

# THE ROLE OF THE INSTITUTIONS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE FIGHT AGAINST CORONAVIRUS PANDEMY

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## Abstract

*In the context of the Coronavirus pandemic, the institutions of the European Union have monitored the whole situation, adopting a number of measures that apply throughout the Union. This included the adoption of relevant legislation and ongoing coordination with Member States to exchange information, assess needs and ensure a coherent response at EU level. According to the EU Treaties, Member States are responsible for adopting measures at national level to respond to the CoVID-19 pandemic, in particular as regards national health systems, the repatriation of citizens or restrictions on life. Showing solidarity, in parallel with managing the consequences of the crisis internally, Member States came to each other's aid by providing support where it was most needed. They provided services, specialized personnel and medical equipment. Collaboration, they managed to repatriate almost half a million Europeans who were stranded abroad by mid-April 2020. The collective action of the EU institutions has focused on responding to the immediate health crisis and its humanitarian needs, strengthening the health, water supply and sewerage systems of partner countries, increasing their research and preparedness capacities to cope with the pandemic, and mitigating the socio-economic impact.*

**Key Words:** *pandemic, measures, institutions, European Union, European Council.*

**JEL Classification:** [K33]

## 1. Introduction

Europe, as well as the whole world, is going through a general situation during this period that humanity has never faced before. More than ever, in the current context, the principles enshrined in the Treaties of the European Union (Andreșan-Grigoriu & Ștefan, 2010) have proved their effectiveness, with the Union institutions having to apply various measures to support states and protect the population from this scourge called Coronavirus.

That is why, in this article, we intend to present some of the measures that the European Union, through its institutions, has taken during 2020, in order to prevent the spread of the virus and protect the population against its devastating effects.

However, in order to better understand this mechanism, I will make a brief presentation of what this virus is. COVID-19 is a disease caused by a new type of coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), which was first identified in China in December 2019. Thus, in December 2019, an epidemic broke out in the Chinese city of Wuhan.

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COVID-19, which has spread rapidly to other regions of China and the world. In January 2020, isolated cases appeared in some EU Member States, and at the end of February 2020, Italy reported a significant increase in COVID-19 cases concentrated in the northern regions of the country (Ritchie *et. al.* 2020). Most other EU Member States have started reporting cases of infected people.

What is worrying, however, is that by March 2020, all EU Member States had reported cases of COVID-19. Since then and until now, the number of cases has continued to grow even more is the fact that new strains of this virus have appeared, with a more severe impact among the population, thus forcing states to resort to drastic measures, which has displeased population of the states of the European Union.

The Council, together with other EU institutions, is closely monitoring the situation and taking different types of measures, tailored to each issue. This includes the adoption of relevant EU legislation and ongoing coordination with Member States to exchange information, assess needs and ensure a coherent response at EU level.

The World Health Organization (WHO) is also coordinating the global response, and on 11 March 2020, the WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. The EU contributes directly to WHO's global response (World Health Organisation n.d.).

## **2. The measures imposed by the institutions of the European Union to stop the coronavirus pandemic**

In the 2020 General Report on EU Activities European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said: "It has been a difficult year, but our response to the pandemic will ensure we emerge stronger, more resilient and more united. I have never been prouder to be European, and never more convinced of the value of acting together to face our biggest challenges" (European Union 2021)

That is why the European Union has shown its solidarity in these times, protecting people's lives and livelihoods, focusing on actions that have provided an immediate and effective response to the crisis.

Since mid-March, the Commission has been monitoring the measures taken by Member States, which have an impact on rule of law, democracy and fundamental rights. (Suceveanu, 2020).

During 2020 alone, more than 1,350 measures were adopted to combat the crisis, including almost 400 State aid decisions that threw a bailout at European businesses.

Since the first days and weeks of the pandemic in Europe, health systems have received reinforcements at national, regional and local level, and hospitals across the European Union have also treated patients from other countries. Mobile medical teams have been sent to the field to meet the most urgent needs, more than 600,000 European citizens stranded abroad have been brought home and public and private

investments have been mobilised to develop safe and effective vaccines for the whole world.

The Commission's Medical Equipment Coordination Centre has helped Member States work together to cover the deficits.

The Commission also mobilised all resources from the European Union budget to meet the urgent needs that could best be met through strategic and coordinated actions at European level. The Emergency Support Instrument, with a budget of EUR 2.7 billion, has funded a wide range of actions, with much of its budget supporting the vaccine initiative, in which all 27 Member States participate.

