

COVID-19 update 61 – 02-10/03/2021

A compilation of press releases/articles on policies and best practices from various EU and national information sources, and information provided by our members

⇒ **Please note that this update is published on a 2-week basis.**

1. EU MEASURES

Under the [State Aid Temporary Framework](#), the Commission has recently approved:

- €200 million [Cypriot schemes](#) to support companies and self-employed affected by the coronavirus outbreak;
- a modified €1,2 billion [Danish 'umbrella' scheme](#) to support self-employed affected by the coronavirus outbreak;
- a €2 billion [French scheme](#) to support uncovered fixed costs of companies affected by the coronavirus outbreak;
- a €60 million [Greek scheme](#) to support micro, small and medium-sized enterprises affected by the coronavirus outbreak;
- a €55 million [Irish 'umbrella' scheme](#) to support companies active in tourism or in directly related sectors in the context of the coronavirus outbreak;
- an increase of €240 million in budget of existing [Latvian scheme](#) to support companies affected by the coronavirus outbreak;
- a €15 million [Portuguese scheme](#) to support micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in Azores region in the context of the coronavirus outbreak.

On 4th March the European Commission [advised](#) EU countries to “gradually transition between the emergency measures, taken in the context of the pandemic, and those necessary to ease the process of labor and capital reallocation in the recovery.” EU governments have to strike a fine balance between phasing out support too soon and risk a wave of bankruptcies, and putting off inevitable restructuring by extending blanket support. The Commission said it recognizes the “risks of phasing out emergency measures without effective new policies in place.”

It set out three policies that EU countries should adopt to achieve “a job-rich recovery”: time-limited hiring incentives to help workers move from “declining to expanding sectors;” training schemes to ensure workers’ skills match labor market demands; and targeted support to the unemployed.

The Commission adopted an [action plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights](#), detailing quantitative targets for 2030 including achieving 78 percent of all adults in employment; 60 percent of all adults in training every year; and slashing the number of people at risk of poverty by 15 million.

“As we gradually start to come out of the health crisis in coming months, it is essential to give a very strong political message to all Europeans that the EU is concerned for their livelihoods, their job and their wellbeing,” said Jobs and Social Rights Commissioner Nicolas Schmit. (Source: POLITICO)

On 23rd February the European Commission said that it has formally warned six EU countries (Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Hungary, and Sweden) that their virus-related border curbs could undermine free movement within the bloc. The EU executive is worried the measures go beyond recommendations adopted four months ago seeking a “proportional” balance between slowing the spread of the coronavirus and maintaining movement. It has given the countries until beginning of March to respond, failing which it could, theoretically, start proceedings for breach of EU laws.

The Commission’s letter to Germany, which addressed Germany’s decision to close the borders with Czech Republic and Slovakia as a result of the emergence of new variants of the virus, pointed out that the spread of variants in the Czech Republic and Slovakia was no worse than in some other EU countries. It also questioned the German authorities’ requirement that COVID-19 test results be issued in English, German, French or Italian, saying results in Czech or Slovak should also be accepted.

The German reply insisted that the restrictions met the EU standards of being non-discriminatory and proportional to the threat, given “the specific situation of the border regions” and that in any case Germany had the right “to deviate in individual cases” from the EU recommendations “to protect health” – an area of responsibility that remains in the power of each Member State, not the EU. The letter also said the restrictions still allowed cross-border goods traffic to flow.

The European Commission now has to assess whether the German response adequately answers its formal warning letter. If it decides it does not, it theoretically has the option of starting legal action against Berlin – though the executive has never done so in such a case where national prerogatives hold.

The Belgian authorities decided to lift travel bans of non-essential travel from and into the country only as of 18 April. (Sources: [Euractiv](#), [POLITICO](#), [The Local de](#))

2. NATIONAL MEASURES

For information on the current **provisions regarding the crossing of Single Market borders**, please consult the Commission’s [Re-open EU](#) web portal.

