Welcome to the NAT bulletin!

These are challenging times. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has severely disrupted the way we live, work and communicate. Thousands of people have lost their lives. Regardless of this hardship we still think that it is very important to stay in touch, discuss the relevant topics of the day and give you feedback on what we are working on. Below you can find some of the main things that have been keeping us busy. Do not hesitate to contact us at nat@cor.europa.eu and share with us news, your ideas or any information you might consider relevant. And most importantly, stay safe!

Ulrika Landergren (SE/RE), NAT Commission Chair

COVID-19: CoR President calls for EU Health Emergency Mechanism

In a statement published on 20 March 202, the President of the European Committee of the Regions requested the creation of an EU Health Emergency Mechanism:

"The efforts put in place by the European Commission and by the Council of the EU are heading in the right direction...I believe that the EU must go further by launching an EU Health Emergency Mechanism aimed at better supporting the thousands of regional and local leaders who are struggling to provide health services locally.

The Health Mechanism should help cities and regions across Europe to urgently hire additional medical staff, buy more medical devices, support intensive care services, and provide sanitation tools and material to hospitals and schools"


COVID-19 – CoR launches five-points Action plan, exchange platform

In the framework of the current crisis, the CoR is ready to assist, inform, engage and represent regions and cities across Europe. In operational and concrete terms, the CoR Action Plan will:

1) call for an EU Health Emergency Mechanism;
2) create a cooperation platform between cities and regions across EU;
3) provide, through CoR mechanisms, concrete feedback from the local and regional angle on how to address the health, social and economic aspects of the pandemic and their impact on the people and their local communities;
4) provide regular, practical information to local and regional authorities on 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 from Members to improve EU policies based on the experiences of the local and regional level (policy health check).


COVID-19 Exchange Platform:
Taking into consideration the need of cooperation and mutual assistance, CoR has launched a supporting online platform for local and regional authorities in this crisis situation. Beside the list of Member States’ contact points, the platform also offers a possibility to exchange best practices and agree on concrete steps in fighting COVID-19. Moreover, due to this instrument, local and regional leaders can inform not only about their successes but also the challenges they are facing and the help they might need during these hostile times.


EU support for hard-hit fisheries sector
Fishing and aquaculture have been among the sectors hit hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic. The demand for seafood is experiencing a dramatic downturn, as retailers, restaurants, canteens and other large-scale buyers are reducing or temporarily closing down their activities. The European Commission has therefore decided to revise EU state aid rules, which allow Member States to provide temporary relief to economic operators hit by the crisis. The new rules include a large increase of the maximum amount of de minimis aid per undertaking, from currently € 30,000 to € 120,000. The impact of these measures on coastal areas goes well beyond the fisheries and aquaculture sectors. Also companies in the wider blue economy – from biotech to tourism – will benefit. Virginijus Sinkevičius, European Commissioner for Environment, Oceans and Fisheries, said: “Our fishermen and women and our aquaculture farmers are among the first to suffer the economic consequences of COVID-19, as the
demand for seafood has experienced a dramatic slump. But let me say it loud and clear: the European
Union stands with you through this crisis. Together, we will ensure that the EU maintains a strong
seafood industry and thriving coastal communities, now and in the future.”


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**EU helps to secure medical and protective equipment**

Personal protective equipment – **masks, gloves, goggles, face-shields, and overalls** – as well as medical **ventilators** and **testing kits** are vital for hospitals, healthcare professionals, patients, field workers and civil protection authorities. To buy such equipment rapidly and at reasonable cost, the Commission launched four different calls for tender: (1) gloves and surgical gowns, (2) masks, goggles, face-shields; (3) medical ventilators and respiratory equipment and (4) laboratory equipment, including testing kits. All interested Member States were able to take part and contracts should be signed in the coming weeks. The equipment should then be available in the Member States without delay.

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**Boosting EU production capacities**

Manufacturers in Europe must massively increase their overall production of personal protective equipment. To make their efforts possible, the Commission and the European Standardisation Organisations agreed that **all the relevant European harmonised standards will exceptionally be made freely and fully available** for all interested companies. This action will help to manufacture these items without compromising on our health and safety standards and without undue delays.


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**Export authorisations**

Reacting to the restriction on exports of personal protective equipment, the Commission issued guidance on how to implement these measures. As a result, almost all Member States have lifted by now national export restrictions and the **protective equipment can be delivered seamlessly across the Union** to where it is most needed.


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**One for all, all for one**
This week, Germany has been taking seriously ill COVID-19 patients from France and Italy for treatment in its hospitals in North-Rhine Westphalia and Baden-Württemberg. France and Germany combined sent to Italy more masks and protective gear than China; Austria is sending another 1.6 million masks as we type. (Source infographic: European Commission)
Transfer of doctors

Meanwhile, the Commission together with Ministries of Health is working on a proposal for the EU wide support in terms of transfer of health professionals from countries with less immediate intensive care burden to countries where needs were more acute. This could complement the already undertaken cross-border coordination of patients (see above) and also provide training for health care professions of other countries, in case of further strain in other national contexts at a later stage. National governments should now inform about their needs and agree to go forward with such a proposal.


Wider scope for the Solidarity Fund

As part of the European coordinated response to the current COVID-19 pandemic, the European Commission has proposed to broaden the scope of the EU Solidarity Fund to include major public health crises in view of mobilising it if needed for the hardest hit Member States. Currently, the EU Solidarity Fund is an essential support instrument for responding to major natural disasters.

In 2020, the hardest hit member states should get access to financial support of up to €800 million in 2020 – decided on a case-by-case basis.


rescEU medical stockpile – EU solidarity in action

The European Commission has decided to create a strategic rescEU stockpile of medical equipment such as ventilators and protective masks but also vaccines and laboratory supplies to help EU countries in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (rescEU is part of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism which strengthens cooperation between Participating States in the field of civil protection, with a view to improving prevention, preparedness and response to disasters).

Commissioner for Crisis Management, Mr. Janez Lenarčič said: "The EU is taking action to get more equipment to Member States. We are setting up a rescEU stockpile to rapidly get the supplies needed to fight the coronavirus. It will be used to support Member States facing shortages of equipment needed to treat infected patients, protect health care workers and help slow the spread of the virus. Our plan is to move ahead without delay."