The Commission has acquired and distributed 10 million masks to Member States for medical personnel. Funds were also provided for testing and intensive care training courses, for the purchase of ultraviolet light robots to disinfect hospitals and to support clinical trials on COVID-19 treatments.

According to the mandate received from the European Council, the European Commission coordinated a joint European response to the COVID-19 pandemic, taking measures to strengthen the public health sectors and reduce the socio-economic impact of the pandemic. The European Union has mobilised all the means at its disposal to help Member States coordinate their responses at national level and has provided objective information on the spread of COVID-19 and effective efforts to limit its spread.

The European Union, through its institutions, has acted swiftly to respond to the challenges of the pandemic. On 28 January 2020, the EU Civil Protection Mechanism was activated to start the repatriation of European citizens stranded abroad (approximately 408 flights helped 90,000 European citizens to return home by the end of the year).

On 13 March 2020, the Commission called for a coordinated economic response to the crisis caused by COVID-19 and on 16 March set up an expert advisory group, chaired by President Ursula von der Leyen and Commissioner for Health and Food Safety Stella Kyriakides, to consider and guide the European response to the crisis. The work of this group and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control was subsequently complemented by the new EU scientific advice platform on COVID-19 (European Court of Auditors 2020).

Composed of Member States' scientific advisers on COVID-19, the Platform aims to better coordinate scientific advice and exchange best practices on national public health measures related to this disease.

On 19 March 2020, the Commission appealed for solidarity by creating the rescEU (European Commission 2021) reserve of medical supplies, the first common European stockpile of emergency medical equipment, including protective masks and artificial breathing apparatus, to help Member States facing a shortage of equipment. Hosted by Member States, rescEU has delivered approximately 3 million high-quality protective masks to first-acting personnel, including medical and civil protection personnel, from Spain, Croatia, Italy, Lithuania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo.

The Civil Protection Mechanism sent artificial respiration devices, protective clothing and disinfectant to countries in difficulty and deployed emergency medical teams. Norwegian, Polish and Romanian doctors helped treat patients in Italy and Lithuania, and medical teams from Germany, Italy and Lithuania provided support to their guild colleagues in Armenia and Azerbaijan. A mobility package has helped to finance the transport of patients, medical teams and essential medical supplies.

On 28 October 2020, the Commission adopted a recommendation on testing strategies for COVID-19<sup>1</sup>, including the use of rapid antigenic tests, and on 18 November adopted a specific recommendation on rapid antigenic tests.

Also, on 18 December 2020, the Commission submitted a proposal for a Council recommendation on a common framework for rapid antigenic tests and for mutual recognition of test results for Covid-19.

The Commission mobilised EUR 100 million under that instrument to directly acquire rapid antigenic tests and deliver them to the Member States. On 18 December, she signed a framework contract with Abbott and Roche, which made it possible to purchase more than 20 million rapid (European Union 2021).

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The European Commission has also responded promptly to concerns about the possible food shortage by adopting emergency measures in April 2020 to provide more flexible opportunities for access to funds under the common agricultural policy and the European Fisheries and Maritime Affairs Fund, but also to implement actions to help stabilise agri-food markets.

The pandemic has caused major disruptions to travel and transport in Europe. The various health restrictive measures introduced by Member States in March and April led to border closures and strict controls, and thousands of trucks were blocked, forming long queues. In order to maintain the cross-border movement of goods within the European Union and to protect essential supply chains and transport workers, the Commission has quickly worked with Member States<sup>2</sup> to designate 'green lanes' of border crossing (European Commission 2020a) within the

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<sup>1</sup> Commission Recommendation of 18.11.2020 on the use of rapid antigen tests for the diagnosis of SARS-CoV-2 infection, Official Journal of the European Union, L 392, 23.11.2020, pp. 63–68, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32020H1743>.

<sup>2</sup> Communication from the Commission on the implementation of the Green Lanes under the Guidelines for border management measures to protect health and ensure the availability of goods and essential services, Official Journal of the European Union, C 96 I/1. 24.3.2020, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/RO/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020XC0324\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/RO/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020XC0324(01)).

entire trans-European transport network so that trucks can cross the border in no more than 15 minutes.

Earth observation and satellite navigation programmes Copernicus (European Commission 2020b) and Galileo (European Global Navigation Satellite Systems Agency 2020) have contributed to the identification of bottlenecks and the streamlining of transport. In October, the Commission extended the 'green lane' approach to multimodal transport, including rail and sea freight transport and air freight transport, and stressed the need to ensure essential connectivity for passengers.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Commission has worked closely with Member States to ensure a coordinated approach to border issues and a gradual return to free movement. The European Union has adopted a guide to help employers and workers organise a return to work in a safe and healthy environment, as well as guidelines to improve the protection of seasonal workers.

