



**European Committee
of the Regions**

SEDEC Bulletin N°10

COVID-19 impact and response measures

10 May 2021



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 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 being planned and implemented at EU, national, regional and local level.

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

On **22 April 2021**, the SEDEC commission held its [second meeting](#) this year.

On this occasion, local and regional decision-makers backed the European Parliament's resolution that declares the entire EU a LGBTIQ Freedom Zone. They called on the European Commission to ensure that the fundamental values of the European Union are respected and that no municipality, region or state introduces systemic discriminatory mechanisms, such as "LGBT-free zones" or resolutions "against LGBT ideology" such as those adopted by certain local and regional authorities in Poland.

The [draft opinion](#), presented by Kate Feeney (IE/Renew Europe), Member of Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council, welcomes the European Commission's [LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025](#), which is part of the [Union of Equality](#) package. This strategy emphasises the importance of mutual tolerance within communities and points to the need for concrete measures aimed at preventing and combating violence against LGBTIQ people and countering hate speech. It also calls on the Commission to work on improving the position of rainbow families through the rigorous application of cross-border family law and intensified dialogue.

"Fighting inequality in the EU is a shared responsibility that requires action at all levels of governance, as well as the active and permanent involvement of civil society, LGBTIQ organisations and advocacy groups. Local authorities can send a positive signal to their LGBTIQ communities by establishing ambitious pro-LGBTIQ policies. And while legal and societal change is a long-lasting process, it is even more important that cities and regions become pioneers of inclusion, rejecting bad examples of exclusion", said rapporteur Kate Feeney.

[SEDEC commission](#) chair **Anne Karjalainen** (FI/PES), Member of Kerava municipal council, said: "LGBT-free zones are incompatible with the very concept of our European Way of Life because they go against all the founding values of the EU. By applying a strict zero-tolerance policy to all forms of LGBTIQ-discrimination, local and regional authorities can make a real difference in their capacity as employers, providers of public services and as the interface between people and the state".



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MEP **Pierre Karleskind** (FR/Renew E.), who initiated the European Parliament's [resolution](#) declaring the entire EU a LGBTIQ Freedom Zone, pointed out that "local and regional authorities have a crucial role to play on LGBTIQ issues: they are at the forefront of promoting and fostering a welcoming attitude towards LGBTIQ people in every corner of our Union." MEPs **Terry Reintke** (DE/Greens-EFA) and **Maria Walsh** (IE/EPP), as well as a representative of [ILGA Europe](#), also participated in the debate and shared this view. Ms Feeney's draft opinion is scheduled for adoption at the October plenary session.

Commissioner for Equality **Helena Dalli** will address the next CoR plenary session on 6 May, when two more opinions linked to the Union of Equality package will be adopted: one on the [EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025](#) (rapporteur, Yoomi Renström, SE/PES) and the other on the [Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030](#) (rapporteur, Daniela Ballico, IT/ECR). The latter draft opinion was discussed at the April SEDEC meeting, together with the following opinions:

[Social Economy Action Plan](#)

Rapporteur **Mikel Irujo** (ES/EA), Minister for Economic and Business Development of the Regional Government of Navarre, said: "It is essential to promote education for entrepreneurship through forms of social economy at all educational levels, from primary school to higher education, including vocational training. In this regard, projects such as the Social Economy Business School, promoted by seven European regions within the framework of the Smart Specialisation Platform, provide innovative solutions to this shortage in training courses on social economy enterprises and aim to train competent professionals capable of accompanying and leading the growth of these enterprises and entities."

[Future plan for care workers and care services – local and regional opportunities in response to a European challenge](#)

Rapporteur **Heinrich Dorner** (AT/PES), Member of the State Government of Burgenland, said: "The shortage of care workers affects us all in one form or another – it is a challenge for all cities and regions in the EU. We have to establish transnational awareness of the problem and in some areas, we need a coordinated and holistic approach according to the motto: *think together – learn from each other – act together.*"



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Social policy and employment

The [Social Summit in Porto](#), to be held under the Portuguese Presidency, provides an opportunity to give fresh impetus to social rights in the EU. It is the ideal occasion to initiate the European Pillar of Social Rights in order to set concrete targets and timelines in relation to its implementation. The High-Level Conference (**7 May 2021**), will focus on finding the best ways to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights, with broad participation. The outcome of the conference will feed into the Informal meeting of Heads of State or Government on 8 May. The High-Level Conference will consist of opening and closing plenary sessions as well as parallel workshops on employment and jobs, skills and innovation and welfare and social protection. The CoR will be represented at the Porto Social Summit by the first Vice-President Mr Cordeiro and the SEDEC Chair, Ms Karjalainen. The CoR opinion on '*The implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights from a local and regional perspective*,' to be adopted at Plenary in May, also constitutes the CoR's contribution to the Social Summit, as it addresses the urgent need for the full implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights in a European Union bitterly put to the test by the pandemic.



