



*We are on the same boat,
all of us fragile and disoriented,
but at the same time important and needed,
all of us called to row together
(Pope Francis, 27/3/2020)*



EPP Group Position Paper on Coronavirus

A EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY PACT AGAINST THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

7 April 2020



Europe is under enormous threat and Europeans are suffering. Everybody feels the uncertainty that the Coronavirus has created, the danger for those at risk or the grief for the lives lost. Europe can only pull through this crisis if the European family stands together in solidarity and responsibility. We Europeans have been through tough times together. We will get through this too.

To respond to the extraordinary and serious situation caused by COVID19, the EPP Group in the European Parliament proposes a SOLIDARITY PACT, consisting of immediate measures to beat the virus, help those affected, protect our families, workers and the most vulnerable, support our businesses and provide for a long-term plan to strengthen Europe's response to such crises in the future.

This Pact starts with thinking of each other. Trusting each other. Taking care of each other. Solidarity is part of our DNA as Europeans.

The EPP wants to thank, first and foremost, all those on the frontline against the virus: doctors and nurses, carers and cleaners, food producers and shop keepers, transport and postal workers, members of the police and the armed forces, and their families. Yet, we all have a role to play. By looking out for each other. By staying at home or keeping a distance to protect vulnerable people. We cannot overcome this crisis by acting on our own. Nor by pitting national against European competences. We can only overcome it if we work together. All of us are now called upon to row together.

Our Solidarity Pact rests on five concrete action pillars. We propose to:

1. FOCUS on a united response to the health challenge NOW:

Health care systems and hospitals are stretched to the limit. The EU should stand ready to organise solidarity between Member States wherever possible. We want to:

(1) Establish an **EU Medical Response Coordination Unit**, functioning as an information and coordination hub - including for the joint procurement of

medicine, equipment and protective gear - as well as an emergency response team able to deliver vital supplies, medical equipment as well as medical staff to Member States experiencing a sudden surge in infections;

(2) This Coordination Unit should also operate as a contact point with a **real-time database of available beds in Intensive Care Units** and co-ordinate, where appropriate, the cross-border transfer of critically-ill patients to hospitals in other Member States still having treatment capacities; Where needed, military forces should provide logistic support and assist regional authorities and the emergency services with setting up field hospitals, providing airlift capacities as may be necessary (potentially using the European Air Transport Command and existing NATO structures). We welcome the guidelines published by the European Commission in this respect as well as the financial support given and urge all Member States to participate as they can;

(3) Reject all national bans on the export of medicine and medical equipment to other EU Member States; the Commission should explore all ways to prevent national measures from altering the correct functioning of the single market and co-ordinate the re-purposing of manufacturing capacity for the production of these products, notably sanitising gel, ventilators and protective equipment; as well as to pool and coordinate digital manufacturing capabilities, such as 3D printing, which can contribute to manufacturing necessary equipment; EU and national authorities need to release for a limited period of time, the patents and IPR related to medical ventilator designs and for medicines that have a shortage of supply. We strongly support a prolongation of the transition period of the Medical Device Regulation to focus all efforts on the production of material;

(4) Intensify EU medical research to enable speedy results from research on a vaccine as well as treatment against Coronavirus. The European Medicines Agency should fast-track procedures for testing and approving COVID-19-related medicine or vaccines whereas the Coordination Unit should coordinate the availability of vaccine production sites, to ensure that, once available, hundreds of millions of vaccines can be produced in a short period of time and made available at a fair price, taking into account the public investment in this research;

(5) Ensure that Member States pay sufficient attention to the **mental health implications** of the crisis and organise an EU-wide mental health campaign, advising citizens how to safeguard mental wellbeing under these new circumstances and informing them where to seek advice when needed;

(6) Guarantee the safety and **protection of the most vulnerable**, especially people with disabilities, children, the elderly and those at risk of suffering domestic violence, including by providing alternative shelters during periods of lockdown;

(7) Call on Member States to **pay particular attention to disadvantaged communities**, national minorities and in particular the Roma, when devising strategies for the fight against COVID-19;

(8) Calls for the **activation of the European Solidarity Corps** for the support of our societies as soon as movement restrictions are lifted, and for the mandate of the EU Aid Volunteers to be broadened to enable them to operate on EU territory;

(9) Deploy an EU supported action to test and provide medical support to the migrants and refugees located at the External borders of the EU, particularly in Greece;

The EU must show **solidarity with our partners in the world** and in particular with the countries of the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood as well as the African continent and Latin America, and support them in their efforts to combat the virus; The EU must provide support to our partners, including diplomatic support, like in the case of Taiwan which has successfully mitigated the effects of the virus. Believes therefore that all parties concerned, including Taiwan, should be incorporated into WHO meetings, mechanisms and activities, particularly during the global public health crisis.

