COVID-19 and EFA's Vision for a Post-Pandemic Europe

European Free Alliance

"A profoundly different
future may not be so far
away as we think"

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Content

Introduction
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It was once said that there are decades when nothing happens, and weeks when decades happen. Predicting the future is a famously risky business, but one thing seems sure at present: even by the standards of recent years, 2020 will be remembered as a particularly significant period of change.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis unprecedented in the modern era. It is now up to us to channel these waters, and to give life to the possibilities of a new and exciting Europe. Whether we realise it yet or not, this crisis and its aftermath is a social experiment on a scale never before seen.

In many ways, we at the European Free Alliance have operated at the centre of some of the defining events in European politics over the last few years. From the Scottish referendum and the ongoing independence campaign in Catalonia, to the Eurosceptic surge and the tragedy of Brexit, EFA and its members have worked tirelessly in this time of great upheaval and change for the self-determination of all peoples, and to build a better Europe.

EFA represents the under- or un-represented across Europe, often those ignored by the big states. In times of uncertainty, it is often those on the margins that disproportionately experience the negative effects of great historical shifts. However, it is also these smaller and decentralised communities that are often better placed to adapt and flourish in the face of challenges. Given the opportunity and the power, they can have the freedom of flexibility and creativity needed to offer innovative solutions and to thrive in unique ways.

The European Free Alliance represents a number of these nations, political parties, and governments across Europe. From autonomous nations with a high degree of political competences to unrepresented linguistic communities, we must make sure that the potential for change offered by the pandemic is one that contributes to building a better future, and not one that entrenches the *status quo*. This is the moment in which we must now all engage in an act of collective self-determination and take that step forward together to a brighter future.

"A profoundly different future may not be so far away as we think"

But just as we have a very particular potential for positive change, the groups that EFA represents have also experienced the negative effects of the pandemic in a unique way. The impact on our languages and political powers – both of which are vulnerable in times of crisis or great change, especially those without adequate legal protection – has been an extra source of anxiety in an already worrying time.

The pandemic has turned the world upside down in a matter of months. Almost overnight, the outbreak and rapid spread of COVID-19 changed the way we act. That which was unthinkable just weeks ago suddenly became commonplace. From wearing face masks when shopping, to limitations on the freedom of movement, the patterns of daily life have been completely disrupted. That such changes – be they small or profound - are so readily-accepted and

quickly normalised can be both a source of concern, and a beacon of hope. A profoundly different future may not be so far away as we think.

But more importantly than the changes in how we act, are the changes in the way that we think. Alongside those adaptations in behaviour and movement, there are parallel shifts in patterns of thought and our imaginations. Unexpectedly, many during this global crisis have had the opportunity to experience an alternative reality and thereby the chance to imagine a different way of doing things. What was previously unimaginable was suddenly within grasp.

On the one hand, there is the suffering, the strain on underfunded healthcare services, the job losses and precarity, the disruption to our economies. On the other, many reported a better quality of life, spending more time with family, rather than long hours commuting.

Some people have rediscovered their creativity during the long days of lockdown. Others have noted that the lack of social pressure and anxiety surrounding the hyperactive pace of modern life has been beneficial for their mental health. Because of the lack of air pollution caused by cars and aeroplanes, many people living in cities have for the first time ever been able to see the stars at night.

Although there may have been some positive effects or secondary benefits, some changes have had corresponding negative effects. The lack of aeroplanes may have led to clearer skies for some, but for others whose livelihoods depend on tourism, it has certainly made their futures somewhat darker. EFA represents a number of communities based in geographically peripheral or isolated regions, who have suffered disproportionately as a result of the pandemic.

As well as geographically, on an individual level lack of interconnectivity and long-term solitude has had a detrimental impact, particularly on mental health. Lockdown has also meant a rise in gender-based violence, many at-risk women have been trapped with their abusers for example.

Refugees too - already one of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in society - have been adversely and disproportionately affected, with many states closing their entire asylum systems whilst borders were closed, leaving many in a state of limbo and desperation.

During lockdown, we experienced a collective realisation of who the true essential workers and services in our societies are. We owe huge debts to the nurses that tended the sick and comforted our loved ones, to the supermarket assistants that kept the shelves full and so many more essential people. It is vital to remember that these jobs are often very precarious, grossly-underpaid, and generally overworked. Equally important is that these are also the roles that are disproportionately carried out by women, young people, and migrants.

