SEDEC Bulletin N°6

COVID-19 impact and response measures

24 July 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 for every aspect of our daily existence. The Commission for Social Policy, Education, Employment, Research and Culture (SEDEC) at the European Committee of the Regions is preparing regular bulletins on the policy fields within its remits, reflecting recent research, articles and discussions on the socio-economic impact of the pandemic in Europe and on the different actions and response measures being planned and implemented at EU, national, regional and local level.

Anne Karjalainen (FI/PES), Chair of the SEDEC commission

In order to adapt to the current COVID-19 situation, our **SEDEC Commission meeting** on 9 July 2020 took place in hybrid mode, as a videoconference with participants both onsite and remote.

European Commissioner for Social Rights and Jobs Nicolas Schmit, who attended the meeting, pointed out that as a result of the pandemic, poverty and inequalities were on the rise. He went on to stress that, in the current circumstances, which are putting the Single Market to the test, European solidarity and active subsidiarity are needed more than ever: "*It is in the EU's regions where the action really happens. It is in the regions where our policies are implemented. And it is in the regions that our European Social Fund becomes a reality on the ground. Let's work together to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights and to use it as our compass in recovering from the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.*" He also promised the Commission would look into the "unacceptable situations" affecting seasonal workers across the EU.

In the debate, SEDEC members highlighted the fact that the EU's recovery efforts after the COVID-19 pandemic must have a strong social dimension in order to maintain social security networks, safeguard workers' jobs and avoid wrongful dismissals. **Anne Karjalainen**, Chair of the SEDEC Commission and rapporteur of the CoR opinion on **A Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions**, said: "*The COVID-19 pandemic is leaving a trail of deep social and economic damage across the EU, but it must not be used as a pretext for postponing or withdrawing social policy proposals. The green and digital transitions must be based on social justice, equality and environmental sustainability. In times of hardship, like those we are living in, we all look to the European Union for protection. Let's hope that Member States will now live up to our expectations and come to a swift agreement on the EU's future budget, which must be commensurate to the major recovery challenge at hand. This is essential for a strong Social Europe that leaves no people and no places behind, and for cities and regions that are fully empowered to take forward just transitions.*"

The opinion also highlights the importance of up-to-date skills and lifelong learning and suggests increasing funding for the Youth Guarantee, making it permanent and extending the age limit to 30. SEDEC members welcomed the Commission's recent proposals for a new **European Skills Agenda** and **Youth Employment Support** and appointed **Csaba Borboly** (RO/EPP, President of

Harghita County Council) and **Romy Karier** (LU/EPP, Member of Clervaux municipal council) respectively as CoR rapporteurs for these topics. It was also proposed drafting two own-initiative opinions on a **Future plan for care workers and care services** (rapporteur **Christian Illedits**, AT/PES, Member of the State Government of Burgenland) and on the **Restart of cultural and creative sectors** (rapporteur **Giuseppe Varacalli**, IT/Renew Europe, Member of Gerace Municipal Council).

Members also pointed out that workers in employment sectors particularly exposed to the risks of the COVID-19 pandemic needed stronger social protection, safer working conditions and better remuneration. As most workers in these sectors are women, the impact of the pandemic should also be addressed in the **EU's Gender Equality Strategy**, subject of the draft **opinion** presented by **Concha Andreu** (ES/PES), President of La Rioja region.

The SEDEC Commission also adopted the following two opinions at Thursday's meeting:

- **White Paper on Artificial Intelligence – A European approach to excellence and trust** – rapporteur **Guido Rink** (NL/PES), Alderman of the municipality of Emmen
- **Regional Innovation Scoreboard and its impact in regional place-based policies** – rapporteur **Mikel Irujo** (ES/EA), Director-General for External Action of the Government of Navarre

The next SEDEC meeting will take place on 1 October 2020 in Brussels.

Social policy and employment

The COVID-19 pandemic is estimated to have made approximately an extra 900 000 people unemployed in the first three months of the crisis, according to **ETUC**, which based its conclusion on newly released Eurostat data.