2. FLATTEN the curve NOW ... in a coordinated way:

In the absence of effective medication or a vaccine the immediate fight against the spread of the virus builds on limiting social contacts. In this context, we want to:

(10) **Coordinate at European level** the suspension of flights, issuing of travel advice and closure of internal and external borders;

Internal border controls, though needed as a contingency measure, must remain strictly time-limited, proportionate and used only for the period deemed necessary by the responsible health authorities. We must preserve the Schengen area at all times;

(11) Establish **safe travel routes for EU citizens** or residents returning back to the EU from abroad, including a harmonised approach to testing and quarantine upon entry; the joint repatriation of EU citizens should be coordinated by the EU's Civil Protection Mechanism and the EEAS should be strengthened;

(12) Ensure **Priority Lanes at all internal EU borders** to secure the free flow of help such as medical professionals, agricultural seasonal workers and medical supplies where they are needed as well as the flow of essential items like food, agricultural inputs, and other goods in the single market and keep the supply chains open; interruption in trade and flow of goods must be minimal;

(13) Restrictions on movement must be established and lifted around the most affected areas in a coordinated manner to avoid negative cross-border effects. We want the EU Commission to **start work on an effective exit strategy**, which can be implemented when we have assurance that the curve has been flattened so as not to overload our healthcare system. This exit strategy could include large-scale testing, personal protective equipment for all health and sanitary workers and social distancing in relevant areas, as well as the possible use of apps. We also call on the Commission to develop a common EU testing protocol which should be implemented in a joint, coordinated and sequenced manner including testing at airports;

(14) The European Commission should enhance its **communication to the general public** and provide a regular update at least once per week on the common European response to the outbreak of COVID-19. This regular update should be presented to European citizens in an easily accessible and visible manner through channels such as public service broadcasters and preferably at the same time;

(15) Give **special regard to border regions** in view of allowing frontier workers to continue crossing borders, for example by means of a special certificate or vignette for priority professionals like health workers but also for other sectors and professions,

ultimately working towards a harmonised system; encourage Member States to coordinate social and fiscal legislation in order to avoid a switch in social security and fiscal systems for cross-border workers as a result of emergency measures such as working from home, and to coordinate their income support policies to ensure that all cross-border workers and SME's and self-employed persons operating across borders are included;

(16) Support plans to **create an EU research data platform** as well as a EU Data Centre for Emergency Coordination able to help the EU to collect data and for clinical uptake, to identify behavioural patterns, flows of people and vital products and run predictive analytics. Developing common EU standards for data collection and analysis to achieve a common data pool is crucial;

(17) We urge the **use of AI, data analytics** and other supercomputing tools to analyse data necessary for fighting the spread of the virus; research and development in these areas is crucial in order to improve existing technologies;

(18) **Use the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in an appropriate manner** to address the emergency for a limited period of time; medical state authorities should have access to anonymised EU-wide data of movements to keep the pandemic at bay and use AI to analyse data necessary for fighting the spread of the virus; we support the development of a mapping platform to be financed through Horizon and using existing technologies, such as GALILEO, for future crises;

(19) Calls on the Commission to ensure that, also during the exceptional times of the COVID-19 crisis, all measures taken on national and/or European level must be in line with the **rule of law**, strictly proportionate to the exigencies of the situation, clearly connected to the ongoing health crisis, limited in time and subject to regular scrutiny;

3. SECURE our critical infrastructure NOW:

The current extra-ordinary circumstances underline the importance of key infrastructures and strategic sectors. We therefore want to:

