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## COVID-19: European Union Actions to Support Tourism

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Submitted 09/12/21, 1st revision 21/12/21, 2nd revision 22/01/22, accepted 20/02/22

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**Abstract:**

**Purpose:** The main objective of the study is to analyze the European Union's action to combat COVID-19, in particular those activities which have an impact on the tourism sector. The study hypothesized that the development of a crisis situation related to the spread of COVID-19 in China, Japan and Korea was not identified by the EU institutions as a danger to the EU and that this situation was treated with a specific ambivalence until March.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** The study uses source literature analysis, analysis of legal acts from the EU.

**Findings:** The results of the research confirmed the research hypothesis. Studies have shown that the COVID-19 was treated with a specific ambivalence until March, when it was due to the increasing number of reported infections. The European Union's bodies called on the Member States to take joint action. However, regardless of the relatively late response, EU action is holistic and multisectoral. It includes both actions aimed at reducing the spread of pandemics and measures aimed at providing material support to the health sector and financial support to the countries most affected by the pandemic.

**Practical Implications:** This analysis is the basis for scenario development, forecasts of the development of the EU pandemic situation.

**Originality/Value:** Based on the analysis of the literature, analysis of legal acts from the EU, a research gap was analyzed the European Union's action to combat COVID-19, in particular those activities which have an impact on the tourism sector.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, tourism, European Union, pandemic.

**JEL codes:** I10, Z32.

**Paper Type:** Research article.

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## **1. Introduction**

When examining economic and social aspects, it is worth noting that the European tourism sector represents a significant development potential and contributes in many countries to growth and jobs. The tourism sector in the European Union comprises around 1,8 million entrepreneurs, the majority of which are small and medium-sized enterprises, employing around 11% of the total workforce, around 22,6 million jobs, generates more than 9% of EU GDP and is steadily growing. At the end of this decade, tourism was the third most important area of economic and social activity in the EU, after trade and distribution and construction. The sectors closely linked to the tourism industry (distribution, construction, transport, culture) generate more than 10% of EU GDP estimated and account for around 12% of all jobs (Communication, 2020).

The entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon has also been important for the European Union's tourism policy. The Treaty of Lisbon has extended the Union's competence in the field of tourism. For the first time, it has created a Community framework for the development of tourism in Europe, enabling a policy to be developed which, taking advantage of the diversity offered by the tourism sector, will serve European and non-European tourists (Helnarska, 2015).

The rapid development of international tourism in the EU was mainly due to the active tourism policy of most Member States which have decided to use foreign tourism not only as one of the areas that stimulate economic growth, but as a driver for accelerating the integration processes of the Community.

The tourism sector is one of the sectors most affected by the epidemic caused by COVID-19. It is estimated that revenues in the industry fell by 50% for hotels and restaurants, by 70% for tour operators and travel agents and by 90% for cruise and airline flights. Between January and October 2020, the pandemic triggered a 70% decline in international tourist arrivals compared with the same period in 2019. This was mainly caused by people not wanting to spend money on flights or not being allowed to fly by government restrictions. The UNWTO expects international arrivals to have declined by 70-75% for the whole of 2020. This would mean that international tourism has returned to levels last seen roughly 30 years ago (Rezolucja, 2020).

## **2. The European Union's Action Toward the Tourism Sector in Connection with the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The development of a crisis situation related to the spread of COVID-19 in China, Japan and Korea was not identified by the EU institutions as a danger to the EU. This situation was treated with a specific ambivalence until March, when it was due to the increasing number of reported infections, The European Union's bodies called on the Member States to take joint action. However, regardless of the relatively late

response, EU action is holistic and multisectoral. It includes both actions aimed at reducing the spread of pandemics and measures aimed at providing material support to the health sector and financial support to the countries most affected by the pandemic.

On 13 May 2020, the Commission proposed a series of measures to allow for the gradual and coordinated provision of tourist services and establishments. There is also specific support for companies in the industry. These measures shall include:

- supporting the financial liquidity of tourism enterprises: flexibility under state aid rules allows member states to introduce, for example, voucher guarantee schemes and other liquidity support schemes, to help businesses and to guarantee the return of cash to consumers for travel canceled during a pandemic;
- EU funding: Through an investment initiative in response to COVID-19 and shared management with EU Member States, the EU provides ongoing liquidity to businesses affected by the crisis. In addition, the Commission has made available from the European Investment Fund up to €8 billion in funding for 100 000 small businesses in crisis (Tourism and transport, 2020).