The Week of Action for **#EU4FairWork**, the first EU campaign about the benefits of declared work, was postponed to September due to COVID-19. Social partners and national authorities have planned a wide range of activities, including online publicity campaigns, bilateral cooperation, information sessions and a range of other activities at national, regional and local level. The campaign is also being mounted on social media (March-October 2020).

On 16 July the **ILO** published a guide entitled "Practical Guide on Teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond". Its purpose is to provide practical recommendations for effective teleworking that are applicable to a broad range of actors; to support policymakers in updating existing policies; and to provide a flexible framework through which both private enterprises and public sector organisations can develop or update their own teleworking policies and practices.

On 15 July **Eurofound** updated its report on "Minimum wages in 2020: Annual review". This report, as part of an annual series on minimum wages, summarises the key developments in 2019 and early 2020 concerning the EU initiative on fair wages and puts the national debates on setting the rates for 2020 and beyond in this context. The report also includes a section on the regional dimension of minimum wages and presents the latest research into the effects of minimum wage changes on wages, employment, in-work poverty, prices and profits.

Collective bargaining: On 10 July, the EP adopted the "Gusmão" own-initiative report, which – among other things – calls for the extension of collective bargaining to people working on digital platforms. Earlier, on 1 July, the European Commission issued a press release on the public consultation on the Digital Services Act in which it pledged to address the issue of collective bargaining for self-employed workers.

Commissioner Schmit attended SEDEC's 9 July meeting and spoke with its members. He set out the EU response to the COVID-19 outbreak and gave an update on the legislation the Commission was currently working on. He also referred to the **CoR opinion on "A Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions"** – to be adopted at the October Plenary – and stressed that in the current circumstances European solidarity and active subsidiarity are needed more than ever.

On 8 July **Eurostat** published its report on Absences from work. This included a set of additional seasonally adjusted quarterly indicators which help to capture the most recent movements on the labour market in the 27 EU Member States.

In a statement issued on Wednesday 8 July five ministers called for the establishment of a formal Gender Equality Council.

On 7 July the **OECD** published the OECD Employment Outlook 2020: Worker Security and the COVID-19 Crisis.

On 6 July **Eurofound** published a policy brief entitled "How does employee involvement in decision-making benefit organisations?". This examines the empirical evidence that workplaces with high employee involvement are more successful in developing the capacity for high performance in workers than those with lower involvement. It examines the influence of work organisation on two factors contributing to performance: work engagement and skills development.

On 2 July **Eurofound** published a report entitled "Regulations to address work-life balance in digital flexible working arrangements". Its aim is to provide policymakers with ways to address new challenges in the world of work and to serve as a point of reference for future initiatives in relation to digitalisation, working time and work–life balance.

On 2 July **Eurostat** published its report on Euro Area unemployment. Eurostat estimates that 14 366 million men and women in the EU, 12 146 million of them in the euro area, were unemployed in May this year. Compared with April, the number of unemployed increased by 253 000 in the EU and by 159 000 in the euro area.

On 1 July the European Commission launched Youth Employment Support: a bridge to jobs for the next generation.

On 30 June the ILO launched the ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. 5th edition.

Education and Youth, Culture and Sport

Education and Youth

On 9 July the European Commission unveiled the additional **24 European Universities** that will join the first 17 alliances of higher education institutions already selected in 2019. **Margaritis Schinas**, Vice-President for Promoting the European Way of Life, said: "*The Commission is today strongly responding to the call of students for more freedom to study across Europe, from teachers and researchers to better pool knowledge, and from higher education institutions to pool resources. With 41 European Universities, involving 280 institutions and backed up by EUR 287 million from the EU budget, the European Education Area becomes a tangible reality for many.*" **Mariya Gabriel**, Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, said: "*I am very pleased to see that a diverse range of higher education institutions from all Member States and beyond are now involved in the 41 European Universities. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that deeper cooperation across borders, disciplines and cultures is the only way to recover from the crisis and to build resilience. These European Universities are a key building block for the European Education Area.*" Selected from 62 applications, the 24 newly selected European Universities comprise 165 higher education institutions from 26 Member States and other countries participating in the Erasmus+ programme.