(20) Establish a **contingency plan for critical infrastructure**, which must include unhindered functioning of digital services, health and care facilities, energy, and food supply within the entire single market;

(21) In the light of the **fundamental importance of the EU agri-food sector**, we underline the importance of the Common Agricultural Policy and want to take the necessary measures to ensure the viability of farms and the fisheries sector and avoid the massive abandonment of production during the crisis, such as liquidity support via the timely (pre-)payment of direct and second pillar payments, flexibility in the management of aid schemes and in the submission of claims, market monitoring and crisis management (private storage, promotion measures and exceptional measures to allow the Commission to propose additional market measures and time-limited derogations from competition law);

(22) Regarding **agriculture and food production**, take measures to ensure that sufficient personnel, including seasonal and cross-border workers, are in place to harvest produce, under the right conditions (health certificate, individual housing and entry requirements etc.);

(23) **Workers in the transport sector must be among the priority groups to be protected**, among others by having access to sanitising gel and safe parking areas where food and toilets and showers with appropriate sanitary standards remain available;

(24) Introduce a **crisis-management mechanism in the transport sector**, notably in relation to the transport and supply of protection material and precious commodities;

(25) Launch a **European Health Autonomy Action Plan** to produce and store in sufficient numbers critical medicine and pharmaceutical products as well as key medical equipment such as masks or ventilators, such as not to be largely dependent on outside suppliers, while strengthening global supply chains, including joint procurement for strategic materials. The European Commission should launch a proposal for a centralised purchasing system for basic sanitary equipment allowing countries to be prepared in exceptional emergency situations;

(26) Extraordinary measures should be matched with **intensified communication**

between Governments and Parliaments. Journalists and the political opposition must have unimpeded access to information and reasoning behind imposed solutions, and must be able to exercise their scrutiny. Transparency is key;

(27) Ensure that the digital sector take the necessary measures to **stop fake news, misinformation and hate speech** regarding the Coronavirus crisis via social media and protect independent media as the true guarantor of the right of people to be informed; The EU also has to co-ordinate Member State **action against third-country propaganda, internet-fraudsters and cybercriminals** exploiting people's fears or selling overpriced or counterfeit medical material;

(28) Ensure that **Erasmus+** students are able to resume their studies programme once the crisis ends; ensure that all research and educational project deadlines are extended. We want to **help EU researchers** by reducing administrative burdens and ensure continuity of employment and / programmes for researchers for an automatic six month extension;

4. HELP the most affected people, businesses and regions NOW:

This crisis is not the fault of any Member State but the huge economic impact is being felt by everyone. We have a moral obligation to help and support those at the frontline. The first to suffer are the workers, employees, self-employed, family businesses and SMEs - the backbone of our societies and the European economy. What is at stake with the survival of SMEs and the single market is nothing less than the survival of the European economy.

Besides worrying about their health, people fear for their jobs and our aim is to prevent as many job losses as possible, together with the Member States. Particular attention must be paid to Member States who are hit the most and those who were still recovering from the financial crisis.

The unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 shock requires immediate measures as well as an **ambitious recovery plan**, pushing the total EU and ECB pandemic response to **over 1 trillion Euros and the**

combined European and Member State effort towards 3 trillion Euros, activating all existing tools to ensure financial solidarity and developing new commonly funded financial instruments and sources of income, which have sufficient size and long maturity to be fully efficient. It is in our common interest to show the greatest possible solidarity and responsibility. All 27 Member States and the EU should stand with the regions most in need.

To ensure a rapid operationalisation of the recovery plan we propose to:

(29) Use all available means and unused money in the current EU budget, including the surplus and unspent margins and the Globalisation Adjustment Fund to deploy financial assistance quickly to the most affected regions and businesses, and allow for the greatest flexibility possible in the use of funds, while continuing to respect the principle of sound financial management and ensuring that funds reach those most in need; we welcome, to this end, the recent Commission proposal to create an **Emergency Support Instrument**;

