



**European Committee
of the Regions**

SEDEC Bulletin N°1

COVID-19 impact and response measures

02 April 2020



The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically affected our world and our way of living with the loss of thousands of lives and unprecedented consequences on every aspect of our daily existence. The Commission for Social Policy, Education, Employment, Research and Culture (SEDEC) at the European Committee of the Regions will prepare regular bulletins on the policy fields within its remit reflecting recent research, articles and discussions on the socio-economic impact of the pandemic in Europe and on the different actions and response measures planned and implemented at EU, national, regional and local level.



'Responding to the CoR Action Plan of 24 March, I am proud to launch our SEDEC bulletin on the consequences of COVID-19 for our European social systems and our economies, and the relevant response measures.

On Thursday 26 March, the members of the European Council stated that they would do everything necessary to meet the COVID-19 challenge in a spirit of solidarity. They also stated that the crisis would require a coordinated exit strategy and a comprehensive recovery plan and unprecedented investment. I sincerely hope that a suitable agreement, commensurate with the challenge, will be reached without further delay.

Europe must prove to its citizens that it can protect them and that solidarity is not an empty word in practice. It is imperative to protect everyone by any means necessary including essential workers and vulnerable population groups, from this unprecedented threat. From our perspective as local and regional authorities, any strategy, to be successful, has to be coordinated and involve all levels of government. Regions and cities in particular, which are confronted with the virus head-on, will have to be given the means to cope with the pandemic and to build up resilience, while being key drivers of the recovery action plan.

But first of all, my thoughts and praise go to all those who are on the frontline combating the pandemic. I wish to express my sincere gratitude to our public services, particularly across health services, regional and local authority services, government departments and local media for your exemplary levels of commitment, and for playing your part in protecting us from this virus. Let me also thank each one of you for the personal sacrifices you have all made during this time of crisis, and wish you the strength to persevere with responsible civic behaviour that is required. I also firmly believe that, in this borderless fight against COVID-19, we should all remain united: by working together and helping each other, we will prove our resilience and emerge stronger. Stay strong, stay healthy and be prepared!'

--- Anne Karjalainen (FI/PES), Member of Kerava City Council, Chair of the SEDEC commission



**European Committee
of the Regions**

SEDEC Bulletin N°1

COVID-19 impact and response measures

02 April 2020



Social policy and employment

On 19 March 2020, the European Commission adopted a [Temporary Framework](#) to enable the Member States to use the full flexibility provided for under State aid rules to support the economy in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak. This framework is based on Article 107(3)(b) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, which refers to remedying a serious disturbance across the EU economy. The aim is to ensure that businesses have the liquidity to keep operating, or to put a temporary freeze on their activities, if need be, and that support for businesses in one Member State does not undermine the European single market. Several Member States have announced support measures for citizens or companies. ([link](#) and [link](#)). On 30 March, the Commission issued practical guidance on ensuring the free movement of critical workers ([link](#)).

Additionally, the Commission has launched a proposal for a Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative. This will be directed at: healthcare systems, SMEs, labour markets, and other vulnerable parts of our economies. In order to quickly direct EUR 25 billion of European public investment to deal with the fallout from the coronavirus crisis, the Commission will propose to relinquish this year its obligation to request refunding of unspent pre-financing for European structural and investment funds currently held by Member States.

The Member States will be required to use these amounts to speed up their investments under the Structural Funds. They will use this for the national co-financing they would normally have had to provide themselves in order to receive the next tranches of their structural fund envelopes. In view of the average co-financing rates across Member States, the EUR 7.5 billion will be able to trigger the release and use of some EUR 17.5 - 18 billion of structural funding across the EU. After this proposal is adopted, the national operational programmes would be adapted, where necessary, to channel the funding towards areas such as short-term work measures, the health sector, labour market measures, and sectors particularly affected in the current circumstances.

The European social partners have also been active during this crisis. You can find a joint statement concerning the pandemic from several social partners ([link](#)); furthermore, ETUC has made a declaration on the topic ([link](#)).