At the same time, European Union legislation has been updated to take account of new risks present at work and to provide greater protection for all workers, especially those working in direct contact with the new coronavirus. Additional practical guidelines have been published (European Commission 2020c) to ensure that critical workers can cross EU borders to get to work and to guarantee the union's health, health and access to food.

In March 2020, the Commission issued guidelines on border management measures (European Commission, 2020d) to protect health and ensure the availability of essential goods and services, including medicines and medical equipment for front-line medical staff. These were followed in May by guidelines and recommendations to help Member States phase out temporary border controls and travel restrictions, while taking all necessary safety measures.

Another important area in which measures have been taken by the European Union institutions is tourism, which contributes almost 10% to Europe's gross domestic product, being an extremely important source of employment and income in many regions. This being one of the sectors most severely affected by the pandemic. This area, unfortunately, will, from my point of view, be the most difficult to recover, due to the restrictions and rules imposed by some Member States.

Thus, in order to help Member States, as a result of the national quarantine measures in the spring, to coordinate its activity in order to restore the tourism safely, the Commission proposed a package of travel and tourism measures in 2020 and subsequently.

The package included a gradual lifting recommendation for restrictions to help resume businesses, labour and social life, including restoring free movement and resumption of transport, while providing tourism units for health measures.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The Commission launched in June the re-open EU website, which provides clear, reliable and real-time information about travel opportunities in all EU Member States and related health and safety

Less than a week after the declaration of Europe as a Covid-19 Pandemic Centre by the World Health Organization, the Commission adopted a temporary State aid framework in order to allow Member States to fully use the flexibility provided by the rules in the field, in order to support companies affected by the crisis. In this context, the Commission approved the aid measures notified by all Member States of the European Union and the United Kingdom.<sup>4</sup>

To counter the effects of the crisis, the European Union and the Member States have mobilized 4.2 thousand billion euros, which means over 30% of the Union's gross domestic product.

The EU budget has also been mobilized to a large extent possible to provide direct financial support to Member States in difficulty, the Commission presenting investment initiatives as a response to Coronavirus, which allowed Member States to use cohesion funds to support the most exposed sectors of their economies.

The Emergency Support Instrument was thus activated to provide direct financial support to strategic needs at European level, and the Commission launched the European Instrument for Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE) (European Commission, n.d.a) who is designed to help protect people in work and jobs affected by the coronavirus pandemic.

What is important to specify is that the establishment of the SURE is still a tangible expression of Union solidarity, whereby The Member States agree to support each other through the Union by providing additional financial resources with the help of loans. Thus, the Council has already approved a total financial support of EUR 87.9 billion for 18 Member States.<sup>5</sup>

The Covid-19 Pandemic has produced a major shock to economies in the European Union and around the world, having serious socio-economic consequences. Despite the rapid and comprehensive political response at both at Union and national level, it was soon realized that the EU economy would face a historical recession in 2020.

Therefore, a broader response was needed to repair the economic and social damages caused by the pandemic. The consolidated long-term budget for the period 2021-2027 and NextGenerationEU (European Council, 2021), the temporary recovery plan, together form the largest package of incentives ever funded from the European Union budget, amounting to 1.8 thousand billion euros. These funds will help the union to support citizens, but also companies and regions, especially those particularly affected by the crisis.

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restrictions. On 2020 December 14, Re-Open I became available in the form of free application for Android and iOS mobile devices.

<sup>4</sup> During 2020, the Commission adopted nearly 400 decisions approving 500 national measures in total amount estimated at 3 thousand billion euros.

<sup>5</sup> By the end of 2020, a financial support was approved totaling 90.3 billion euros for 18 Member States, and 39.5 billion euros were paid to 15: Belgium, Greece, Spain, Croatia, Italy, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia. Member States may continue to submit applications for financial support from Sure, which has a total financial capacity of up to 100 billion euros.

On May 27, 2020, the Commission proposed the largest funding package by the European Union in support of the recovery of post-pandemic Europe, in addition to the EU's 4.2 billion mobilized by the EU and the Member States. At its July meeting, the European Council unanimously agreed on the total of 1.8 trillion in funding, combining the new NextGenerationEU, which has 750 billion euros, with a modified European budget for the period 2021-2027 of 1,074 thousand billion. This funding package will help citizens, companies and regions most affected by the crisis and, at the same time, build a more green, more digital and resilient continent.