On 9 July the European Committee of the Regions' SEDEC Commission appointed Ms Romy Karier, EPP, rapporteur for an own-initiative opinion on "*Youth Employment Support: A Bridge to Jobs for the Next Generation Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee*". This opinion will be based on two documents published by the European Commission on 1 July and outlined below.

On 1 July the European Commission submitted a proposal for a Council recommendation entitled *"A Bridge to Jobs – Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee and replacing Council Recommendation of 22 April 2013 on establishing a Youth Guarantee"*. The European Commission proposes to extend the age bracket of the Youth Guarantee to include those of 25 to 29 years old. This makes the Youth Guarantee scheme more inclusive, since in its current form it only applies to those under 25. The Commission proposal also includes several recommendations to Member States, including enhancing the digital

skills of young unemployed people and reinforcing prevention systems such as mapping to identify young people at risk of unemployment.

On the same day, the European Commission also issued a communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions entitled "Youth Employment Support: a Bridge to Jobs for the Next Generation". This sets out various measures that could be implemented at EU level to tackle youth unemployment. The measures are divided into four "chapters". The first concerns the proposal for a renewed Youth Guarantee. The second relates to the EU's vocational, education and training policy and the third to apprenticeships. The last one concerns additional measures supporting youth employment. Some of the measures that could be supported are: short-time work schemes to protect young workers from the risk of unemployment; direct subsidies for apprentices in SMEs; financial aid for students; training sessions of short duration and a revamped Youth Guarantee scheme.

On 25 June the UNESCO Cities Platform held an online meeting on **Urban Solutions: Learning from Cities' Responses to COVID-19**. It included three debates and a special session on sustainable tourism. The debates were structured around interconnected themes focussing on cities' actions during the different stages of the pandemic, namely:

1: Cities' Responses to COVID-19
2: Learning from Early Recovery
3: A More Resilient Future: Imagining the Cities of Tomorrow
4: Special Session: Transformative City Tourism

At a videoconference on 23 June **EU education ministers** exchanged views on the lessons learnt from the crisis as a basis for informed decisions in the future. As Blaženka Divjak, Croatia's Minister for Science and Education, put it: "*A crisis can also be a learning opportunity. Lessons learnt during the past months should inspire us to turn challenges into opportunities. Online learning activities will only grow and we have to explore how to use innovation and technology to achieve quality and inclusive education. Our efforts should be focused on further digital transformation, at the same time ensuring equal opportunities and wellbeing.*"

Ministers highlighted the positive attitudes of pupils, students and teachers towards distance learning, but also broadly agreed that online education and training will require better digital skills, updated technological equipment and wider application of digital technologies in teaching and learning. Ministers identified some challenges, such as the social inclusion of all pupils and students, in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds, the availability of digital equipment and internet access, as well as cyber security. Providing teachers, pupils and students with adequate digital skills was also mentioned as an important challenge. Member States are working on plans for the next school/academic year. However, many ministers shared the view that final decisions will depend on the epidemiological situation.

Culture and Cultural Heritage

On 13 and 14 July the **German Presidency of the Council of the EU** held a conference on "Promoting Europe's cultural heritage and diversity – Who? How? With whom?". It focused on 40 recommendations from ICOMOS, the International Council on Monuments and Sites, for the long-term promotion of cultural heritage by the EU and its Member States. Experts in heritage conservation and promotion from across Europe joined members of the cultural and creative industries and civic organisations for heritage preservation to compile their expectations of heritage conservation policy.