The nature and rituals of work itself have also been questioned, given the acclimatisation to working from home. Videoconferencing is now completely normal. The debate on the future of work was once the preserve of academics. It is now mainstream thinking.

Other changes have also been surprising. During the lockdown many European governments introduced schemes tantamount to a universal basic income. Empty hotel rooms were given to homeless people during lockdown. States intervened in businesses and took control of certain industries in order to produce equipment to fight the virus. The European Commission, too, introduced a temporary legal framework relaxing the rules on state aid in various sectors in order to give Member States' economies a boost in these challenging times. The idea of this happening before the pandemic was unthinkable. However, it is now commonplace and these measures are implemented all across Europe.

It has never been clearer that there are easy solutions to a number of problems, and has highlighted that injustices existing at all in a modern, developed European Union, is the result of political choices. It is not good enough.

The European Free Alliance is committed to greater protection of the environment and to biodiversity, and despite the immediate problems of the pandemic, the climate emergency cannot be ignored. According to the UN and WHO, pandemics such as the coronavirus are the result of humanity's destruction of nature and the devastation of wild places and species are a driving factor in diseases leaping from wildlife to humans. The recovery from the pandemic must be green, or it will not be a recovery at all.

By its very nature, a pandemic is global in character and is what can be labelled a symmetric crisis. We are all humans and the virus remains a constant. The response to the pandemic however, has been completely asymmetric. The pandemic has turned the world upside down in a matter of months.

Given the impossibility of prediction in even the most stable of times, this report is just a snapshot. It is intended partly as an analysis, and partly as a manifesto of the European Free Alliance's positions on a far-reaching, but not comprehensive, list of topics in the wake of the outbreak. This report covers some of the most important for us as a political party, and those subjects where we have a unique voice and the most to offer. The pandemic means that we must rethink everything, and as such necessitates such a broad evaluation.

We cannot let more decades of nothing pass us by. As we restructure our lives, so too must we restructure Europe. Let our weeks be full of decades' worth of progress, and for future generations to look back and see now as the starting point for a new, more democratic, and happier era of human progress.

1
Democracy, Human Rights, and Elections

Covid may have an important impact on the democratic process itself. The fight against the spread of the virus has presented a golden opportunity for authoritarian leaders to consolidate power. Human rights were necessarily limited worldwide as restrictions on movement were put in place. The question is, what do we consider to be too much limitation? Monitoring human rights abuses will require close attention, and the EU must be extremely cautious in this regard.

A variety of approaches have been employed by different actors across Europe and the world. EU Member States have followed some very different paths, and even the strategies of different governments within the same state have sometimes been in stark contrast or even in opposition to one another. The political vision (or lack thereof) of parties for the post-COVID era looks set to be a big part of future manifestos and campaigns, and the 'rally-around-the-flag' effect has certainly changed the perception of a number of public figures[1], for better or for worse.

It is telling that in moments of crisis, many will revert to prioritising themselves, taking decisions unilaterally rather than in solidarity and in lock-step with others across the Union. Indeed, the first action taken by many governments across Europe was to close their state borders. And this has had a direct impact on many of the territories in which EFA is represented.

The aftermath of the UK's referendum on EU membership led to a demonisation of the entire parliamentary and judicial process. The tabloid press famously branded pro-EU Members of Parliament 'saboteurs' and judges as 'enemies of the people'. Amidst this widespread mistrust and public outcry, the Boris Johnson Government was granted a much freer hand to pursue a harder, more extreme Brexit.

It is also worth mentioning the case of Hungary regarding its approach during the pandemic. Following the declaration of a 'State of Danger' (not emergency), the 'Enabling Act' was passed on March 30th 2020 granting Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Fidesz government the authority and power to enact decrees that may depart or suspend existing acts of parliament and without meaningful constitutional constraint[2]. The act has already been used against municipalities and authorities (including the General Assembly of Budapest) not under Fidesz control. For example, the introduction of 'Special Economic Zones' by the government means that businesses within these zones pay their income taxes directly to the state, rather than to their municipality as was previously the case. This deprives local municipalities of tax income, and gives the state freedom to redistribute money collected wherever it wants. Given that non-Fidesz authorities have been targeted with these zones, it is unlikely that these municipalities will be the eventual full recipients of this tax revenue. This leaves a number of regions even more vulnerable to the pandemic, and without the necessary resources to cope.