European Committee
of the Regions

SEDEC Bulletin N°1

COVID-19 impact and response measures

02 April 2020



❖ Responses at regional and local level

Cyprus

Tax reductions, extensions and other measures have been approved by the Cypriot government in order to tackle the pandemic fallout. The problems that the government is aiming to address can be divided into two main groups – those concerning citizens as private individuals and those impacting businesses. With citizens forced to stay at home many of them have lost their capacity to generate income, and thus they are at an increased risk of falling behind on bills or other vital payments. Meanwhile, businesses are being hit hard by the lack of trade and production and are thus faced with tough choices in terms of layoffs and other drastic measures ([link](#)).

Riga (Latvia)

Riga City Council and local hotel chains are providing rooms for self-isolation. Hotel chains can apply to the city's welfare department in order to be allowed to serve those in need of lodgings for self-isolation ([link](#)).

Barcelona (Spain)

Barcelona is providing municipal support to service providers to protect jobs during COVID-19. All contracts relating to essential services and those which can be provided remotely under the same conditions are to be maintained. The rest of the contracts will remain valid, even though their execution is being totally or partially suspended. ([link](#)).

Policy responses from a research and innovation point of view

30 March: European Open Science Cloud offers EUR 45K grants for COVID-19 projects

The European Open Science Cloud (EOSC) has launched a fast-track call for projects that use its resources and open and trusted environment for data sharing, to respond to the COVID-19 emergency. This will include projects that open up scientific data on the virus; share live on-the-ground data on the spread of the virus; work on the development of software, standards and processes for monitoring COVID-19 treatments; and access and combine data to help control COVID-19 and learn how to deal with similar viruses and future outbreaks. The EOSC says it will evaluate applications weekly, promising a swift response.



**European Committee
of the Regions**

SEDEC Bulletin N°1

COVID-19 impact and response measures

02 April 2020



27 March: PRACE opens up supercomputers for COVID-19 research

The EU-backed Partnership for Advanced Computing in Europe (PRACE) has launched a fast track call for proposals from academic and industry researchers needing access to high performance computing resources to model COVID-19 and its impact. The scope includes mapping the spread of the coronavirus, tracking mutations and the evolution of the virus, developing therapeutics and vaccines, studying infection mechanisms and analysing the impact of the pandemic. Computing resources are available in France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Switzerland. PRACE says there will be a fast-track review process, with applications reviewed within a week, to provide swift feedback to applicants.

26 March: Countries link up to coordinate COVID-19 research

European Commissioner for Youth and Innovation, Mariya Gabriel and science ministers from 14 countries linked up in a conference call to exchange information on ongoing scientific projects on COVID-19. Countries on the call included Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, India, Italy, Spain, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Portugal, Singapore and the UK.

The 14 countries have signed a declaration to open up access to all the information published on the coronavirus. Participants also agreed on the urgent need to increase global production of protective equipment, respirators and diagnostic tests. In a discussion between Australia and Spain, the two countries considered the possibility of circumventing patents to accelerate licensing processes and the transfer of technology, so as to quickly manufacture certain products worldwide.

[Commissioner vows ‘hundreds of millions’ for coronavirus R&D and calls for swift deal on EU budget](#)
Further delays to EU multiannual budget would slow down research to deal with coronavirus pandemic, EU Research Commissioner says.

The EU Research Commissioner has pledged hundreds of millions of euros for coronavirus R&D, but called on Member States to agree on the Commission’s long-term budget to avoid delaying critical research. In a [written interview](#) with Science|Business, Mariya Gabriel said research and innovation are “critical to tackle this global crisis” and the commission is “mobilising hundreds of millions of euro for research projects.”

[Commission announces winners of its first coronavirus research call](#)

Two of 17 projects selected by the European Commission in its first research call to tackle COVID-19 are developing vaccines against the disease. The two vaccine projects are led by researchers at Karolinska Institutet, Sweden’s top medical university and AdaptVac, a Danish biotech start-up. A total of 89 partners from across Europe are involved in the projects announced by the commission([link](#)).