On 29 June EPRS, the European Parliament's Think Thank, published an edition of "At a Glance" dedicated to **Performing arts: Emerging from confinement**. This noted that in the EU, as elsewhere in the world, the performing arts were among the first sectors to be hit by measures to slow the spread of the coronavirus and are now among the last to reopen. As the lockdown measures are relaxed, the focus now is on supporting the performing arts and finding a way to re-engage with live audiences (the report includes several examples from different Member States).

At a meeting of the European Parliament's CULT Committee, rapporteur Dace Melbārde (ECR) presented her draft report on "Achieving an effective policy legacy for the European Year of Cultural Heritage"[1], setting out her three-fold approach to the topic: Education and skills; Digital cultural heritage; Economic potential and sustainability. During the debate, the rapporteur and shadow rapporteurs agreed that culture had been heavily impacted during the COVID-19 crisis and stressed the urgent need for funding recovery measures for the sector. They noted that cultural tourism generated very large revenues in Europe. All speakers agreed that it was important to ensure that the European Year of Cultural Heritage leaves a policy imprint beyond 2018. The vote on the report is scheduled for October 2020.

Sport

On 25 June the **EU Sport Directors** held a videoconference to discuss "Sport and the Media" and to exchange views on the preparation of the EU Work Plan for Sport for the upcoming period. It was emphasised that all sports activities must resume in a safe environment and in secure conditions, cautiously and gradually, and avoiding premature relaxing of specific measures. The European Commission presented its activates in the field of sport, including the flexibility for Erasmus+ Sport projects in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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[1] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/209310/CULT%20Newsletter%20June%202020.pdf.

Information society, artificial intelligence and audiovisual/telecommunications technologies

Artificial Intelligence

Artificial Intelligence at the Edge – outlook for fighting the pandemic

The European Alliance Against Coronavirus Discussion took place, under the umbrella of the European Cluster Collaboration Platform, on 1 July. Participants focused their attention on the main challenges of the future of Edge AI: (i) combining the technology with other sectors, (ii) finding solutions for energy efficiency, (iii) going green and (iv) growing in the digital sector. It was found that Europe could embrace the opportunity to specialise in Edge AI, as is fitted with a decentralised and privacy-driven European policy.

Imaging COVID-19 AI initiative

Imaging COVID-19 AI initiative is a multicentre European project to enhance computed tomography (CT) in the diagnosis of COVID-19 by using artificial intelligence. The project group will create a deep learning model for automated detection and classification of COVID-19 on CT scans, and for assessing disease severity in patients by quantification of lung involvement. Many different hospitals and institutions across Europe will collaborate to rapidly develop an artificial intelligence solution in this time-sensitive research project. The AI model will be made freely available to all participants for clinical validation.

Machine learning and artificial intelligence the focus of the European Congress of Radiology

Machine learning and artificial intelligence were an important item on the agenda at the European Congress of Radiology, which took place online from 15 to 19 July. Pulmonary radiology is one of the most important diagnostic methods related to possible complications of the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants, who included, for example, Dr Luis Martí-Bonmatí, chairman of the radiology department and director of medical imaging at La Fe University and Polytechnic Hospital in Valencia, stressed that greater involvement by radiologists and more help from data scientists are needed to improve the performance of artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms. Such involvement is key to improving the predictive accuracy of modelling based on machine learning and neural networks, and to expand their use in critical practice.

Audiovisual technologies

CoE latest report on ''The European audiovisual industry in the time of COVID-19''

At the end of June the European Audio-Visual Observatory of the Council of Europe published its latest report on "The European audiovisual industry in the time of COVID-19". It is based on information collected on specific national measures aimed at supporting and guiding the audiovisual sector in the 41 member states of the European Audiovisual Observatory.

[Calls for EU plan on the audiovisual sector to facilitate recovery](#)

At the beginning of July the Association of European Radios presented the comments of a group of its member organisations on the acutely felt need for a future EU Action Plan on the Audiovisual and Media sector. A wide-ranging plan of this kind should support the digital transformation and competitiveness of the audiovisual and media sector. Industry associations considered this to be extremely important in the context of the COVID-19 crisis and recovery from it. They stressed that the entire value chain of the radio and TV sector constitutes a strategic industrial sector, essential for the recovery of the European Union and listed among the 14 key ecosystems by the European Commission.