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[1] https://www.politico.eu/article/good-crisis-bad-crisis-european-leaders-rated/?utm_source=POLITICO.EU&utm_campaign=02c78271e1-EMAIL_CAM-PAIGN_2020_06_22_02_59&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_10959edeb5-02c78271e1-190537711
[2] http://constitutionnet.org/news/hungarys-enabling-act-prime-minister-orban-makes-most-pandemic

"Dropping a voting paper into the ballot box is an important ritual"

EU funding to help fight the pandemic must also be closely monitored to ensure that this money does not go towards further entrenching democratic backsliding, undermining subsidiarity, and the stealth centralisation of the state. Member States must be monitored in how these funds are distributed regionally and they cannot be used discriminatively, with industries located in certain areas deliberately being excluded - concerns about this have already been raised by our member party DEB in Western Thrace.

This is an opportunity to work differently in future, for the EU to deal with devolved or sub-state authorities more directly. This would also be a chance for regional governments or municipal councils to interact more directly with the Union, increasing engagement and awareness of the benefits of EU membership. This dynamic would be mutually extremely beneficial, and must be encouraged.

However, COVID-19 is not a 'normal' crisis. This is a crisis that is occurring globally. A state of emergency declared in response to a global or a localised crisis are extremely different in nature. Blame cannot so easily be shifted and the cause of the crisis is not under the Government's control. In this sense, accountability of governments is being measured in daily deaths, containment of the virus, and protections offered to its citizens.

Democracy and participation

On hearing the word democracy, people imagine very different things. One person might think of bustling chambers, filled with parliamentarians waving papers. For others, it might conjure images of great crowds listening to speeches at mass demonstrations. Some people might think of the act of voting itself, and the excitement of the polling station on election day. Whatever the image conjured, on a fundamental level it generally involves groups of people, coming together to steer the course of change. The empty street and deserted town square are powerful visual symbols that something is amiss.

Democracy is a very physical process. Dropping a voting paper into the ballot box is an important ritual, upon which our entire political system has rested for generations. After the pandemic with its restriction of physical contact and assembly and the phenomenon of social distancing, the democratic process is sure to look rather different.

The advent of social media and digital technology means that things have already changed a great deal in this regard. Algorithms control virtually everything we see online, and our every activity creates yet more data to be processed – and therefore potentially manipulated for commercial or political gain. This is true whether we are online shopping or campaigning. The extent to which we should digitalise democracy has already been the source of some controversy, in particular the issue of online voting and political advertising. Election interference has become a big worry worldwide, notably with the Cambridge Ana-

lytica scandal, and with further digitalisation and more of our time spent online than ever before, this trend is certain to continue.

Estonia, a small state but internationally recognised for its advances in the field of digitalised society and internet freedoms, is the only Member State of the European Union that gives voters the possibility to vote over the internet in state elections. However, most voters still prefer to vote in person. This may well change after COVID-19.

There are a number of concerns with online voting: the possibility of cyber-attacks, reliability and security, lack of citizens' trust, to mention a few. However, it also offers increased opportunity for democratic participation to those who might find it difficult to go to a polling station. The elderly, the disabled, citizens living abroad, those living in extremely isolated or peripheral areas. Even factors like the weather can influence turnout and the result of elections. Across the world, turnout in elections has been falling significantly, with an average of 76% turning out to state elections in 1980, dropping to 67% in 2018.

Social distancing and restrictions on assembly are changing the psychology of our societies, and as people become more cautious about physically gathering. We must provide means for them to continue to participate in the democratic system. Safe, transparent, secure, and accessible forms of online voting should be explored, and technology harnessed to empower 21st century post-pandemic democracy, and not to stifle it.

As the issue of limiting needless travel and reform of European structures is currently firmly on the table, the time is right to rethink the necessity of a second seat for the European Parliament.