On 19 June 2020, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on transport and tourism in 2020 and the future (2020/2649(RSP)) calling for further action to support the crisis-hit SMEs and a specific budget line to support the sector. MEPs said that the crisis should be seen as an opportunity to modernize tourism in the EU so that it can become environmentally friendly and socially responsible. The resolution identifies areas where the existing actions remain insufficient to support the sector employing 22,6 million people (11,2% of total employment in the EU) and which in 2019 contributed to 9,5% of EU GDP:

- short-term financing to avoid business bankruptcy and to support workers, including self-employed persons in the transport, culture and tourism sectors;
- supporting long-term economic recovery and modernizing the sector: Parliament asks the Commission to issue guidelines to ensure rapid access to the financial resources allocated. MEPs call for a specific budget line for sustainable tourism in the EU's long-term budget for 2021-2027;
- guarantees of safety and reliability through common standards and detailed protocols on hygiene and health control measures;
- an early notification system that warns tourists against potential health risks at the destination;
- an eu safety certificate for establishments and operators meeting the highest standards of hygiene and safety;
- A special information campaign on travel and tourism aimed at promoting intra-EU travel, restoring confidence in the travel and tourism sector during COVID-19 and educating tourists about existing health and safety measures;

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- safe transit and movement between countries that will not be hindered by unilateral agreements and agreements between individual Member States (Tourism and transport, 2020).

The resolution on transport and tourism points out that it is necessary to examine the idea of a crisis management mechanism for tourism in the EU in order to respond adequately and promptly to any future challenges of a similar scale. The COVID-19 should help to modernize tourism in the EU and make it more sustainable. The EU should promote and certify environmentally friendly, socially responsible and economically rational travel and tourism.

EU support should serve as a tool to guide the development of infrastructure, transport and tourism toward more sustainable, innovative, resilient and high-quality products and services. Businesses and workers in the tourism sector can benefit from the support instruments introduced by the EU in response to the crisis caused by COVID-19, including liquidity support, tax relief and relaxation of State aid rules, as well as the temporary suspension of EU rules on slots to avoid empty flights.

In support of the transport sector during a pandemic, the European Parliament has adopted amendments to the rules on the distribution of slots and the validity of certain certificates:

- relaxed provisions on slot allocation;
- prevent empty flights;
- the validity of certain documents and certificates, such as a driving license or technical inspection, will be extended (European Union, 2020).

The European Union has updated the passenger rights guidelines and the package travel directive.

On 18 March 2020, the European Commission presented detailed guidelines to ensure the consistent application of passenger rights in the EU and the protection of passengers in all Member States.

The European Union is the only place in the world where all citizens traveling by air, rail, ship and bus are protected by a full set of passenger rights.

Airlines cancelling flights are obliged, in all cases, to offer passengers three possibilities, to return money, to re-route at the earliest possible date, to re-route at a later date chosen by the passenger. Air carriers are required, without exception, to provide free meals, drinks and hotel accommodation to passengers whose flight has been canceled and who have chosen to travel on a re-route at the earliest possible date. Air passengers shall be entitled to compensation if their flight has been canceled less than 2 weeks before the date of departure, unless there are 'exceptional circumstances'. This exception may apply in the case of the COVID-19 when

measures taken by public authorities prevent the normal operation of airlines (European Union, 2020)

On 26 March 2020, Parliament approved a temporary suspension of EU rules on airport slots to halt so-called empty flights during the COVID-19 pandemic. The rules have entered into force retroactively since 1 March 2020 (since 23 January 2020 for flights between the EU and China or Hong Kong), since the suspension of the 'use or lose out' rule expired on 27 March 2021. On 10 February 2022 the European Parliament approved an update of the rules, allowing airlines to use 50% of their slots for the 2021 season (compared to 80% before the pandemic). The European Commission can in future extend these new rules by setting a minimum rate of utilization between 30% and 70% (Proposal, 2020b).

As part of the EU's joint response to the outbreak of COVID-19, the European Parliament adopted instruments at an extraordinary meeting as a matter of urgency:

- Investment initiative in response to COVID-19. The aim of this instrument is to provide EUR 37 billion of available EU funding to the citizens, regions and countries most affected by the pandemic as soon as possible. These measures will target health systems, SMEs, labor markets and other vulnerable parts of the economies of the EU Member States.
- Enlargement of the EU Solidarity Fund to cover emergency public health crises. In 2020, these funds will amount to up to EUR 800 million available to European countries. The extension of the EUSF will allow measures such as support in the event of a serious public health threat, including medical assistance, as well as measures to prevent, monitor or control the spread of diseases.

