



Welcome to the NAT bulletin!

With an end of the current COVID-19 crisis still out of sight, all of us are trying to find solutions for daily problems and for the future after coronavirus. On 2 April the European Commission proposed a legislative package of initiatives targeting key areas in need of urgent attention. European Parliament's Committees will convene via teleconference, and the European Committee of the Regions is also looking into the possibilities to forward to the legislator its policy recommendations, not an easy task under the current circumstances. In this bulletin we have summarized some other key news from the last days. Please reach out to us via nat@cor.europa.eu and send us your proposals and ideas. And most importantly, stay safe!

Ulrika Landergren (SE/RE), NAT Commission Chair

HELPING MEMBER STATES HEALTH SYSTEMS DIRECTLY

Last week, the Commission came forward with the proposal for a COUNCIL REGULATION that would give the Union the possibility to "activate the emergency assistance support " for the period of 2 years, starting retroactively on 1 February 2020. If approved by the European Parliament and the Member States in Council, this "state of emergency" will allow the Commission to:

1. stock-pile faster and coordinate essential resource distribution across Europe;
2. transport protective gear imported from international partners across the EU;
3. transport patients in need to cross-border hospitals which can offer free capacity;
4. boost cross-border cooperation to alleviate the pressure on health systems in the most affected EU regions;
5. procure centrally and distribute essential medical supplies to hospitals (respirators, ventilators, personal protective equipment, reusable masks, medicines, therapeutics and laboratory supplies and disinfectants)
6. increase and convert production capacities of EU enterprises to address supplies shortages of essential products and medicines;
7. set up temporary and semi-permanent field hospitals and provide support for reconverted facilities;
8. increase production of testing kits and support for acquiring key basic substances;
9. boost swift development of medication and testing methods;
10. develop, buy and distribute testing supplies (testing kits, reagents, hardware).

On the money side, there are initially €2.7 billion proposed for 2020 to support the financing of actions envisaged under this Emergency Support Instrument (plus 300 million for RescEU). "Additional contributions will be possible from Member States and also individuals, foundations and even crowd funding".

As the Chair of this commission, I am personally delighted to note how many of our "main political recommendations" defined in the NAT Outline Roadmap are reflected in the proposal for his new law. These include our calls to:

- strengthen the Emergency and Disaster response capacities of the EU
- Establish an EU medical stockpiling
- Set-up an EU-wide "State of Emergency"
- Create a special fast-lane procedure for joint procurement
- Strengthen EU cooperation in the field of developing, producing and distributing vaccines
- Work towards Europe is self-sufficient in the production of essential medical supplies
- support R&D efforts to complement public and private medical research to fight Covid19
- improve EU coordination on medicine shortages
- boost the mutual assistance and cooperation on cross-border healthcare

It is very reassuring to see that our thinking is so much aligned with the Commission's proposal – however, what is still missing is the local and regional dimension. We will need to address this shortcoming politically later in our opinion.

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_20_577

Guidelines: EU Emergency Assistance in Cross-Border Cooperation in Healthcare

On 04 April 2020, the European Commission published Guidelines clarifying the existing rules on cross-border healthcare cooperation. The biggest and most interesting adjustment the question of reimbursement of patients treated under the Cross-Border Healthcare Directive for COVID-19 in another Member State. Normally, any patients wishing to access hospital care (involving an overnight stay) in another country must first receive a so-called "prior authorisation" from their health insurer – a sort of a permit or reassurance paper that he or she will indeed be reimbursed (and how much) to this treatment. Such a procedure, judged too lengthy and impractical during the pandemic, the Commission encourages the Member States to be more pragmatic and simply use a blanket prior authorisation covering any patient that "carries a document attesting that s/he is covered at the time of hospital admission or any other practical arrangements that the Member States involved may agree upon".

Another interesting bit: patients treated abroad would not have to pay upfront, but the foreign hospital would bill the health insurer directly, just as if care was accessed under the Social Protection Regulation (i.e. the European Health Insurance Card).