Physical presence is extremely important in politics, and there are limits to the possibilities offered by digital systems and new technologies. But as times change, so too must democracy evolve to be more responsible, and the technology we already have offers a means for more participation, understanding, and accountability in our politics than ever before.

Elections

By now there have been a few important elections held in Europe since the outbreak of COVID-19. Elections are the lifeblood of democracy, but present challenges in the times of coronavirus.

The Basque and Galician parliamentary elections on 12th July saw some excellent results for EFA member parties Eusko Alkartasuna and the BNG. Not surprisingly, turnout was the lowest on record for the Basque parliamentary election, and the second-lowest in Galicia. Even turnout in the French state - which is tra-

ditionally higher than the European average - dropped. In the second round of French municipal elections held on 28th June, participation was recorded at just 41.6%, with 43% of surveyed non-voters citing fears of catching COVID-19 as the main factor (followed by 38% who did not vote as they believed the elections would not change anything in their daily lives). However, big gains were made by abertzale candidates in the northern Basque Country with wins in Uztaritze, Ziburu, Urruña, Itsasu and Baiona.[3]

Serbia too held elections on 21st June, originally scheduled for earlier in the year but postponed, and subject to several boycotts by opposition parties and voters, with a resounding win for incumbent President Aleksandar Vučić. A state of emergency was redeclared and announcements of reintroducing curfews were made less than two weeks later, given the consequent spike of those testing positive for COVID-19. Having previously been under strict lockdown, many have questioned why the election was held when the data suggests that the number of cases was not decreasing significantly. Since the election and the announcement of the possible reintroduction of curfews, there have been sustained anti-government protests.

On one hand, the elections were held in the midst of the pandemic when it was probably not safe to do so. And on the other hand, had the election been

"Elections are the lifeblood of democracy"

postponed, the government would overextend their mandate and may have led to its discontinuity. In an extremely difficult state of affairs, our member party the LSV have insisted that when circumstances with the pandemic normalises to a degree, that elections should be repeated. One thing is clear this was not a normal election, and the results reflect this unfortunate situation.

Similarly in Poland, presidential elections have been held amidst controversy, and criticism that they represent a rushed consolidation of power. Originally scheduled for 10th May, Andrzej Duda won the second round of the election held on 12th July, with 51% of the vote. Many people, including politicians from Duda's ruling coalition[4], criticised the holding of the elections during the pandemic. Critics commented that Duda's party, *Prawa i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice), had expressed concerns about its ability to win the election with a delayed ballot and the likely economic downturn resulting from the lockdown measures.

Belarus too held its presidential elections amidst the pandemic, the result of which was largely disputed by voters. Widespread popular protest has ensued, and with it police brutality and political detentions. In a joint statement condemning the conduct in Belarus, High Representative and Vice President of the European Commission Josep Borrell condemns the dis-

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[3] https://www.nationalia.info/brief/11322/corsican-basque-nationalism-progress-in-local-elections
[4] https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-poland-election/spat-over-presidential-election-tests-polands-ruling-coalition-idUSKBN21LON7

> "Political demonstrations are an organic element in the body politic in modern democracies and they will no doubt reappear reinforced"

proportionate state violence against peaceful voters and protestors and demands a release to all those detained.[5] However, he continues to claim that the images of police brutality against peaceful Catalan voters and demonstrators are false[6], was a staunch supporter of the application of Article 155 (giving Madrid direct rule over Catalonia) and has been aggressive in his campaign to discredit the Catalan movement for self-determination internationally.

On a global level, this trend of authoritarian leaders using the crisis to their own advantage is highly concerning. At the time of writing, 47% of Americans are worried that President Trump would not concede defeat following a loss in the November US Presidential election, after months of stoking fears of electoral rigging and manipulation.[7]

As with many other processes during the pandemic, a balance must be sought. On one hand, forcing the holding of elections in the midst of the pandemic can at best be extremely irresponsible and at worst, be a political weapon. On the other hand, withholding elections on the basis of the outbreak can also be used as a means of political manipulation and an undermining of democracy, but may indeed represent the lesser of two evils, given public support in a number of cases in favour of postponement. When large public gatherings present a great danger to public health, it is not surprising that high numbers of people have been avoiding turning out to vote, and has already had an impact on electoral results.