CZECH REPUBLIC

Czech Republic has introduced a very detailed set of new measures to combat the worsening COVID crisis in the country, as well as a gradual lifting of the measures as of 26th March. **As of 14th March**, retail stores will be closed, **with the exception of foodstores, electronics, ICT, fuel, pharmacies, chemists, animal welfare goods and feeds, opticians, newsagents, laundromats and e-shops**. As of 16 March, free movement is limited with the exception of travel to and from work and trips necessary to ensure basic human needs (e.g. foodstuffs, pharma shopping, helping older family members).

As of 26th March and at different intervals during the month of April, lifting measures will gradually be introduced. (For more detail: [Government of the Czech Republic](#))

DENMARK

Denmark confirmed on 24th February that it will partially lift national coronavirus restrictions with effect from 1st March. The announcement came after the publication of expert group recommendations and negotiations between the minority Social Democratic government and other political parties.

Shops which sell durable goods such as clothes or furniture will be allowed to open nationally from provided they are under 5.000 square metres in size. Stores which are located in shopping malls will not be allowed to reopen. Increased social distancing requirements will apply and larger stores will also be allowed to open on an appointment basis to a limited number of customers, contingent on approval from health authorities.

Only some school classes and only in certain regions will start again. Additionally, students over the age of 12 will be asked to take a COVID-19 test twice weekly, as will teachers. Outdoor cultural life and outdoor sports and leisure pursuits would also be permitted nationally with a 25-person assembly limit in place.

According to the Justice Ministry statement, the government will review infection trends before deciding whether to allow schools to reopen in other regions of the country. A second round of reopenings would take effect on 15th March. (Source: [The Local dk](#))

FINLAND

A state of emergency has been reintroduced, leading to further lockdown measures, such as the closure of restaurants, and distance learning for students over 13. Additionally, there is a ban on public gatherings of six or more people. (Source: DeHavilland)

FRANCE

After the initiatives of Intermarché, Casino or even Auchan to help students made vulnerable by the epidemic (see our [COVID-19 update 60](#)), **Carrefour** announced on 1st March that from 2nd March to 31st August, female students will be offered each month a free packet of tampons or sanitary napkins of the Carrefour Soft brand, in all of the distributor's hypermarkets, up to the limit of 400.000 kits made available nationally by Carrefour. To do this, they will have to present their student card, but also the loyalty card – two conditions also set by Intermarché, Casino, and Auchan for their reduction coupons for students. According to a study carried out by the student union FAGE, on 8th February, 33% of the female students believe they need financial help to buy their periodic protection. With its measure, Carrefour wants to take action before the entry into force, as from the start of the September, of free hygiene protection, announced on 23rd February by the Minister of Higher Education, Frédéric Vidal. Long claimed by feminist associations, it will result in the deployment of 1.500 distributors in universities. (Source: [LSA](#))

Système U is in turn taking action. From 1st March to 31st March, the brand will contribute €1 for every 100 checkouts of its 7 million U card customers, Système U announced on 3rd March. **At the end of the operation, the amount collected will be donated in the form of food products to student associations.** This device is “a concrete response that complements the

measures we have already taken to support young people, particularly in terms of employment and learning”, said Dominique Schelcher, president of Système U. Indeed, at the local level, many System U stores are already supplying basic necessities to local associations. In Lyon, some 350 baskets worth €50 were given to students in early February. (Source : [LSA](#))

GERMANY

Germany is easing some of its pandemic restrictions but will extend its lockdown, with many non-essential shops unable to reopen unless infection numbers reduce. Caught between resurgent coronavirus rates and a public exasperated by the tight restrictions put in place last fall, the Government came up with a new compromise: **From 8th March, book shops, florists and garden centers will be allowed to reopen as long as strict hygiene measures are in place.** The next stage of the reopening may happen on 22nd March, but only if “there is a stable or decreasing trend” of new infections. At that next stage, Germany would allow catering businesses to reopen their outdoor spaces, and theaters, opera houses and cinemas to resume operations. Meanwhile vaccinations and testing for the virus will be ramped up. Starting on 8th March, there will be one federally reimbursed [rapid] test for each citizen per week. (Source: [POLITICO](#))