(30) Put forward and reach agreement quickly on **a new proposal on the next multiannual EU budget** (MFF) which must be considerably higher to be a true instrument of solidarity and cohesion, reflect the right priorities and include sufficient margin for unforeseen events, including future pandemics, as well as a significant increase in investment-related and research items and measures to boost the relaunch after the crisis, including an 'SME kickstart strategy', a 'New European Tourism Strategy' and support for the culture and education sectors; failing an agreement on the next MFF we expect the Commission to propose a contingency plan now to extend the duration of ongoing financing programmes beyond 31 December 2020, based on the current MFF and including a re-focusing of current programmes to address the situation created by the coronavirus pandemic;

(31) Create an **EU Coronavirus Solidarity Fund** of at least 50 billion euros, consisting of up to 20 billion euros outside the MFF ceilings in grants and up to 30 billion euros in loans, guaranteed by the EU Budget, (both frontloaded in the first 2 years of the next MFF or, failing an agreement on the MFF in due time, spread over the contingency period), supporting the financial efforts undertaken by the healthcare sectors of all Member States during the current crisis, as well as investments in the healthcare sector

in the post-crisis period in order to make health-care systems more resilient but focussing on those most in need;

(32) Support the development of a new instrument or the new use of existing instruments in the Member States most hit economically including through the appropriate and effective use of the **ESM**;

(33) Support the ECB and the European Commission in their determination to do 'whatever-it-takes' to help the European economy get out of this unprecedented crisis stronger than ever, in recognition of the fact that this crisis was not the fault of any Member State; support the use of article 122 of the Treaty on financial assistance to Member States in severe difficulties due to exceptional occurrences beyond its control, as well as the crisis-related use of **maximum flexibility in the SGP**, maintained while strictly necessary to respond to the crisis and willing to return to balanced and sustainable public accounts afterwards;

(34) Create a European system supporting **state-supported part-time work**, covering a part of an employee's wage loss due to reduced working time; Given the urgent need to protect jobs and wages while awaiting a future Commission proposal on a possible European unemployment re-insurance scheme, we welcome the SURE proposal of the European Commission; this temporary instrument must be deployed quickly and effectively to the regions and Members States most affected;

(35) Address the urgent liquidity needs of our companies, notably SMEs and the self-employed, through an increase in the EIB's equity and the establishment of a **dedicated extraordinary EIB fund** to provide liquidity to SMEs facing a temporary and dramatic drop in their revenues because of the crisis. Money drawn from this fund could be used to pay wages or debt obligations and would come with a very low or zero interest rate;

(36) Insist on a **pro-active role of the banking sector** in this crisis, allowing companies and citizens who are suffering financially as a result of COVID19 to temporary lower or halt debt or mortgage repayments, providing maximum flexibility in the treatment of non-performing loans, temporarily suspending dividend payments and lowering the often excessive interest rates on current account overdrafts; supervisors must demonstrate a high degree of flexibility to this end;

(37) Support SMEs through a **COVID-**

19-screening of EU legislation and a clear reduction of red tape including regulatory action taken by EU agencies; furthermore it should be ensured that planned legislation does not create additional uncertainty during the crisis; calls in that regard for a postponement of the farm to fork and biodiversity strategies;

(38) Member States should pay all their outstanding bills to **SMEs** within 7 days in order to avoid a further cash squeeze for SMEs;

(39) Make **state aid** guidelines more flexible and increase the de-minimis support for agriculture and fisheries and additional EFSI funds;

(40) While avoiding general tax increases, demand a contribution from those who gained financially from this crisis, such as short-sellers, in the form of a considerable **Solidarity Levy** on speculative short-selling on financial markets; Revenues shall be used to support health care systems in the regions most in need;

(41) Keep key industries alive, such as utility companies, steel or the transport sector, supporting recapitalisation if needed, without distorting competition, and paying attention to the preservation of less frequented routes; prevent key industries faced with a sudden fall in their stock price due to the crisis from hostile takeovers by competitors outside the EU;

(42) Preserve Europe's cultural diversity and heritage: artisans, musicians, creatives, and cultural industries have to be supported in this crisis where needed; support also the tourism sector with adequate policies such as state aid and resources from the instruments available;

5. Plan NOW for the future:

We need to learn the lessons of this unprecedented crisis. This goes beyond our immediate health response. Based on the single market, we want to relaunch our economy, strengthen our industry and SMEs, and embolden vulnerable sectors. To this end, we propose to:

