

Discussion Paper on civil protection support for the EU and Member States' response to the COVID-19 outbreak

While the initial reaction and main responsibility in respect of the COVID-19 outbreak lies primarily with the health sector, developments in Europe in particular show that a coordinated cross-sector and cross-border approach is now critical. The competencies of several sectors are needed, from healthcare, home ministries and those in charge of civil protection, to foreign and consular affairs, transport and the economy.

The EU and its Member States are working together in a spirit of solidarity. We need to step up these efforts including in collaboration with the EEA associated countries and the UK in order to reinforce unity of effort and timely information sharing.

Several Council configurations have now discussed the impacts of this outbreak. The EPSCO Council (Health) gathered in Brussels on 6 March for its second extraordinary meeting and called for the establishment of a coordinated EU approach.

Ministers responsible for home affairs and those responsible for civil protection, have key responsibilities when it comes to the security of our citizens, which is why the Presidency has decided to have a very focused and practical exchange at the next JHA Council lunch. The nature of this exchange should allow us to have a frank and open discussion on what else is needed both from the EU and from us, the Member States, in terms of support and coordination. We should make full use of our civil protection tools and ensure a more complete and regular information exchanges.

On the Council side, on 2 March, the Presidency decided to step up the activation of the EU Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR) arrangements¹ in order to facilitate a cooperative, cross-sectoral approach in the EU in response to this complex crisis. This mechanism is designed to help us rapidly identify critical vulnerabilities and develop coordinated, cross-sectoral response options. It relies on the work done through the vast array of EU sectoral tools including in particular the Health Security Committee and the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM).

A European Coronavirus Response Team consisting of five Commissioners has been established to coordinate the Commission's efforts to address the coronavirus outbreak. Their work will be focused on three main pillars: healthcare, mobility, and the economy. The role of the Commission varies depending on the policy area.

The UCPM offers a platform that can be used flexibly in any kind of crisis. It can relay the information in real time, including requests for assistance, coordinate the responses with offers and co-finances their delivery.

Third countries have also benefitted from in-kind assistance provided through the UCPM at the outset of the outbreak and the mechanism contributed to the successful and rapid repatriation of EU citizens back to Europe.

¹ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/ipcr-response-to-crises/>

Moreover, under the UCPM legislation there is a possibility to consider strategic medical stockpiling as a rescEU capacity, which needs to be further examined. Recently, several Member States have already asked for concrete assistance in handling the coronavirus outbreak inside the EU. The response to these requests relies for the time being on solidarity among Member States. However, since most Member States are facing this crisis simultaneously, the EU's capacity to respond to the emergency presents some limitations.

Therefore, a collective and coordinated European approach is the only coherent way to face the situation. It would be important to explore the EU-wide measures in various areas.

As an example, there is the ongoing joint procurement procedure. This could be complemented by additional rescEU reserve, under the framework of the UCPM, of strategic stockpiling of medical countermeasures and personal protective equipment. Such stocks could then be used both for COVID-19 but also for any outbreak that represent a serious cross-border threat to health in the future.

The Commission has also mobilised a significant financial contribution of more than EUR 235 million of development, humanitarian and research funding in response to COVID-19 globally. Part of these funds will be allocated immediately, while the rest will be released over the coming months. This targeted EU funding will help detect and diagnose the disease, care for infected people and prevent further transmission.

In light of the above, Ministers are invited to discuss the following questions:

- 1) For those Member States who already have more experience with tackling COVID-19, what are the key lessons which you could share focusing on a civil protection perspective and highlighting any wider lessons?**
- 2) What additional preparedness and response measures would you expect from the Union Civil Protection Mechanism? What would you expect from the IPCR in addressing cross-cutting bottlenecks identified and in terms of cross-sectoral information sharing and integration with the support of the European Response Coordination Centre as its 24/7 capacity?**
- 3) Would you be ready to provide additional support through the UCPM, coordinating also with other relevant authorities at national level?**