❖ **Responses at regional and local level**

Education and Young People

Klagenfurt, Austria

[Social Impact on the Alps Adriatic region (SIAA)](#) is a project financed by Interreg Italy-Austria that aims to create a favourable ecosystem for the development of social businesses in the Alpe-Adria macro-region, with the involvement of public administration and relevant stakeholders. The core of the project is the development of a social entrepreneurship training programme (SIAA LAB) in each partner region, with a subsequent acceleration phase to develop the best ideas and bring them to the market quickly. In response to the pandemic, the project had to find a more inclusive way to support and assist people, using a mix of tools that showed how to be more inclusive and meet different people's needs.

Vilnius, Lithuania

In just a week [Red Noses](#) Lithuania created a virtual "Clown Line" for little patients in hospitals and also wasted no time linking up with the care home for the elderly in Vilnius, where residents were happy and excited to be back in touch with their already beloved clowns, as a result feeling more relaxed, connected and empowered, and experiencing less anxiety and stress.

Cultural and Creative Sectors

Malta

The **[Malta Jazz Festival](#)** (13 to 18 July) went partly virtual this year. Although unfortunately the majority of the live performances that had been previously announced did not take place, the festival boasted a rich programme to mark its 30th anniversary, including virtual masterclasses, a channel featuring rare broadcasts of concerts from the festival archives and a virtual photo exhibition.

Campobasso, Italy

The intention behind the **Ingegnarsi** event was to react to the COVID-19 situation and to provide an alternative and resilient way to celebrate this important moment for the city by organising a 4-day online event that reached over 5 000 people.

Vienna, Austria

A project called Žalike2030 was created as an artistic response to the current COVID-19 crisis and spawned an **Art Manifesto**. Reinforcing solidarity and the sense of Europe as a shared public space through virtual community work, the project's participants (5 female artists from Austria and Slovenia) used this opportunity to sustain people-to-people interaction beyond Europe's borders during these times of travel restrictions and social distancing in order to maintain cultural life and social experiences and prepare the ground for a cultural revival after the crisis. They aimed to develop new approaches to cultural and art work and build new alliances across sectors to deal with the current challenges imposed by the crisis.

Sport

Gdynia, Poland

The Cargo Bikes in Urban Mobility (CoBiUM) project aims to improve sustainable transport services, i.e. less traffic, less noise, less pollution. Cargo bikes mean greener cities and convenient transport for local entrepreneurs and residents, but also a more active life. The COVID-19 pandemic is now a priority area of interest where all available resources are being deployed. The CoBiUM project, with its cargo bikes, creates innovative solutions for green, sustainable and convenient transport in municipal areas. The pandemic situation proves that there is a huge need for such services among residents.

Additional useful links

Association of European Regions: https://aer.eu/covid19/
European Research Council:
https://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/magitems/ERC_actions_on_Covid-19.pdf
European Medicines Agency: https://www.ema.europa.eu/en/human-regulatory/overview/public-health-threats/coronavirus-disease-covid-19/covid-19-whats-new
European Commission: https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response_en
EU support for the cultural and creative sectors:
https://ec.europa.eu/culture/news/coronavirus-how-eu-responds-outbreak-support-cultural-and-creative-sectors_en; https://creativesunite.eu/
EU Learning Corner: https://europa.eu/learning-corner/home_en
JRC (Science Hub): https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en
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

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 COVID-19: http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/en/

ERRIN news: https://errin.eu/news (primarily R&I /regional focus)

EARTO news: https://www.earto.eu/news/ (primarily R&I)

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/R&I)

Bruegel: The latest on COVID-19

CEPS: Research on COVID-19

WHO: Coronavirus Dashboard