The continued lockdown and store closures and the withdrawal of a temporary cut in sales tax has led to German retail sales to tumble more than expected in January. The Federal Statistics Office said retail sales fell 4,5% on the month in real terms after an upwardly-revised decline of 9,1% in December. The January reading undershot a Reuters forecast for a decline of 0,3%. Fashion retail sales plunged 76,6% year-on-year, while sales of groceries were up 4,3% year-on-year as supermarkets and convenience stores remained open. Online retailers continued to benefit from shifting consumer habits with sales up 31,7%. (Sources: Reuters, [ESM](#))

In close coordination with the Stuttgart state government, **the drugstore chain dm will open its own test centers for free corona rapid tests at the end of March.** The project will initially start at 250 locations in Baden-Württemberg, for example in tents on the dm parking lots. The company is building an app based system so that as many people as possible can be tested for the coronavirus. Registration, appointments and display of the results are integrated into the app. The initiative is meant as a contribution to combating the pandemic, rapid tests should not become a new business area for the company. The head of the drugstore assumes that other qualified retailers will also offer such test options in the future. (Source: [Lebensmittel Zeitung](#))

The first corona rapid tests for self-application went on sale in Germany on 6th March in Aldi Nord and Aldi Süd. The delivery quantity was limited to one pack per customer. A pack costs around 25 euros. It contains five tests, the results of which should be available in 15 minutes after the nasal swab. The detection rate is said to be 96 percent. **Lidl** offered the tests on its website. Within a couple of hours the tests were out of stock. The test should shortly be available at various retailers and drugstores. (Sources: [Lebensmittel Zeitung](#), [LSA](#))

A number of large retailers want to use the Luca app for contact tracking in the fight against the coronavirus. Shopping center operators ECE, Deichmann, Kik, and Thalia rely on the solution as well as retailers such as Deichmann, Kik, Breuninger, Thalia, Katag, s.Oliver, Sport2000 and ANWR Group. On 8th March, politicians want to decide on a nationwide introduction.

The Luca app has received a lot of attention in the past few weeks. It works like this: Every shop receives a QR code. When a customer enters the shop, he scans the QR code in the shop window and checks in there. In the event of a reported corona infection, the local health department should be able to track the contacts in the store via the encrypted system and quickly interrupt chains of infection. (Source: [Lebensmittel Zeitung](#))

GREECE

Greece plans to lift COVID-19 restrictions in the retail sector and open schools before the end of March and begin to re-open the tourism sector in May ahead of the vital summer season. However, this decision hinges on epidemiological data. In the mid-term, as vaccinations progress, the government plans to allow outdoor dining in April and to restart tourism, which accounts for about a fifth of Greece's economic output and employs one in five people. How the sector fares will be crucial for the country which is slowly emerging from a decade-long debt crisis but which has seen its economy shrink sharply due to COVID-19 restrictions. Two weeks of lockdown accounted for a reduction in public spending and lost taxes of 1,2 billion euros including 520 million euros from retailers. (Source: [Reuters](#))

HUNGARY

The following restrictive measures will come in force beginning on 8th March: **All non-essential shops must remain closed for a two-week period.** Restaurants remain closed except for takeout and delivery. All services, with a few exceptions, e.g. private healthcare, are suspended for a two-week period. Fitness centers and gyms will have to close as well. The wage support and tax benefit program already in place for hotels, bars and restaurants will be extended to cover all shops and services that need to close. Nurseries and primary schools will be closed until 7th April. Digital learning in secondary schools and higher education remains in place.