European Committee
of the Regions

SEDEC Bulletin N°1

COVID-19 impact and response measures

02 April 2020



❖ Responses at regional and local level

[Three Flemish companies launch an application to stem the COVID-19 pandemic](#)

A joint venture involving three Flemish technology companies has developed an application to curb the spread of the new coronavirus "faster and more efficiently". Entitled "Flattening The Curve", and available free from next week, the application will warn users of places where there are high levels of infection and encourage them to see a doctor if and when any symptoms of COVID-19 disease appear. [Read more](#) (in French)

[Antwerp – challenge for digital solutions](#)

Antwerp has made EUR 250 000 available for innovative, quickly implementable solutions from start-ups and companies that can arm citizens and companies against the impact of the COVID-19 virus and make life possible in lockdown mode. The city launched [a call](#) that welcomes (digital) solutions in areas such as welfare, healthcare, childcare, poverty reduction, working from home, communication and participation and more. Read more (in Dutch) [here](#).

[The Hague gives laptops to families with minimum income](#)

In order to allow every child to study during the lockdown, The Hague, together with Rabobank, will be distributing 330 laptops to families with a low income. The measure aims to enable every kid living in the city to access online classes during the coronavirus-caused lockdown.

[Estonia moves fast to get funding to COVID-19 solutions](#)

Country famed for cultivating a lively digital start-up scene sets up hackathon competition in hours and awards EUR 5K grants in three days: Last Friday, Estonia's minister for foreign trade and information technology, Kaimar Karu, said he wanted "outside of the box ideas" to tackle the coronavirus crisis.

A few hours later, an online hackathon was drawing on the thoughts of over one thousand researchers and entrepreneurs. By Monday, the five best submissions were awarded EUR 5 000 grants to develop their proposals.

Education and Youth, Culture and Sport

The outbreak of COVID-19 and necessary national measures taken to tackle the spread of the virus may cause significant disruption to the provision of **education, training and mobility** opportunities for learners, teachers and educators across the European Union (EU). Alternative methods have been put



**European Committee
of the Regions**

SEDEC Bulletin N°1

COVID-19 impact and response measures

02 April 2020



in place so that students can continue studying at home: online learning platforms, TV programmes, the use of social media etc.

The European Commission has made available [online learning resources](#) where one can discover a selection of resources and tools for learners, teachers and educators during the outbreak of COVID-19. There are several **online platforms for teachers and educators**:

- [School Education Gateway](#) available in 23 European languages.
- [eTwinning](#): a collaborative European platform for teachers available in 30 languages.
- [Learning Corner](#): teaching materials, including online games, to help discover the EU.
- [SALTO-YOUTH](#): an online catalogue of training tools promoting and supporting youth work.
- [Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe \(EPALE\)](#)
- [Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange](#): online virtual exchange opportunities for young people across Europe and the South Mediterranean.
- [European Institute of Innovation and Technology \(EIT\)](#)
- ['Yummy Physics'](#): video series produced under the “Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions” programme.

The COVID-19 outbreak is negatively affecting the carrying out of the many activities, which are ongoing or were planned, under the **Erasmus+** programme and **European Solidarity Corps**. The European Commission has published a [COVID-19 factsheet](#) that gives essential practical advice to participants in Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps mobility activities in the light of the COVID-19 outbreak.

The European Commission is also planning two important initiatives in this policy field, particularly relevant under the current conditions:

- **Updated Skills Agenda for Europe** (6 May)
- **Digital Education Action Plan** – update (24 June)

[Learning City Webinar Series 2020, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning \(UIL\)](#)

In March, webinars were held by UIL for cities to share and learn about measures taken at different stages of the emergence of COVID-19. Lessons learned and insights from their experiences were shared by participants from Beijing, Shanghai (China), Fermo (Italy), Kashan (Iran), etc.