Finally, the Guidelines also call for more cooperation between border regions and encourage the Member States to recognise health professional qualifications more broadly so that healthcare workers could be deployed where it is most needed. "

Link to PRESS RELEASE: <https://cor.europa.eu/en/news/Pages/COVID-19-CoR-President-calls-for-a-EU-Health-Emergency-Mechanism-to-support-regions-and-cities.aspx>

Situation on the EU Agricultural markets

Due to the coronavirus crisis, the EU agricultural markets are experiencing problems with transports, labour shortage the closure of restaurant markets across the continent and the change in the purchasing behaviours of consumers.

During winter and spring, some Member States rely heavily on the imports for their provision of fresh vegetables and fruits. Under current circumstances, the traffic of fresh food can be delayed or disrupted. Other Member States with largely export oriented agro-food sector has also been negatively affected by the disruption of food sales caused by the pandemic.

European Commission recalled that any national prohibition on circulation of goods have to be removed. To protect EU food supply chains, the Commission established transport green lanes for agricultural and other essential products so.as to make sure that the circulation of these goods is facilitated within the EU. Commission's guidance document for border management aims at keeping procedures at green lane border crossings to what is strictly necessary.

Moreover, to pick up fresh vegetables and fruits this spring and thus avoid shortages, the EU urgently needs seasonal workers. European Commission prepared guidelines to allow seasonal workers to cross the borders. Other exceptional measures are currently on the table to lessen the impact of the current crisis on the agricultural markets.

Link to PRESS RELEASE: Coronavirus - EC Practical guidance on continuous flow of goods:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_510

Link to PRESS RELEASE Coronavirus: EC practical guidance on free movement of critical workers:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_545

Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative Plus

The EU's executive announced the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative Plus (CRII+) package on April 2, which includes a number of measures aimed at alleviating the difficult situation facing farmers. The measures proposed includes : flexibility in the use of financial instruments, possibility to use the Rural development policy to invest in medical facilities and small-scale infrastructure in rural areas, possibility to reallocate money left unused under their Rural Development Programmes (RDP), possibility to amend ESI Funds' Partnership Agreements concluded for the 2014-2020 budgeting period to modify their RDP, postponement of the deadline for the sending of the RDP Annual Implementation Report and of the CAP payment applications, advances of direct payments and rural development payments increase and reduction of physical on-the-spot checks and give more leeway for timing requirements.

Members States fear that it would not be sufficient and calls for private storage aid and also for market interventions in which the EU steps up to buy stocks of certain food products when their market price falls too far or too steeply call.

Link to PRESS RELEASE Coronavirus : Questions and answers on the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative Plus: New actions to mobilise essential investments and resources:
https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_20_574

€3 billion via the Emergency Support Instrument

On the 2nd of April, the Commission published a new package of measures proposing to redirect all available remaining funds from this year's EU budget to help respond to the COVID-19 crisis.

From the announced €3 billion to ramp up direct support to healthcare systems in the Member States, €300 million will go to RescEU to support the common stockpile of equipment. The focus will be on managing the public health crisis and securing vital equipment and supplies, from ventilators to personal protective gear, from mobile medical teams to medical assistance for the most vulnerable, including those in refugee camps, as well as on the efforts to scale up testing and enabling the Commission to procure directly on behalf of the Member States.

Link to PRESS RELEASE: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_582

COVID-19 Exchange Platform – Examples and Practices from the Regions

The COVID-19 exchange platform for local and regional authorities has been active for a while now on <https://cor.europa.eu/en/engage/Pages/COVID19-exchangeplatform.aspx>, and we have received a lot of contributions via the e-mail address covid19@cor.europa.eu. The CoR is sharing those stories from all around Europe on the webpage and via social media (https://twitter.com/EU_CoR and <https://www.facebook.com/European.Committee.of.the.Regions/>) You can find summaries from members and partners, links to specialized websites with situation updates from international organisations and national authorities. The page is evolving daily and includes specialised thematic bulletins, so please check regularly for updates or send us your stories via covid19@cor.europa.eu. We welcome your personal experiences, ideas, proposals, video messages, and we ask you to share your needs and requests that to be addressed at EU level and give us feedback on the EU response. Messages, updates, documents and other resources will be continuously published on the exchange platform.