future after its recovery. [The Conference on the Future of Europe](#) offers a timely opportunity for a candid dialogue with citizens, on the key issues and priorities that will shape the EU's future. By bringing together EU institutions, national governments and parliaments,

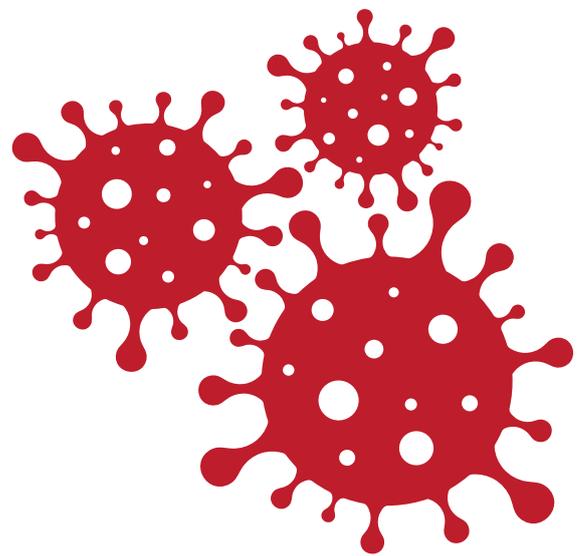
social partners and civil society organisations, Europe can develop solutions to its common challenges and emerge stronger from the crisis.

Enhancing communication

To succeed in overcoming the health and economic crises, authorities and organisations and all levels must coordinate and communicate their actions effectively, with each other and with citizens, to avoid misconceptions. Not only do unilateral, uncoordinated measures put lives at risk, they undermine the trust of citizens who are especially vulnerable during a health crisis and rely on access to accurate and unbiased information. Indeed, the communication during and after a health crisis should focus on strengthening solidarity between Member States and citizens instead of fuelling nationalist sentiments.

Support for independent media and fact-based coverage remains crucial. Together with national governments and me-

dia platforms, the EU can work towards stopping the spread of disinformation during a health crisis. Pandemics also should prompt more proactive crisis communication by the EU institutions, to help reinforce solidarity and coordination between Member States. Last but not least, in times of crises, it is especially important to connect citizens across member states and bridge the gap between civil society and institutions. Civil society can help build and strengthen these much-needed ties, allowing a more resilient and united European society to emerge from the crisis.



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