European Committee
of the Regions

SEDEC Bulletin N°1

COVID-19 impact and response measures

02 April 2020



The **UNESCO** International Research and Training Centre for Rural Education (UNESCO INRULED) and the Smart Learning Institute of Beijing Normal University (SLIBNU) released a special publication entitled "[Handbook on Facilitating Flexible Learning During Educational Disruption](#): The Chinese Experience in Maintaining Undisrupted Learning in COVID-19 Outbreak". As UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay said: *"We are entering uncharted territory and working with countries to find hi-tech, low-tech and no-tech solutions to ensure the continuity of learning."*

UNESCO is also proposing:

- [National learning platforms and tools](#) – a selection of national distance education platforms
- [Distance learning solutions](#) - educational applications, platforms and resources to help parents, teachers, schools and school administrators facilitate student learning and provide social care and interaction during periods of school closure.

The coronavirus outbreak has had a significant impact on the **cultural and creative sector**, artists and their audiences alike. Many activities under the Creative Europe programme cannot now take place as planned due to the measures imposed to contain the spread of the virus.

The European Commission has launched [#CreativeEuropeAtHome](#) – a social media campaign that is running on Creative Europe accounts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. With this initiative, the European Commission is crowd-sourcing the effort to highlight great online cultural activities throughout the Creative Europe community – available to culture-lovers currently stuck at home.

Mariya Gabriel, European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture and Youth, said *"In these difficult times we need culture, creativity and solidarity more than ever! Therefore, together with Commissioner Breton, I'm glad to launch #CreativeEuropeAtHome. With this initiative, we aim to show and make accessible the rich and diverse online offer of our Creative Europe community. We might be confined to our homes for the moment but that shouldn't stop us from enjoying the beauty of art and culture, make new discoveries and share experiences. We are all in this together!"*

❖ Responses at regional and local level

Education and Youth

Turin

'[Fondazione per la Scuola](#)' (Foundation for the School): this initiative aims to provide schools with greater internet bandwidth, as well as organise webinars to help teachers with online learning. The [Torino City Love](#) project in collaboration with local companies offers free resources and skills programmes.



**European Committee
of the Regions**

SEDEC Bulletin N°1

COVID-19 impact and response measures

02 April 2020



Tallinn

Librarians from [Tallinn Central Library](#) are reading books via Skype or phone for children staying at home.

Düsseldorf

The city has launched a [new e-learning platform](#) which enables teachers to provide their pupils with learning material and online classes.

Brussels

Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) has compiled a [list of online resources for school children](#) aged from 6 to 18 years old. Resources relate to formal education, information on Covid-19 and fun activities. ULB also organised a [webinar](#) for university teaching staff aimed at sharing best online teaching practices.

Stockholm

[Stockholm University](#) has compiled tips and online tools on the best ways of teaching, studying and working online.

Culture and Creative Sectors

Murcia

Over 30 000 people joined weekend [online cultural activities](#) organised by the city, including theatre, dance, shows for children and recipes with the most famous local chefs.

Madrid

Madrid City Council's Youth Department is proposing [over 40 digital leisure activities](#) for young people. The activities cover a range of topics such as art, health, sport, solidarity, legal aid, science and technology.

Helsinki

Helsinki is offering [express funding](#) for culture, sport and youth work affected by coronavirus cancellations. Helsinki has also put measures in place to limit the financial damage to CCSs.

Grenoble

Grenoble has started a [digital festival](#) in which sport, cooking lessons, cinema sessions, and more, are being shared with local residents.

Munich

[Kreative Deutschland](#), in partnership with the Team of Excellence for the Cultural and Creative Industries of the City of Munich and others, have launched a campaign called "[Don't stop creativity](#)" to share info about funding opportunities as well as inspirational ideas.



European Committee
of the Regions

SEDEC Bulletin N°1

COVID-19 impact and response measures

02 April 2020



Sport

Stuttgart

Sports clubs in Stuttgart are offering daily sport sessions online. The **programme** includes fitness, yoga, aerobics and Zumba, and is available on the city's [Facebook page](#) and on YouTube.