(43) Establish a **better European pandemic response**. The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) must be strengthened and turned into

a fully-fledged European Health Agency, including its early-warning and response system, with a unique ECDC authority in each Member State and the scientific community to implement cross-border measures and coordinate a European pandemic response and the capacity to act as a coordinating centre for public health;

(44) Transfer the COVID-19 expert panel into a permanent independent expert team on virus outbreaks working with ECDC to develop standards, make recommendations and **develop protocols** to be used by the Commission and Member States in case of a similar crisis;

(45) Establish a **dedicated EU fund** to help Member States strengthen their hospital infrastructure and health services in the years to come, ensuring the highest standards of health care, treatment, research into Health Sciences and innovation; In this context calls for the establishment of an EU Health Academy network as part of a European Global Health Plan, with at least one (university) hospital per Member State, serving as a national diffusion hub for European cutting-edge medical research and training; This EU Health Academy network should have mandatory and regular information-sharing, best-practice learning and staff exchanges;

(46) Boost EU **research and Innovation**, focusing on infectious diseases and related pandemics, also beyond the COVID19 emergency; launch furthermore a **new pharmaceutical strategy**, translating inter alia the European Health Autonomy Action Plan into a permanent approach, aimed at lowering the EU's dependence on third countries for the provision of key medicines and medical material;

(47) Launch a **new European industrial strategy**, which follows a forward looking approach and takes account of the need to combine the recovery of industries most affected by the current situation and the necessity of climate neutrality;

(48) Create **strategic reserves** of material and commodities;

(49) Ensure the swift and full implementation of the Regulation on **Foreign Direct Investment Screening**, including the use of all available tools to the fullest extent, in particular in the health sector as a strategic sector, and propose a further strengthening, if needed;

(50) Make full use of **trade defence**

instruments and develop new tools if needed in order to address market-distorting practices of third countries;

(51) Adopt a **European Travel and Tourism Strategy** for Europe to remain the world's preferred tourism destination;

(52) The current **European Civil Protection Mechanism** must evolve into a genuine European Civil Protection Force with its own human resources, easily mobilised, and ready to act on a permanent basis in any given emergency.

(53) Ask the Commission to present a strategy on the health care **impact of the thorough demographic change** Europe is confronted with, building on the Report on the impact of demographic challenges, and to propose measures and recommendations to Member States to further develop robust health care systems, and to take into account the impact of depopulation in several regions and areas where vulnerable citizens feel left behind because of lacking care facilities and personnel;

(54) Introduce a **European Carer's Strategy**, in recognition of the social impacts associated with changes in and loss of employment, particularly for those with caring responsibilities who are disproportionately women;

(55) In the future, the EU should develop a **European Online Educational Platform** for schools and universities to ensure that all schoolchildren and students in Member States have access to quality educational tools. The platform could also serve as a common resource centre for teachers, students and parents home-schooling across Europe, thus enhancing the overall quality of education in all Member States;

(56) **Tackle the root causes** of virus transmission from animal to humans, including the role of 'wet markets', also through increased co-operation at international level; set up a permanent dialogue between the EU and China to assess reciprocity and compliance with standards, to ensure a level playing-field, secure industrial supply chains and prevent future crises;

(57) We must not lose sight of the geopolitical consequences of the pandemic. The freezing of Western economies and the expected recession can accelerate the change of the global balance of power. Intensified geopolitical rivalries seem inevitable possibly leading to a period of

political chaos. This must be a wake-up call, and the EU must seize the moment by **strengthening the rules-based international order** and multilateralism; in this context we call for the mobilisation of all external financing instruments, such as the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI), the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP), the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI) and the European Development Fund (EDF) alongside with the Humanitarian Aid instrument;

(58) Send the strong message that the **EU is ready to engage with its citizens**; in the current context the European Parliament, the European Commission and the Council should discuss and establish the format that would allow the Conference on the Future of Europe to start its work at the first opportunity. The format of the Conference should be reshaped to reflect the issues raised by new context we are living;

(59) **Support the eventual creation of a Special Committee of Inquiry** into the lessons learned and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic including the social and economic impacts of the pandemic. Learning the lessons from this pandemic, **ensure the European Parliament, as the only directly-elected institution of the European Union, can remain fully functional** even in times of crisis.