And on 10 November 2020, the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission reached a political agreement on this package, which included a 15 billion euro increase of a key program series, such as Erasmus + and EU4Health (European Commission, n.d.b).

To make it easier to repay funds from the market, the Commission will propose new sources of revenue to the EU budget.

The first new resource to be introduced in 2021 will be based on non-recycled plastic packaging and will contribute to achieving the European Green Pact's policy objectives. In the middle of 2021, the Commission will present new proposals on new own resources based on a carbon dioxide border adjustment mechanism on a digital tax and a revised European emission certificate trading system.

In order to contribute to a green and digital recovery, the funding of the long-term budget and NextGenerationEU will be allocated according to these two policy objectives.

As is well known, the nature of environmental rights requires an international effort aimed at their keeping and protecting. This is due to the interdependency amongst environmental sectors, cross-border effects of destroying the environment and the complex and overwhelming phenomenon such as destroying the ozone layer and global warming. It is very important to understand that the constitutional environmental rights are not a solution for all environmental problems. (Nicolau; 2016)

That is why, in the current context, it was decided that at least 30% of the funds will be spent on combating climate change, which makes the budget for 2021-2027 and NextGenerationEU to constitute the largest ecological investment package ever adopted at the level world.

More than 50% of the funds will be directed to new priorities. These include research and innovation programs (Horizon Europe), climate transition and fair digital transition (Fair Transition Fund and Digital Europe), training, recovery and resilience (through the Recovery and Resilience Facility) (European Commission, n.d.c), rescEU and the new EU4Health program. They will complemented cohesion and agricultural policy, which in turn have been modernized.

The recovery and resilience facility is the central element of the NextGenerationEU tool. It will help the European Union to become stronger after

overcoming the current crisis, providing Member States with loans and grants of € 672.5 billion in the crucial first years of recovery.

As part of the European Union Vaccine Strategy, the Commission has concluded agreements with six-company (AstraZeneca, Biontech / Pfizer, Curevac, Johnson & Johnson, Modern and Sanofi / GlaxoSmithKline) to ensure the availability of a wide range of anti-Covid vaccines- 19 safe and effective for European citizens (European Commission, n.d.d).

Without compromises at the level of safety or efficacy, the first vaccine was administered in the Union before the end of 2020. And on December 21, the European Commission granted a conditional marketing authorization to the anti-Covid-19 vaccine produced by Biontech / Pfizer, the first of this type authorized in the European Union, and seems to be the only one that has a high efficacy of protection, without significant side effects, being the most requested and administered vaccine.

In parallel, the Commission has shown solidarity with global partners by contributing to the Mechanism for global Access to Covid-19 Vaccines (COVAX), a global initiative to ensure fair access to affordable prices with EUR 500 million from European funds (100 million in the form of grants and a loan of EUR 400 million guaranteed by the European Sustainable Development Fund). By December 2020, the Team EUROPE - European Commission and EU Member States - had allocated over 850 million euros to the Covax mechanism, which meant that the European Union as a whole was initially the largest donor of Covax. This vital contribution will support the COVAX objective to provide 1.3 billion doses of vaccine countries with low and medium incomes by the end of 2021.

A very important role in addressing many challenges that have arisen with the rapid outbreak of the Pandemic of Covid-19, they played digital solutions. Applications for the detection and warning of confirmed patients who complement the existing manual detection of contacts have played an essential role in discontinuation of the virus transmission chain and even contribute to the salvation of human lives.

The European Union has helped to establish a coordinated approach between Member States that have launched applications to detect and warn confirmed patient contaminants, in compliance with data protection and privacy rules. The European budget has financed the development and implementation of a European solution for the interoperability of screening applications based on a decentralised architecture covering almost all national applications developed in the European Union. Thus, mobile applications to track and warn the contaminants of confirmed patients have been able to reach their full potential, even across borders.

With the support of the Commission, Member States have taken a number of necessary measures to make their national applications interoperable and in October the Commission launched a European 'gateway service' to interconnect these applications. And today, more and more national applications are interconnected as they become available.



Thus, the European data portal on COVID-19 ([covid19dataportal.org](https://covid19dataportal.org), n.d.) was launched, intended to collect and share research data, which quickly compiled an impressive volume of data, including more than 25 000 viral sequences and more than 100 000 scientific publications. The portal received more than 2.9 million data requests from more than 92,000 unique users in more than 170 countries.