On **1 May, International Workers' Day**, Commissioner Schmit gave a [statement](#), in which he noted that "short-time work schemes, supported through the EU's SURE instrument, have kept people in jobs and preserved families' incomes. The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan presents our ambition for a strong social Europe that is inclusive and fair. It proposes EU-level targets for more and better jobs, skills and equality, social protection and inclusion, and it calls on Member States to turn the principles of the Pillar into actions. The action plan has a 2030 horizon, but our work has already started. While Member States should maintain job-retention schemes as long as they are needed, we will also support people transitioning into new jobs and promising sectors, including the green and digital ones. This is why the Commission has adopted EASE, our Recommendation to Member States on job creation".

During the SEDEC meeting on **22 April 2021**, the opinion on a ***Future plan for care workers and care services - local and regional opportunities in the context of a European challenge***, was adopted. The aim of this own-initiative opinion is to make proposals for improving better services, to address the lack of trained professionals and to set standards that make care jobs more attractive. It will contribute to the Commission's **Initiative for Long-Term Care** (scheduled for 2022).



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As the last in a series of three roadmap events leading to a high-level conference on apprenticeships on 3-4 June 2021 'entitled ***The role of regions and cities in delivering high-quality apprenticeships for all***, on **23 March**, the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) and the European Commission's European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA) organised an online event on [***The role of regions and cities in supporting apprenticeships, upskilling and reskilling in the health sector***](#). The live-streamed discussion explored local and regional initiatives for training, upskilling and reskilling health workers, taking into account the future skill needs of the sector. **Birgitta Sacrédeus** (SE/EPP), CoR Member and Regional Councillor and Member of the Dalarna Regional board, pointed out that the COVID-19 pandemic had led to a significant increase in the number of people interested in becoming a nurse. During the pandemic, the region of Dalarna developed successful lifelong learning initiatives for older workers, and offered reskilling programmes (for flight attendants, for example) allowing workers to become nursing assistants. More broadly, the health sector serves as an efficient gateway into the labour market and holds untapped potential as an integration tool for migrants. **Romy Karier** (LU/EPP), CoR Member and Councillor of the Municipality of Clervaux, called for greater harmonisation in healthcare qualifications across EU Member States. To integrate lifelong learning prospects, nursing training programmes should provide bridges that enable nurses to transition from lower diplomas to higher qualifications, such as a bachelor's degree. As an example of reskilling initiatives, Ms Karier explained that second-chance programmes, allowing mid-career professionals to become nursing assistants were launched in Luxembourg, requiring a time commitment of two days a week for three years.

During the CoR Plenary on **17-19 March 2021**, the opinion on ***Adequate minimum wages in the European Union*** was adopted, following the European Commission's proposal for a Directive on the topic. Its aim is to establish a framework for setting minimum wages in the Member States, to combat in-work poverty and to strengthen collective bargaining.

On **4 March 2020**, the European Commission published the [**European Pillar of Social Rights \(EPSR\) Action Plan**](#), which proposes employment, skills and social protection as the headline targets to be achieved by the end of the decade. These targets can guide policy decisions in the Member States and their regions, in relation to the national recovery and resilience plans and will also make it possible to measure and monitor progress, along with the revised Social Scoreboard, on the political commitment of the Pillar. The Commission will review the Action Plan in 2025 in order to provide a basis for further actions at EU level with a view to achieving the 2030 EU targets. LRAs have an important role to play in achieving the 2030 employment, skills and social protection headline targets. The Action Plan calls on Member States, including regional and local authorities, social partners, civil society and other relevant actors, to join forces to advance implementation of the Pillar within their respective spheres of competence.



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As a concrete action under the European Pillar of Social Rights, on **4 March 2021**, the Commission presented a [Recommendation on Effective Active Support to Employment](#) following the COVID-19 crisis (EASE). This outlines a strategic approach to shifting gradually from the emergency measures taken to preserve jobs during the pandemic to the new measures needed for a job-rich recovery. With EASE, the Commission is promoting job creation and job-to-job transitions, including in the digital and green sectors.