The instruments adopted aim to help people and businesses immediately in the fight against the COVID-19 crisis.

It has also facilitated the repatriation of tens of thousands of European citizens who have been stuck abroad through the EU Civil Protection mechanism. The European Commission (EC) published Regulation (EU) 2021/836 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 amending Decision No 1313/2013/EU on the Union Civil Protection mechanism. The new rules, which have been in force since 26 May 2021, aim to strengthen the resilience of Member States and to enhance the European Union's disaster response capacity. The EC, in cooperation with the Member States, will work out the EU's objectives of resilience to both natural and man-made disasters.

The European Commission proposed on 4 September 2020 that Member States coordinate action to restrict freedom of movement during a pandemic. The aim is to reduce the uncertainty for travellers and traders resulting from many divergent national rules. The Commission has adopted a proposal for a Council Recommendation to ensure that any measures taken by Member States which restrict

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free movement in connection with the COVID-19 are coordinated at EU level and made clear. The Commission proposal identifies four key areas where Member States should cooperate more closely:

- common criteria and thresholds for member states when deciding on the introduction of travel restrictions;
- determination of common criteria using the agreed color code;
- a common framework for measures to be applied to travellers from high-risk areas;
- clear and timely communication to the public of any restrictions.

The national criteria for the introduction of measures restricting free movement within the European Union are currently very divergent. The Commission proposes that each Member State should take into account the following criteria when implementing restrictive measures:

- The total number of newly reported COVID-19 cases per 100 000 persons in the area over a 14-day period;
- Percentage of positive tests from all COVID-19 tests performed in the area over a seven-day period;
- Number of COVID-19 tests performed per 100 persons per area over seven days.

Member States should report this data weekly to the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control. Member States should also provide this data at regional level to ensure that any measures can be targeted at those regions where they are absolutely necessary, the Commission proposes that Member States do not restrict the free movement of persons traveling from another Member State where:

- The total number of newly reported COVID-19 cases in a given area is less than 50 per 100 000 persons over a 14-day period, or
- The percentage of positive tests from all COVID-19 tests performed in a given area does not exceed 3%.

On the basis of the data provided by the Member States, the Commission proposes that the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control publish a weekly updated map of the EU and EEA countries together with a common color code to support Member States and travellers. The Commission proposes:

- Green for an area where the total number of newly reported COVID-19 cases is less than 25 for a 14-day period and the percentage of positive tests for all COVID-19 tests is less than 3%;
- Orange for the area Where the total number of newly reported COVID-19 cases does not exceed 50 over a 14-day period, with a positive percentage of all COVID-19 tests of at least 3% or the total number of newly reported COVID-19

cases between 25 and 150, with a positive percentage of all COVID-19 tests is less than 3%;

- Red for an area where the total number of newly reported COVID-19 cases exceeds 50 over a 14-day period and the percentage of positive tests from all COVID-19 tests is at least 3 % or the total number of newly reported COVID-19 cases is over 150 per 100 000 persons over a 14-day period;
- Gray if there is insufficient information to assess the criteria proposed by the Commission or if the number of COVID-19 tests carried out per 100 000 persons does not exceed 250.

The Commission proposes a uniform approach by Member States for travellers coming from high-risk areas. Member States should not refuse entry to persons traveling from other Member States. Member States which introduce restrictions on free movement based on their own decision-making processes may require that:

- Persons traveling from the red or gray area have been quarantined or tested for COVID-19 on arrival – the preferred option is the COVID-19 test;
- Where appropriate, Member States may consider recommending that persons traveling from an area defined by orange color submit at least a COVID-19 test before departure or after arrival. Member States may require persons coming from an area defined in red, orange or gray to submit a passenger location card, in particular from persons traveling by air, in accordance with data protection requirements. Travellers with an important function or special needs, such as critical workers, frontier and posted workers, students or journalists performing their duties, should not be required to undergo quarantine (Proposal, 2020b).

In its proposal, the EC presented common criteria and thresholds for the introduction of restrictive measures, EU-wide risk assessment and handling of travellers coming from high-risk zones. If countries decide to impose restrictions, they should inform the public clearly and in good time. The Commission proposes that Member States provide Member States and the Commission on a weekly basis with detailed information on the planned restrictions on the free movement or the abolition of travel restrictions. Changes must be reported one week before they enter into force. The information should also be available on the re-open EU web platform, along with a link to the weekly map of the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control (Commission Recommendation, 2020).