Activism

Online political activism has often been used as a byword for a superficial or glib brand of political engagement. However, the distinction between the online and offline worlds is becoming increasingly less clear, and online activism has proven an extremely effective tool. Petitions launched online can influence parliamentary proceedings, online fundraising campaigns can finance grassroots movements, and meme-sharing Facebook groups have been proven to influence political narrative.

During the lockdown, the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the USA following in the wake of the murder of George Floyd by a Minnesota police officer had an extremely impactful online presence in parallel with the mass demonstrations across the US, copied world-over. Millions of dollars were raised overnight for the family of George Floyd, for cam-

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5 https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/83935/belarus-joint-statement-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-and-neighbourhood-and_en
6 https://www.elnacional.cat/en/news/spain-borrell-lies-europe-catalan-referendum_346221_102.html
7 https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/sep/02/ -fear-trump-reject-election-defeat-poll

paign groups, for independent media outlets, and raising bail funds for detained activists.

Physical presence at demonstrations may be very limited or impossible, but activists will always find a way. Dr Kostis Kornetis, during one of the Coppieters Foundation's online *Conversations on Youth Participation* believes that "movements will suffer for a bit, but they are an organic element in the body politic in modern democracies and they will no doubt reappear reinforced, sooner or later"[8]. In many places, the first thing that many people did after the easing of lockdowns was to take to the streets to protest.

With both determination and creativity, online activism is extremely effective, and can affect real-world change in ways never before imagined. Even in lockdown, when there was no other option but online activism, communities faced with injustice were able to educate, organise, and empower themselves. Activists in EFA member parties must seize the opportunity to make full use of online platforms and digital tools to foster solidarity and campaign for their respective causes.

Human Rights

This crisis presents a big opportunity for abuses and the consolidation of power structures but a certain degree of limitation of human rights has been nec-essary and even welcomed by the public. The limitations on the freedom of movement for lockdowns has been an unpleasant experience for many, but also a very effective measure to stem the spread of the outbreak. Despite systematic human rights abuses in other areas, many initially touted China's model of extreme and total lockdown as an effective model to follow. However, with a second wave being predicted, lockdown fatigue will certainly have an effect on people's willingness to accept such strict measures again.

"Without stringent monitoring, the door is open to all types of abuse"

Public opinion judges those countries that have over-extend their power, limiting human rights for political gain. And at the same time, public opinion has also turned against those governments with an extremely hands-off approach - those which did not introduce lockdowns early enough to stop the spread, for example, in Sweden, England, and the United States. The question therefore, is how much curtailment of human rights is appropriate, and can it be measured?

The European Free Alliance warmly welcomes IDEA International's establishment of the Global Monitor for Human Rights in partnership with the EU[9], which

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8 https://ideasforeurope.eu/news/covid19-restrictions-consequences-on-youth-movements/
9 https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices/#/indices/world-map?covid19=1

"The Spanish state must immediately grant amnesty to Catalan political prisoners"

is a data-tool for tracking the situation in wake of the outbreak across the world, providing an open source for data on how governments are using the crisis to consolidate power and facilitate democratic backsliding. Without stringent monitoring, the door is open to all types of abuses of human rights.

We must be incredibly wary in Europe and worldwide of governments abusing their sweeping new powers. There have already been examples of governments using state of emergency executive powers to make changes completely unrelated to the pandemic and management of the crisis. These include militarisation of police forces and higher military spending, imposing further austerity, clampdowns on journalists and freedom of expression, and the classification of parliaments as 'non-essential services'. When or if a vaccine for COVID-19 is developed, its distribution must be monitored closely, as it is not hard to imagine certain communities within society being discriminated against, with governments giving preferential treatment or priority to supportive groups or regions. This could be a particular concern for EFA members in future, as representatives of communities that are already often on the peripheries of the big states.

In a statement on 25th March, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet called on governments worldwide to take urgent action to protect the health and safety of those in detention and in closed facilities saying that "Now, more than ever, governments should release every person detained without sufficient legal basis, including political pris-

oners and others detained simply for expressing critical or dissenting views."[10] In EFA we are only too familiar with the issue of political prisoners, and the Spanish state must immediately grant amnesty to Catalan political prisoners - including elected EFA MEP Oriol Junqueras - and exiles.