The European Commission will launch its proposal for for a European Platform for Combatting Homelessness during a High-Level Conference in Portugal on 21 June. The European Commission's Affordable Housing Initiative is also expected this summer.

Research and innovation policy

The annual [European Research & Innovation Days \(23-24 June\)](#). ECCA 2021 will turn the spotlight on the pressing need to accelerate the transfer of knowledge from R&I to policies and practices, including societal transformation and behavioural change in a post-COVID-19 environment, in order to increase resilience in Europe and beyond, in a context of rising health and climate risks.

On **18 March**, Commissioners Gabriel, Kyriakides and Breton engaged in an exchange of views with members of the European Parliament's Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE) to discuss issues related to the COVID-19 vaccination strategy, focusing on research and innovation and the production and supply of vaccines. MEPS were updated on recent developments, such as R&I's contribution to [the HERA incubator](#), which includes the launch of a European network for vaccine trials (VACCELERATE) and the mobilisation of additional funding for R&I actions to help address the immediate challenges linked to the emergence of SARS-CoV-2 variants.

On **15 March**, the [European Commission adopted the first strategic plan for Horizon Europe](#). The strategic plan's guidelines will ensure that our common EU policy priorities benefit from new knowledge, ideas and innovation. This new approach is another way to make sure that the research and innovation funded by the EU will address the challenges faced by Europeans. The COVID-19 recovery also features among the Horizon Europe priorities.

The EC recently announced that [EU-funded researchers have developed a potential new treatment against SARS-CoV-2](#). The researchers have developed a promising second-generation antibody that is effective in neutralising the virus and its variants, which could be used in both the prevention and treatment of COVID-19. The scientists at the [Joint Research Centre's Nanobiotechnology](#)



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[Laboratory](#) measured the purity, stability, binding and biocompatibility of the antibody. Thanks to the work of EU-funded researchers, this new finding could prevent and treat cases of COVID-19, ultimately saving lives.

On **10 March 2021**, the European Innovation Council and the European Institute of Innovation and Technology organised an online event opened by Mariya Gabriel, European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth. The recorded event can be viewed here: [One year on: How European support is helping innovators develop solutions to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic](#).

JRC report: Digital risks for children are more significant during lockdown, but so are parents' skills in mitigating them. As part of the [Kids' Digital lives in COVID-19 times \(KiDiCoTi\)](#) project, this recent EC report shows that children required to 'make do' with remote learning face negative online content on average more often than before the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to [the coronavirus pandemic](#), the EBRD has rapidly increased support for the [regions](#). In these uncertain times, the bank will continue to be a strong and reliable partner to the countries where they invest. The new [Strategic and Capital Framework 2021-25](#) sets out how the EBRD is committed to preserve and accelerate transition as countries seek to build back better.

Education and Youth, Culture and Sport

Education and Youth

[The CoR has adopted its opinion on the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027](#)

At its Plenary Session on **5-7 May 2021**, the CoR adopted its opinion on the **Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027**. The rapporteur, Ms Gillian Coughlan (IE/renew E.) stressed that it was essential to put in place the digital infrastructure that would give all students and teachers equal chances to prosper and develop their skills. In addition, we must ensure that all European citizens, regardless of their background and socio-economic standing, have equal opportunities to expand their digital competences. To meet this challenge, the rapporteur for the European parliament, Mr Victor Negrescu (RO/S&D), who participated in the CoR Plenary Session, called for the allocation of at least 10% for education in the Recovery Plan, and stated that those new available resources should involve local stakeholders in order to increase accessibility, develop the infrastructure, methods and content and improve the quality of the educational process.



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[On 20-21 May, EURASHE will hold its Annual Conference.](#) The conference, which will be attended by Commissioners Mariya Gabriel and Elisa Ferreira, will focus on Professional Higher Education (PHE) and Sustainability, and the Smart and Sustainable recovery of the regions. The event will take place fully online and is organised in cooperation with EURASHE's members, notably the Portuguese Polytechnics Coordinating Council (CCISP), the Polytechnic Institute of Porto, and with the support of the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

On **4 May**, the OECD published its report on [21st-Century Readers: Developing Literacy Skills in a Digital World](#) in the framework of the Programme for International Student Assessment's (PISA). The publication is also available in German and French.