In its resolution adopted on 17 September 2020, Parliament supported the Commission's proposal to coordinate travel restrictions and called for harmonization of health assessments and other measures by Member States. The European Parliament calls on the Member States to:

- Adopt the same definition of COVID-19 infection, COVID-19 death and recovery after infection.
- Mutual recognition of test results between all Member State.

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- Reduce the disproportionate waiting time for the test to be carried out.
  - Agree on an equal quarantine period.
  - Where necessary, to coordinate travel restrictions, as proposed by the European Commission.
  - Discuss the Schengen recovery plan without delay, including ways and means of returning to its full functioning without internal border controls, and contingency plans (Proposal, 2020).

The European Center for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) should be responsible for assessing the risk of virus spread and publish a weekly up-to-date risk map based on a common color code and information collected and provided by Member States.

In its resolution, Members ask the Commission to develop a harmonized passenger location form in order to build confidence in the trans-European monitoring system. They also call for the use of contact tracking applications, expecting national systems to be interoperable at EU level by the end of October, allowing EU-wide contact tracking for COVID-19. MEPs also stress that applications should operate in full compliance with the general data protection regulation (Proposal, 2020c).

The European Union also supports research aimed at finding effective therapy and the development of a vaccine against COVID-19. One of the EU's key projects is Horizon 2020, which is funded by 18 research projects with more than 150 expert teams. In parallel to the above mentioned actions, the EU institutions, like the World Health Organization, are campaigning for disinformation around COVID-19.

The report of the EU Special Team for Discontinued acknowledged that some of the false content concerning COVID-19 and the pandemic itself was m.in. from China and Russia, which was motivated by the desire to weaken the EU and undermine its credibility. To this end, the European Commission has launched a web page on combating false information on COVID-19.

The Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU has called on the Member States and EU bodies to develop a common approach to strengthening joint cooperation, which should be included in the European Agenda for Tourism 2030/2050. The new EU agenda will be implemented on the basis of eligible forecasts.

By pooling common priorities, objectives and actions, it aims to stimulate the ecological and digital transformation of the tourism ecosystem and to strengthen its resilience and competitiveness. The Agenda will pay particular attention to the situation of SMEs, the employment rate of women and young people, the EU's outermost regions, the role of less developed areas and other areas for support.

### 3. Conclusion

It is not a way to create for the time being a complete picture and the consequences of the crisis that the global tourism economy is facing. The European Union has taken steps to harmonize procedures and provide financial resources for the reconstruction of the industry. An analysis of the measures taken by countries around the world in response to the growing COVID-19 pandemic shows a high level of diversity as to the nature and level of restrictions. It is therefore difficult to identify groups of countries with a similar model of action. Since 2019, EU Member States have been forced to take individual action, mostly contradictory, uncoordinated decisions, lack of idea of how the economy should function during the epidemic, with no logic and analytical basis for decisions to close and open up individual activities, actions based on political considerations, Not economic or social - it is a landscape that is not just about Poland.

While the situation may improve for the travel industry towards the end of 2022, the road to recovery is not easy. A return to 2019 levels in terms of international arrivals could take up to four years, and this recovery will depend on widespread vaccination programmes and the adoption of comprehensive test-and-trace regimes. These systems may themselves be challenging and will take some time to achieve (Holland *et al.*, 2021).

The IMF has increased its lending facility to support tourism in countries that have experienced higher fiscal deficits as a result of lower firm revenues and rising COVID-19-related spending (IMF, 2020). In Europe, action has been taken for part of the EU budget and coronavirus recovery fund to be spent on helping tourism 'emerge more resilient from the crises ahead' (Gomes, 2021). As a result of the current restrictions, international tourism and domestic traffic have not only become frozen, but socio-economic and political developments in the industry are expected.

The crisis provides an opportunity to reconsider the future of tourism and accelerate longstanding priorities such as addressing climate change and promoting a renewable energy transition (OECD, 2020). Governments must encourage the structural changes required to transform the tourism industry in line with future health and environmental challenges. Addressing these challenges also calls for international organisations to use the full extent of their resources to restore traveller confidence, while helping the tourism industry to adapt and survive (Kara *et al.*, 2020).

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