During the pandemic, there have been cases of governments making provisions for criminal convicts, but not for political prisoners. For example, in Turkey, various measures were undertaken to fight COVID-19 in prisons including a controversial amnesty law that enabled the release of some 90,000 convicts, but excluded political prisoners detained facing "terrorism-related charges" (one of the pretexts for detaining Kurdish activists, intellectuals, politicians, NGO workers, and so on) and those whose trials are still pending. One of the prisoners that this affects is Selahattim Demirtaş and Figen Yüksegdağ, former co-chairs of the HDP party, with which EFA maintains its close relationship.

The pandemic can also be used as a means to justify longer periods of pre-trial detentions and denial of international observers to monitor the health and conditions of political prisoners. Compensation for the denial of visitors on public health grounds must be made, for example, expanding the use of phone call and video conferencing for prisoners.

Digital rights are an increasingly important field, but one which is still not prioritised by many, and a subject with a low level of public awareness due to its

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[10] https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25745&LangID=E

complexity and abstract nature.

Using data to combat the pandemic is extremely effective, utilising means such as track-and-trace applications on mobile phones in order to limit the spread and to monitor the movements of possible carriers of the virus.

However, this mass data profiling by the state (and often contracted private sector actors - data analytics is hugely profitable in times of elections and crises) has an unparalleled potential for widespread abuse and presents particular danger to political activists, supporters, and politicians involved with causes like that of EFA and its member parties. As representatives of movements that want to radically change the status quo in a number of European states, individuals identified as having 'dissident' opinions or classed as likely 'agitators' may well be subject to closer, more intrusive, or even illegal monitoring by states, for example. In July 2020, it was revealed that ex-EFA MEP Ernest Maragall and Speaker of the Catalan Parliament Roger Torrent had been targeted by spyware sold only to governments to track terrorists and criminals.[11] Whilst not surprising, it is a profoundly undemocratic act and a worrying development.

Many track-and-trace apps have been developed across Europe, which are being copied by governments worldwide, given their potential for population monitoring. Europe must set an example and these apps must adhere to the very highest standards of data protection and security.

If we are to truly build back better after the pandemic, then that too must include the quality of our democracies in Europe. Online as well as offline participation is vital, and we as political parties must use the tools at our disposal to get our message across. Technology must be harnessed to empower and to protect citizens, not exclude or endanger them. We must utilise all new and effective forms of political activism. However, not all citizens are familiar with the online world and accessibility is not uniform. We cannot allow the creation of a digital divide – it is up to the new Europe to now deliver a digital democratic dividend, ensuring the full respect of privacy and digital rights.

Politics, democracy and human rights are not to be suspended during crises. The opposite is true - they are to be strengthened. This particular crisis will necessitate deeper and more comprehensive scrutiny than ever.

The positive side of the crisis is that there has been a truly global moment of people coming together as communities, organising spontaneously, with coming up with innovative solutions to help one another. This attitude can only be a positive thing in terms of its impact on democracy. With increased participation, solidarity, knowledge, and higher expectations of those in power, people across the world will demand - and deserve - much better. It is now up to the European Union and its governments to deliver a higher quality democracy for all.

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[11] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/16/two-catalan-politicians-to-take-legal-action-targeting-spyware

Recommendations

- The European Commission must closely monitor human rights abuses and democratic backsliding during the pandemic, and take the appropriate action, including sanction if required.

- EFA welcomes the Human Rights Global Monitor tool, an open-source data tool developed by IDEA International to monitor human rights abuses worldwide.

- Unilateral decisions regarding the pandemic must be discouraged; solidarity and cooperation must prevail.

- The EU must closely monitor recovery package funding and its distribution to safeguard against its misuse or abuse. More direct and closer cooperation between the European level and a local or sub-state level is needed to prevent unfair distribution by out-of-touch states.

- To revitalise European democracy and to truly bring it closer to the people, a permanent system of European Citizens Assemblies must be created, giving representation to all the peoples and communities across Europe. These assemblies could then be consulted on various topics, linked to the political priorities of the rotating EUCO presidency or the Commission, for example.

- Elections must evolve with the times, and examples of good practice regarding electronic voting must be studied as a possible means of increasing voter turnout and democratic participation in a time when voting in-person may be difficult or impossible. Any such system must adhere to the highest standards of safety and security.

