

# ARTICLE

## EUROPEAN UNION INITIATIVES TO DEAL WITH THE RISK OF A CORONAVIRUS EPIDEMIC.

European Law | 04/03/20 | Pierre Sellal

### LIFE SCIENCES & HEALTHCARE

Due to its origin, the speed of its spread, the lethal risks associated with it and its impact on the economy and mobility, the coronavirus is a challenge of European dimensions, which concerns all Member States.

However, for the most part, the policies that can be applied and the measures to be put in place to deal with it are matters within the competence of Member States and not of the European Union; this puts the latter in a delicate position when dealing with a challenge that is perceived as Europe-wide and which could have a profound effect on EU policies.

1. The aim of the first step taken by the European authorities is to gather, collate and distribute to Member States epidemiological data and all relevant information on the measures taken by national authorities.

For this purpose, a European agency, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, has opened a dedicated site accessible to all and containing constantly updated available information.

For its part, the presidency of the Council of the EU (currently held by Croatia) has decided to activate the European Union's crisis management mechanism known as the IPCR (Integrated Political Crisis Response), which is intended to support coordination between the authorities concerned at national and European level and to enable decisions to be taken rapidly when needed. This mechanism also facilitates continuous exchanges between the responsible authorities.

2. In terms of support for the research effort, the Commission has launched an exceptional call for proposals concerning the diagnosis and clinical follow-up of infected patients. Such proposals will be the subject of an accelerated procedure and the necessary funding has been set aside within the EU budget.

Health ministers discussed these initiatives at an extraordinary Council meeting in Brussels on 13 February.

3. In the context of any restrictions that might be placed on the movement of people in order to stop the spread of the virus, the question of controls at the internal and external borders of the European Union, and even their closure, was discussed.

As was recalled by the Commission, measures to confine individuals or to restrict movement are matters within the sole competence of Member States. It is recognised that in emergencies and situations of proven necessity, States have the possibility of re-establishing controls at borders inside the Schengen Area; however, to date, no State has taken any initiative in this direction.

4. An assessment of the economic consequences of the health crisis is being conducted simultaneously by the European Central Bank, the Commission and Council bodies. They all agree that it will have an impact, though currently its scale and duration cannot be anticipated. Economics and Finance Ministers will hold consultations on 4 March.

The Commissioner for Economic Affairs has indicated that *"if necessary, the EU is ready to use all available policy tools to protect business and growth"*.

In this context, in certain quarters, particularly in Italy, the possibility has been discussed of relaxing European budgetary rules to take account both of the recessionary impact of the crisis and of the additional expenditure that it might require, and the Commission has indicated that expenditure associated with combating the epidemic might benefit from the flexibility provided by the stability pact, while noting that as yet, it has not received any requests to this effect from any State.

### UPDATE - 06/03/2020

#### Initiatives and actions undertaken by the European Union.

##### 1. Coordination of measures taken at national level by the Member States and summary of available information.

- A conference call is held daily between the Health Ministers and Ministers of Internal Affairs of the 27 EU Member States, with the relevant members of the European Commission.

- The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) ensures a regular compilation of available data on the epidemic and its spread.





- Launch of an inventory of available protective equipment and breathing and respiratory devices, and the production capacity of such equipment.

- Two neighbouring States, Austria (except for travellers from Italy with a health certificate of non-contamination) and Slovenia, closed their borders to people coming from Italy.

## **2. Research.**

- Funding for research into vaccines, diagnosis and treatment has been increased to €140 million (public and private funds).

## **3. Economic situation.**

- The European Commission will ensure that state aid can be provided by governments to companies that need it, implicitly by applying the Treaty rules in this respect in an appropriate manner.

- Similarly, the "flexibility" provided for under the Stability and Growth Pact may be leveraged so as not to constrain States' budgetary intervention capacity.

- A "Corona Response Investment Initiative" has been announced by the European Commission. It is intended to rapidly mobilise an investment capacity of €25 billion for the benefit of health care systems, SMEs, labour markets and "other vulnerable components" of the economy, with the aim of making this funding available very quickly.

## **4. Sector-specific measures.**

- Announcement by the European Commission of a relaxation of the rules on the obligation for airlines to make effective use of the slots allocated to them at European airports.

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