Employers are asked to ensure their employees can work from home if possible. **Masks have to be worn everywhere outside and inside stores, public places and transport.** There is a ban on visitation in hospitals and elderly homes. Physical distancing of one-and-a-half meters will remain in place as well as a curfew between 8.00 p.m. and 5.00 a.m. International travel will be tightened. (Source: [About Hungary](#))

LUXEMBOURG

Luxembourg will extend COVID-19 restrictions until Easter, Health Minister Paulette Lenert and Prime Minister Xavier Bettel announced at a press conference. (Source: DeHavilland)

THE NETHERLANDS

In the Dutch town of Klazienaveen, with a population of 12.000 people, the local retailers implemented a long-cherished plan on 23rd February: On this, according to the original plan, last day of the lockdown, they wanted to open all day and follow the rules again from 3rd March. The action was cut short by the police, and after a good 75 minutes all doors were

closed again. The action reflects the people's mindset in the Netherlands – a mixture of simple frustration and real existential threat. (Sources: [e-tailment](#), [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung](#))

SPAIN

SPAR and local charity Cáritas Diocesana de Canarias have signed an agreement to boost employment in Gran Canaria. The two parties have made a firm commitment to improve the quality of life of those most at risk of social exclusion by expanding job opportunities at SPAR stores.

Cáritas Diocesana will offer job intermediation support to SPAR Gran Canaria when it comes to onboarding new team members. As a continuation of the collaboration, SPAR will facilitate work experience options for young people, favouring those who have been unemployed over an extended period.

SPAR Gran Canaria has also donated more than 2 tonnes of milk and juices to Cáritas to help stock the charity's social dining rooms.

SPAR and Cáritas have joined forces for years to improve the quality of life of the most disadvantaged groups in Gran Canaria. In 2020, this partnership was enriched through the distribution of purse cards for families in need as well as food donations by the Spanish SPAR Partner to Cáritas. (Source: [SPAR Gran Canaria](#))

UNITED KINGDOM

SPAR UK has delivered 1 million pieces of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to Marie Curie Nurses working on the frontline as part of their innovative 'PPE Click & Collect Service'.

Marie Curie is the UK's leading "end of life" charity. It employs more than 2.700 nurses, doctors and other healthcare professionals. With its nine hospices around the UK, it is the largest provider of hospice beds outside the NHS. Marie Curie Nurses have relied on PPE to continue delivering vital care to dying people, with and without coronavirus, throughout the pandemic.

SPAR UK has helped the charity deliver the vast quantities of essential PPE needed to their frontline staff by transporting PPE around the UK and enabling staff to pick it up from their local SPAR store. (Source: [SPAR International](#))

Contactless payment is booming in Corona times. "Contactless" means that the customer does not have to insert his credit card or giro card into a device. The data is encrypted and exchanged with the terminal at the cash register when the card is held in front of the reader. In the UK, the amount was increased in March from a maximum of £45 to £100 (around €116). There is a maximum of €50 for contactless payments without entering a PIN. However, shops can decide for themselves which maximum amounts they allow for contactless payments. With the new rules, Great Britain is deviating from EU standards – as has been possible since Brexit. Security experts fear easier misuse of stolen cards. (Source: [Lebensmittel Zeitung](#))

UNITED STATES

Kroger intends to shortly market a do-it-yourself antigen test, the result of which is given via an application on a smartphone. The antigen tests has been developed by the company Gauss. The consumer is provided instructions for the application of the test. A picture taken with a smartphone of the result, tested on a card, is read by an application, which then indicates whether the test is positive or negative. To meet US regulations, the app shares results with health agencies. The clinical trials carried out on this test gave in 93% of positive cases the same result as a PCR test, and in the event of a negative test in 99% of cases. The product is currently being investigated by the FDA for marketability. Gauss has already produced 1,5 million of these tests. As soon as the FDA has approved its marketing, it will therefore be rapidly distributed in the 2.200 Kroger pharmacies and on its website. Gauss claims to have the capacity to produce 30 million tests per month. The price of this product has not yet been released. (Source: [LSA](#))