- Given the difficulties in physical campaigning during the pandemic, EFA members should be encouraged to use the full range of online platforms and digital tools to foster solidarity and campaign for their causes.

- The administering of a potential COVID-19 vaccine must be fair and be monitored by the EU. Those that are identified as most vulnerable should be prioritised, and there can be no discrimination based on ethnicity, gender, nationality, etc in its distribution.

- In line with the UN recommendation, EFA calls for the immediate release of all prisoners detained without sufficient legal basis, or detained solely for expressing critical or dissenting views. Similarly, the pandemic must not be manipulated to lengthen pretrial detentions or banning visits of international observers.

- Track-and-trace apps must adhere to the highest standards of safety and data protection, and must be monitored closely for potential abuse by governments or private interests.

2

A Gender perspective – the impact on women and girls

The impact of the pandemic has been felt by all, but there have been additional pressures and difficulties faced by women and girls. This section has been written by Miren Hurtado on behalf of the EFA Women's Group, detailing the unique impact of the crisis on women and girls. Since the time of writing, Poland has controversially signalled its intentions to leave the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combatting violence against women and domestic violence.

essential services – most of which are largely underpaid, undervalued and precarious – while balancing care and work responsibilities at home.

It has become clear that women are the backbone of society and their invaluable paid and unpaid care work is essential to the wellbeing and functioning of our societies and the planet. Therefore, gender mainstreaming in COVID-19 crisis is crucial to ensure that the different experiences faced by women and men are recognised and addressed.

Frontline workers

Frontline workers have been the most exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, putting themselves and their families at risk. Women have been leading in the provision of frontline and

Healthcare sector

Women are potentially more at risk of infection than men because they make up the majority (76%) of healthcare workers in the EU.

Percentage of women and men employed in health care activities

■ Women ■ Men
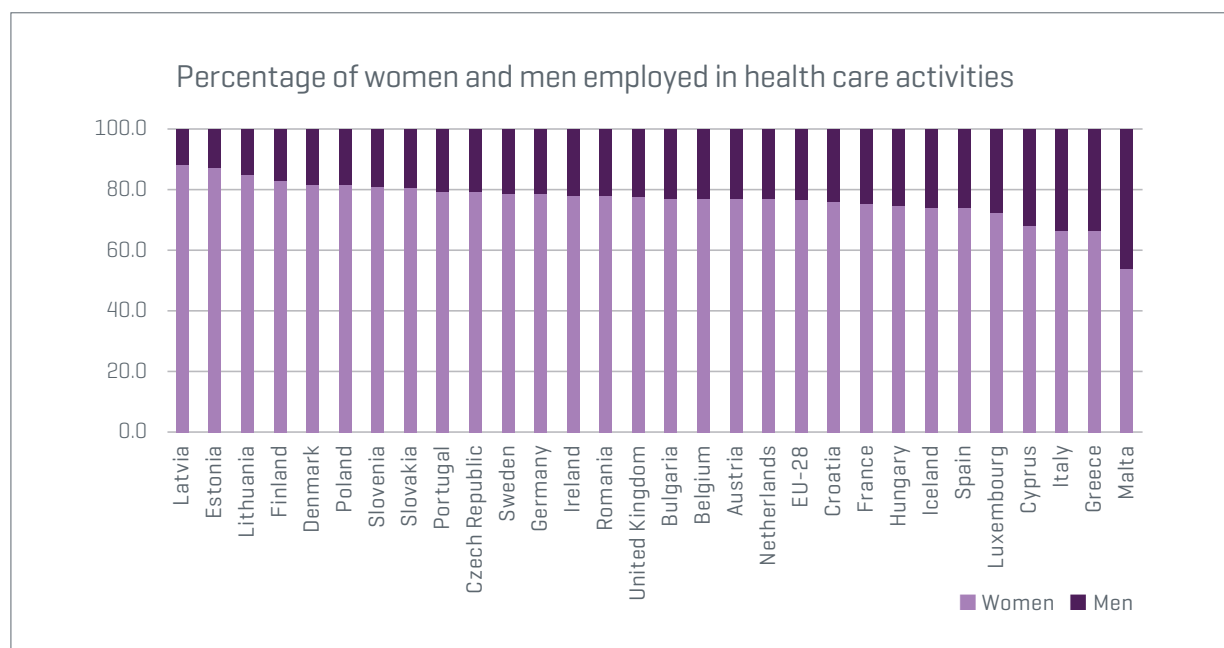
Source: EIGE, Gender Statistics Database

