

President Tzitzikostas and Minister Eichtinger back strong EU regional funds to combat the Coronavirus



□The European Committee of the Regions (CoR) President, Apostolos Tzitzikostas, and Lower Austria's Minister for Housing, Labour and International Affairs, Martin Eichtinger, exchanged views on the EU's measures to combat the current crisis, as well as and Lower Austria's apprentice offensive during a teleconference call.□

President Tzitzikostas explained the work being undertaken by the CoR to bring together the experiences of Europe's local and regional authorities as means to measure, assess and improve the EU's policies to tackle the emergency. He argued that the EU needed to come together, agreeing the next EU budget and sufficient investment to support all regions and cities. "Cohesion policy and its unique partnership between EU, national and regional governments, are key for Europe to contain the pandemic and to relaunch Europe's economy. The divisions among Member States must be overcome to secure an adequate EU recovery plan, based on a bold EU budget, by June. Otherwise we risk to seriously weaken our capacity to protect citizens' health and social rights, preserve Europe's productive capacity, help businesses survive the emergency and invest in a sustainable future", said **President Tzitzikostas**.□

"The European Committee of the Regions is the voice of Europe regions and as such promotes a strong solidarity and cohesion," said Lower Austria's Minister for Housing, Labour and International Affairs **Martin Eichtinger** said during a video conference with the **President Tzitzikostas**. **Eichtinger** said that he appreciated the efforts and measures taken by the EU's institutions to mitigate the current COVID19 Pandemic□.

Lower Austria's apprentice measures as an international model

The discussions focussed especially on effective measures and coordinated strategies across Europe to tackle the corona crisis. Protecting jobs and boosting the economy were key issues for all local and regional governments. The Lower Austria's apprentice offensive is one example of best practice in that respect: "European regions can adapt this model and adjust it to their corresponding labour market structures. The concept of building a regional network with three training pillars together with the social partners has proven to be an effective recipe against youth unemployment in Lower Austria", said **Minister Eichtinger**. He added that, "In 2019 Lower Austria had the highest decrease in youth unemployment compared to all other Austrian regions". The EU supports the Lower Austria apprentice offensive with around 6.75 million from the European Social Fund. "It is also a question of keeping regional funding at a sufficient level in the EU's multi-annual financial framework", **Minister Eichtinger** emphasised.

Learning from the corona crisis – promoting citizen exchange

It was agreed that the current situation only increases the urgency of the Conference on the Future of Europe, as proposed by **Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission**. As part of this Conference the European Commission would like to build on new ways of more actively involving citizens in open, inclusive, transparent and structured debates, based on established citizen dialogues. “The conference would be the appropriate forum to think about how to be more citizen-oriented and efficient and how we can make the EU an active, independent and credible global player. The EU has to learn from the corona crisis”, said **Minister Eichinger**. □

[EASO publishes the COI report “Syria – Security situation”](#)

Today, the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) published the 2020 update to the Country of Origin Information (COI) report “[Syria – Security situation](#)”. This report is part of a series of Syria reports produced in 2019-2020. These reports cover actors of protection, internal mobility, key socio-economic indicators, and targeting of individuals. The reports provide information relevant for international protection status determination for Syrian applicants for international protection, and will be used in the development of a country guidance note on Syria.

In February 2020, asylum applications lodged in the EU+ by Syrians decreased to some 6 460, compared to almost 8 000 in January. Still, Syrians remained the top citizenship of origin, lodging around one in 10 applications in the EU+ overall. In March, just some 4 200 applications were lodged by Syrians. The number of first-instance decisions (5 904) issued to Syrian nationals was slightly above January levels (+5 %); in March, however, they were issued the most decisions (7 476), such that the outflow (case closures) was far more than the inflow (applications lodged), after the opposite occurred for several months in a row. Thus, at the end of March there was a small decrease in the number of cases awaiting a decision at first instance (50 220, down by some 2 900), previously increasing for seven consecutive months.

Around 81 % of Syrians were granted some form of international protection in the first quarter of 2020. This number was slightly lower than the recognition rate in the previous quarter (84 %), but still the highest among all citizenships applying for asylum in the EU+.

The report, [EASO COI Report: Syria – Security situation \(2020 update\)](#), analyses the security situation in Syria, focussing in particular on the situation of the civilian population. It provides an overview of the armed conflicts in Syria, information on the main parties to the conflict and a governorate-level description of the security situation. The reference period

is 2019 and the first two months of 2020.

The report was drafted by the EASO COI Sector together with researchers from the Swedish Migration Agency, Country of Origin Information, Section for Information Analysis, in accordance with the [EASO COI Report Methodology](#). The report was reviewed by the Netherlands, Office for Country Information and Language Analysis. Additionally, ACCORD, the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation, conducted an external review.

Additional information to complement this report can be found in the following EASO reports:

Photo: © 2018 European Union (photographer: Peter Biro)

[COVID-19: Council greenlights €3 billion assistance package to support neighbouring partners](#)

EU ambassadors today endorsed a Commission proposal to provide up to 3 billion euros of macro-financial assistance to ten enlargement and neighbourhood partners to help them cope with the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Enlargement and neighbourhood countries are our closest partners. Now more than ever, it is absolutely essential that we stick together and show solidarity in addressing the economic and social impact of this global crisis.