On **29 April**, the European Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) on the European Child Guarantee, in which MEPs called on the European Commission to examine the possibility of establishing a European Authority for Children. This body could support and monitor implementation of the recommendation on the Child Guarantee, coordinate national work and ensure the exchange of good practices and innovative solutions. The European Parliament also vigorously stressed the need to involve local and regional authorities and municipalities, as well as civil society actors, in all phases of implementing the Child Guarantee.

On **22 April**, Mr Jari Andersson (FI/EPP) was appointed rapporteur for the SEDEC commission opinion on the ***EU strategy on the rights of the child and the European child guarantee***. Through this opinion, the European Committee of the Regions could help promote children's rights and address the issues of child poverty, violence and justice, which have only deteriorated with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The opinion could also ensure that local and regional action, which plays an important role in solving these problems, is taken fully into account in the recommendation for the European Child Guarantee.

On **15-16 March**, the CULT Committee at the European Parliament held its first exchange of views on the upcoming own-initiative report on the ***European Education Area: a shared holistic approach***, the rapporteur for which is Ms Michaela Šojdrová (EPP). The discussion followed a presentation of the study on ***Making the European Education Area a Reality***, by the EP's Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies.

Times Higher Education has released its [2021 Impact Rankings](#) based on the Sustainable Development Goals. Universities are also assessed on their research, stewardship, outreach, and teaching. Assessing more than 1 000 universities from some 100 countries, the highest-ranked university in the European Union is Aalborg University, at 6th place.



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On **11 March**, [EUROFOUND](#) published a study on *COVID-19 - consequences for employment and professional life*, in which they found that young people experienced the sharpest decline in employment of all age categories. The study emphasises the need to avoid another 'lost generation', and stresses the need to make young people a priority for policymakers when designing active labour market policies, in order to mitigate the fallout from the crisis.

The European Commission has opened a public consultation on [Micro-credentials – broadening learning opportunities for lifelong learning and employability](#), running until **13 July**. The survey forms the basis of preparations for an upcoming proposal for a Council recommendation on the same topic.

Culture and Cultural Heritage

On **3-4 June**, Europeana will organise a conference entitled [Towards recovery: digital capacity-building in the Cultural Heritage sector](#), to discuss the cultural sector's potential to drive growth in a post-pandemic framework.

On **17-18 May**, the [Education, Youth, Culture and Sports Council](#) will meet, with several topics on the provisional agenda, such as strengthening multi-level governance when promoting the participation of young people in decision-making processes, the diversification of funding sources and mechanisms for safeguarding European cultural heritage and the selection of the European Capital of Culture 2025.

On **5-6 May**, the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU is organising a high-level conference on [Culture, Cohesion and Social Impact](#), to take place in Porto. Representatives from academia, government and the arts sector will reflect on the cultural dimension in mental health, cohesion and the regions, environmental sustainability, and gender equality.

On **23 April**, at the *New European Bauhaus* conference, Commissioner Ferreira launched the call for candidates for the 2021 prizes. There will be [Prizes](#) in 10 different categories in two parallel competitions:

- New European Bauhaus Awards, for existing completed examples/projects;
- New European Bauhaus Rising Stars, for concepts or ideas submitted by young talents aged 30 or less.

The winners in each category will receive, respectively: EUR 30 000 and a communication package for the New European Bauhaus Awards and EUR 15 000 and a communication package for the New European Bauhaus Rising Stars. The deadline for submissions is **31 May 2021**.



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On **14 April**, the European Committee of the Regions and the European Commission co-organised a workshop on *The New European Bauhaus and its Territorial Dimension: A Conversation to Change the World*.

SEDEC Commission chair, Anna Karjalainen, was joined by the President of the European Committee of the Regions, Apostolos Tzitzikostas, and Commissioners Mariya Gabriel and Elisa Ferreira. The event was also covered in the Spanish, Bulgarian, Lithuanian and French local and regional media.



On **22 March**, Europa Nostra launched its [European Cultural Heritage Green Paper: Putting Europe's shared heritage at the heart of the European Green Deal](#). The was a joint effort, together with the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), and the Climate Heritage Network, with input from members of the European Heritage Alliance, and with the support of the European Investment Bank Institute. The paper aims to remedy the absence of a cultural heritage dimension in the European Green Deal published in December 2019.