Artificial intelligence and robots were helpful in hospitals. There is an artificial intelligence tool (European Commission, 2020e) funded by the Commission to help doctors diagnose COVID-19 on the basis of computed tomography scans and which has already been used throughout the European Union, and ultraviolet light robots have been sent to hospitals to disinfect wards quickly, reducing the spread of the disease and sparing staff from this task, as well as the risk of infection.

An important contribution in this regard has been made by the European Union Space Programme (Copernicus, n.d.), in particular through its Earth observation component, Copernicus, and its satellite navigation system. Since the beginning of the crisis, European Union satellites have monitored traffic congestion at border crossings between Member States and mapped medical facilities, hospitals and other critical infrastructure. Data collected from satellites, in combination with artificial intelligence, provided European and national public authorities with models that made it possible to better understand and address the emergency situation.

On 5 June, in collaboration with the European Space Agency (European Space Agency, n.d.), the Commission launched a fast-acting Earth observation tool in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It uses data obtained from satellites to measure the impact of measures to limit the movement of people and to monitor recovery after these measures are lifted, using economic and environmental data.

Another area in which the institutions of the European Union have worked together is that of Combating disinformation related to COVID-19., especially since in the current climate, it has proved to be fertile ground for conspiracy theories that undermine science and real facts about the origin, spread and treatment of COVID-19. The pandemic has generated more hate speech and racist and anti-Semitic attacks online and an increase in the number of rogue traders selling fake products online that claim to prevent or cure the disease caused by the new coronavirus.

During the pandemic crisis a number of rights and liberties have been restrained and in fact passed through an efficiency test because of necessity to prevent or combat the Covid 19, in an attempt to manage the community as a whole. Each state have its own manner in this fight, depending on the national and regional circumstances, the period and evolution of the pandemic or the diverse reactions of the people of a specific community. (Ploeșteanu; 2020)

Both the Commission and the European External Action Service worked closely on this issue with other European institutions and Member States, as well as international partners from the G7 and NATO, and so on 10 June 2020, the Commission and Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign

Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the Commission, presented a series of actions (European Commission, 2020f) to combat disinformation on COVID-19.

These include strengthening communication, public diplomacy in the immediate neighbourhood of the European Union and around the world, as well as supporting independent media and journalists. The Commission urged all actors, including online markets and social media, to help combat misinformation on the new coronavirus. By the end of the year, four sets of reports had been published on the actions taken in this regard.

The platforms complied with the Commission's call and removed or blocked millions of misleading advertisements and product listings. In 2020, more than 700 disinformation speeches on the new coronavirus were dismantled, published and updated on the EUvsDisinfo website (euvsdisinfo.eu, n.d.).

These actions have been integrated into the subsequent measures taken by the Union against disinformation, in particular the Action Plan for European Democracy and the Digital Services Act. The Commission shall use all the instruments at its disposal and finance research to help combat misinformation and disinformation on COVID-19.

### **Conclusions**

If we look back at 2020, the huge price paid because of the COVID-19 pandemic is indisputable. Fifteen million people in the European Union have been infected with COVID-19, more than 350,000 people have tragically lost their lives, and the fight against COVID-19 continues into 2021.

What we would like to point out, as a conclusion to the above, is that the institutions of the European Union have been more united than ever, working together for a single and unique purpose to protect and support and protect the people of the European Union, to get over this pandemic which has shaken the whole of Europe and the whole world.

Through the measures it has taken, the European Union has proved that the slogan 'together we are stronger' is not only a desire, but is as current and possible at a stage of life that has put all the states both within the Union and beyond to the test. That is why the measures adopted by the Union concerned not only the States of the Union, but also the countries of the world, which need aid.

The response of the Union institutions to the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has also sought to strengthen the health systems of the Member States of the Union and even the whole world and to support economic recovery in the most fragile regions and communities around the world.

The European Union has mobilised EUR 38.5 billion to combat COVID-19 on a global scale. Its response followed a team approach, Team Europe, which meant combining resources from the Union, its Member States and financial institutions, in particular the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, to support each partner country and maximise

impact on the ground. The funds have been used for emergency interventions and to meet urgent humanitarian needs, to strengthen health, water/sanitation and food systems, and to mitigate the economic and social impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Together, the European Union and its Member States remain one of the largest financial contributors in the World Health Organisation, being its main partners in the fight against the pandemic and its effects.

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