Zdravko Maric, Croatian Minister of Finance

Financial assistance will be provided in the form of loans on highly favourable terms and allocated as follows:

- Albania: €180 million
- Bosnia-Herzegovina: €250 million
- Georgia: €150 million
- Jordan: €200 million
- Kosovo*: €100 million
- Moldova: €100 million
- Montenegro: €60 million
- Republic of North Macedonia: €160 million
- Tunisia: €600 million
- Ukraine: €1200 million.

EU assistance will help these jurisdictions cover their immediate financing needs which have increased as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. Together with the support from the International Monetary Fund, the funds will help enhance macroeconomic stability and create space to allow resources to be allocated towards protecting citizens and to mitigating the negative socio-economic consequences of the coronavirus pandemic.

The funds will be available for twelve months and will be disbursed in two instalments. The loans will have a maximum average maturity of 15 years. The assistance will be subject to a memorandum of understanding (MOU), to be agreed between each partner and the Commission.

The text will need to be adopted by the European Parliament and the Council before it can enter into force.

*This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

Declaration by the High Representative Josep Borrell, on behalf of the European Union, on human rights in the times of the coronavirus pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic impacts every country and region of the world and every aspect of our lives. It has reminded us how interconnected we are. Nobody will be safe in any country as long as the pandemic rages in different parts of the world. Respect for all human rights must remain at the heart of fighting the pandemic and supporting the global recovery.

The pandemic and its socio-economic consequences are having a disproportionate impact on the rights of women, children and elderly persons, and on all persons in vulnerable situations, including refugees, migrants, internally displaced persons, and are deepening pre-existing inequalities. Response measures should take account of the needs of those that are most at risk of marginalisation, stigmatisation, xenophobia and racism and other forms of discrimination. Prevention of, and protection from, all forms of sexual and gender-based violence, including through appropriate redress mechanism, and continued access to all essential health services, are particularly important in a time of confinement. All measures and actions taken in response should be inclusive and gender-responsive and ensure the

women's full and effective participation in decision-making processes and in all stages of response and recovery. The heavy impact of the crisis on economic and social rights also needs to be addressed.

The European Union reaffirms the need to pay special attention to the growing impact of the pandemic on all human rights, democracy and the rule of law. In emergency circumstances, international human rights law allows states to limit certain human rights provided that the measures are necessary, proportionate, temporary in nature, and non-discriminatory. The coronavirus pandemic should not be used as a pretext to limit democratic and civic space, the respect of the rule of law and of international commitments, nor to curtail freedom of expression, freedom of the press and access to information online and offline. The measures should not be used to restrict the work of human rights defenders, journalists, media workers and civil society organisations. Digital technologies that have the potential to help contain the pandemic should be used in full respect of human rights including the right to privacy.

Protecting the right of everyone to the highest attainable standard of health requires access to reliable information. People must be empowered to protect their own health and those of others. Misleading or false information can put lives in danger. It is therefore crucial to resolutely counter disinformation with transparent, timely and fact-based communication and thus reinforce the resilience of societies.

The European Union recognises that the role of civil society and human rights defenders is more important than ever to encourage solidarity, support those who are most in need, and defend human rights, fundamental freedoms and democratic space, and to promote accountability.

This is a time for solidarity and global cooperation through multilateral efforts. The European Union reaffirms its commitment to contribute to the global response to the pandemics. The European Union will promote coordination in all relevant multilateral fora, including working with the UN, WHO, the Council of Europe, the OSCE and other regional organisations. Measures taken at the national level are also of particular importance.

The European Union supports the important role of the UN system in mobilising and coordinating the global response to the pandemic with human rights at the forefront. We strongly support the UN Secretary General's call for an immediate global ceasefire, as well as the call to end gender-based violence, and the work of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and her Office.

The European Union recalls that all human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated. This cannot be forgotten at this time of global crisis. We undertake to ensure that our response upholds the dignity and human rights of all without discrimination of any kind and call on all governments around the world to do the same. No one should be left behind, and no human right ignored.

Article – How Covid-19 affects Erasmus and EU Solidarity Corps



How the EU is helping

To help young people who are volunteering or taking part in Erasmus+, as much as possible, the European Commission has said it will make the programmes as flexible as legally possible.

It has recommended that the national agencies, responsible for the management of study exchanges, invoke “force majeure”, which would allow them to assess the possibility of approving additional costs up to a maximum grant amount and to postpone planned activities for 12 months.

Parliament’s [culture and education committee](#) has called on the Commission to do everything possible to provide support, clear information and reassurance for participants.

In a [letter to Mariya Gabriel, the commissioner responsible for youth and education on 15 April](#), MEPs ask the Commission to ensure that:

- **Maximum flexibility** is applied, in particular to help those who have had to return to their home countries for safety reasons

- All exceptional costs in connection with Covid-19 are **reimbursed**
- Exchange students and participants of the Solidarity Corps programme **retain their status**
- Exchange students **do not lose the academic year** and can obtain the ECTS credits through remote study arrangements.