On **15-16 March**, the members of the EP CULT Committee held an exchange of views on the state of play of Europeana. They also discussed the current situation of artists and cultural recovery in the EU (a dedicated report has been drawn up by MEP Monica Semedo). CULT members noted the importance of earmarking 2% of the recovery funds for the sector.

Information society, artificial intelligence and audiovisual/telecommunications technologies

Artificial intelligence

[Proposal for a Regulation laying down harmonised rules on artificial intelligence \(Artificial Intelligence Act\)](#)

In response to the legislative proposal of the European Commission, published on **21 April 2021**, which aims to regulate the use of Artificial Intelligence and its applications in a number of high-risk sectors, the CoR's SEDEC commission will draft a revised opinion on Artificial Intelligence. The CoR Opinion on this subject matter was adopted at its plenary session in October 2020.



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Audiovisual/telecommunications technologies

[The CoR has adopted its opinion on support for local and regional media in the context of the EU Action Plan](#)

During its plenary session on **5-7 May 2021**, the CoR adopted an opinion on **Media in the digital Decade: An Action Plan**. The rapporteur, Jan Trei (EE/EPP), stressed, inter alia, that critical attention had to be paid to the situation of small countries, where the small size of the market meant that resources enabling local and regional media to exist were limited. The rapporteur for the European parliament, Mr Dace Melbārde (LV/ECR) shared her concern with the CoR regarding the currently challenging situation of many local and regional media outlets across the EU.

Smart specialisation

[Smart specialisation strategies are a cornerstone of EU's sustainable recovery \(europa.eu\)](#)

On 15 April, the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, in cooperation with the European Committee of the Regions, held an online workshop on **Smart Specialisation for the Recovery**. A number of high-level speakers shared their thoughts on how a place-based approach to innovation could help regions across the EU tackle the current societal challenges: post-COVID-19 recovery and the green and digital transitions.

❖ Responses at regional and local level

Social policy and employment

Nantes has carried out a series of [measures](#) aiming to help people in need, supporting platform workers, gender equality and affordable housing.

Research and innovation

[Hamburg](#) will assist neighbourhoods and city centres recover from COVID-19. This was announced at a kick-off meeting and the city Senate has now launched funds for this plan. The fund is initially endowed with EUR 1.1 million and can be used until the end of 2022.



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[Lessons from Georgian municipalities' responses to the pandemic](#) Through their various policies and situations, local governments are laboratories of democracy, allowing us to learn from their diverse experiences. In this spirit, the National Association of Local Authorities of Georgia (NALAG) has produced two reports, now available in English, containing in-depth research on the impact of the pandemic on Georgian municipalities and local economies.

Education and Culture

On 8-9 June, the Portuguese Order of Architects is organising a conference entitled [From Bauhaus to the New House – Post-COVID Landscapes](#), to take place at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (Lisbon), under the Portuguese Presidency of the Council, to discuss the role of architecture within the New European Bauhaus.

[On 27 May, the European Festivals Association, together with the City of Bergen, and the Bergen International Festival, will host the live workshop Festival Cities](#). This festival is part of the two-day *Bergen International Summit* event hosted by the City of Bergen. Cities and festivals from Rotterdam, Bergen, Ljubljana, Edinburgh, Ghent, Krakow and Belgrade will get together to discuss a 'festival cities seal'.

[Two pilot programmes](#) will allow the Bucharest National Opera and the Bucharest National Theatre to stage indoor performances. Those who have been vaccinated, those who have recovered from COVID-19 and can demonstrate that they have formed antibodies, and those willing to be screened prior to the show will be allowed to attend the shows.

In [Malta](#), a non-governmental organisation called [Opening Doors](#) is working on providing opportunities for adults with intellectual disabilities. This NGO has an arts background and its mission is to promote the development of artistic and creative skills among adults with disabilities.

Additional useful links

Horizon: the EU Research & Innovation magazine: <https://horizon-magazine.eu/>

Portail de la Recherche et des Technologies en Wallonie: <https://recherche-technologie.wallonie.be/>

Innoviris.brussels: <https://innoviris.brussels/fr>

European Institute of Innovation & Technology: <https://eit.europa.eu/our-activities/covid-19-response>

UNESCO: <https://en.unesco.org/covid19>

Association of European Regions: <https://aer.eu/>



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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/newsandevents/> (Digital/AI/Social/R&I)

Bruegel: [The latest on COVID-19](#)

CEPS: [Research on COVID-19](#)

WHO: [Coronavirus Dashboard](#)