Espoo

[Espoo](#) is offering a wide variety of training options for the general public and simple everyday exercises for seniors.

Madrid

The municipal council of [Madrid](#) has launched a YouTube channel to stream live sessions, exercise programmes and recommendations for staying active during confinement.

Audio-visual and Artificial Intelligence and its applications

Artificial Intelligence

AI applications can deliver medical supplies by drone, disinfect patient rooms and scan approved databases of drugs (for other illnesses) that might also work against COVID-19.

The European Commission has launched an initiative to collect ideas about deployable Artificial Intelligence (AI) and robotics solutions and on other initiatives that could help deal with the ongoing COVID-19 crisis.

<https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/join-ai-robotics-vs-covid-19-initiative-european-ai-alliance>

Comparing the location history of infected individuals with the location history of all other smartphone users (tested positive or not yet tested) could help health authorities gain a much better understanding of where the transmission might have occurred, and who else should be tested urgently. However, European Commission vice-president Margrethe Vestager has stated that privacy should not be undermined as governments seek to use data to fight the coronavirus pandemic.

<https://www.politico.eu/pro/vestager-urges-balance-in-data-use-during-coronavirus-crisis/>

The CoR would welcome information about any best practice among local and regional authorities in Europe which has harnessed artificial intelligence for fighting the COVID-19 pandemic.



European Committee
of the Regions

SEDEC Bulletin N°1

COVID-19 impact and response measures

02 April 2020



❖ Responses at regional and local level

The audio-visual sector

Following contacts between the EU Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton and the top management of major global internet platforms, Netflix, Google, Facebook and others agreed last week to reduce the quality of their videos as a precaution for avoiding internet congestion in Europe. Network breakdown could be a major problem in a situation when many people are working from home via the internet. Moreover, it has been reported that Facebook would share anonymised metadata with the European Commission to predict peaks of the pandemic.

<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/25/eu-industry-chief-coronavirus-crisis-could-be-turning-point-for-big-tech-149755>

In addition to the possibilities offered by audiovisual media technologies for remote work and conferences, audiovisual media can play an important local and regional role in public awareness raising regarding the current pandemic, transmitting the messages of the authorities and informing citizens about the local situation and preparedness. Audio-visual media provide opportunities for local leaders to show exemplary preventive behaviour and explain it to the public.

Estonia

The Estonian government is using a chatbot called Suve to answer the many questions its citizens have about Covid-19. It was developed by local start-ups. The chatbot will help to relieve pressure on call centres and stop fake news spreading.

<https://www.computerweekly.com/news/252480586/Coronavirus-chatbot-to-help-Estonians-cope-during-pandemic>

Additional useful links

EC: https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response_en

JRC (ScienceHub): <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en>

European Parliamentary Research Service - Coronavirus - Impact and reaction (26 March 2020): [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/649349/EPRS_BRI\(2020\)649349_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/649349/EPRS_BRI(2020)649349_EN.pdf)

EU local news: <https://www.themayor.eu/en>

EPRS and other EP publications: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/home.html>

See also <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/priorities/eu-response-to-coronavirus>



**European Committee
of the Regions**

SEDEC Bulletin N°1

COVID-19 impact and response measures

02 April 2020



ESPON programme: <https://www.espon.eu/collecting-experiences-and-evidence-local-and-regional-responses-covid19>

Eurocities: <https://covidnews.eurocities.eu/>

CEMR: <https://www.ccre.org/en/actualites/view/3994>

OECD New Digital hub for Covid19: <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/en/>

ERRIN news: <https://errin.eu/news> (RI mostly/regional focus)

EARTO news: <https://www.earto.eu/news/> (RI mostly)

EUA (European University Association): <https://eua.eu/news/>

Vanguard Initiative: <https://www.s3vanguardinitiative.eu/news>

Lisbon Council: <https://lisboncouncil.net/news-a-events.html> (Digital/AI/Social/RI)