Research from the European Institute of Gender Equality (EIGE) has found that about 76% of the 49 million care workers in the EU are women. These include child care workers and teachers' aides (93%), personal care workers in health services (86%), like those working in home-based settings or in institutions, and domestic cleaners and helpers (95%). These figures do not take into account the share of undeclared employment, in particular in the domestic sector.

The majority of those providing the most essential health and care supports in this moment are women. When it comes to providing formal long-term care in people's homes, it is estimated that 4,5 million out of 5,5 million workers in the EU are women. Carers provide different types of services depending on their qualifications and job tasks. They might provide nursing care and basic medical services and they can be personal carers or domestic workers. Across the EU, it is estimated that about 83% of workers out of 1.8 million carers are women too.
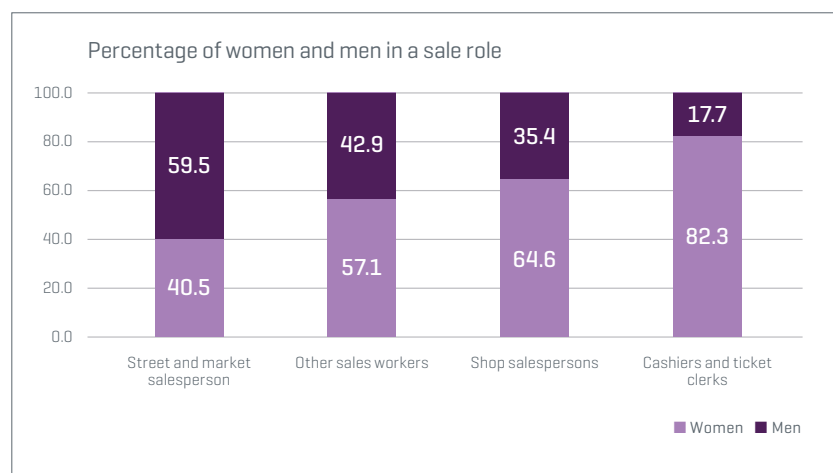
Women are at the forefront in providing frontline services and care to those in need, including home-based professional care to older people and to people with functional diversity, allowing society to continue functioning, and communities to live in self-isolation. In particular, in the health care and agriculture sectors, some measures have been

taken to allow for the free movement of workers during COVID-19 to ensure the ongoing provision of frontline workers across EU Member States.

This disproportionately has applied to many women from Central Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the Baltic States, as well as from Southern Europe who travel to other EU countries to work in low-paid jobs, and who are less likely to receive the same social protections as those afforded to citizens of those countries, facing a heightened risk of infection.

Retail sector

Workers in essential jobs like street cleaners and supermarket cashiers have also been exposed to a high-level of risk during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the fact that their duties involve (physical) interaction with people. This affects women in particular, as they make up 82% of all cashiers within the EU.

Percentage of women and men in a sale role

	Street and market salesperson	Other sales workers	Shop salespersons	Cashiers and ticket clerks
Men	59.5	42.9	35.4	17.7
Women	40.5	57.1	64.6	82.3

■ Women ■ Men

Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Survey (2018)

The contribution of women to the economy has never been so visible. Coronavirus has demonstrated the urgency to move beyond an outdated and default male breadwinner setting in which women's roles are confined to a caretaker role.

These majority-women led professions are among the most undervalued, underpaid and precarious jobs in the EU. The challenge now and ahead is to ensure their protection, to improve their working conditions and to grant dignity to those who have performed their duties in extremely testing times. There must also be a strong focus on those workers who face additional discrimination on grounds of race or ethnic origin, functional diversity, age, sexual orientation, language, class and/or migration status.

In order to tackle this, the following recommendations should be taken into account:

• Equality and democratic principles must be at the core of responses to the COVID-19 crisis;

• Recognise and address the wellbeing, as well as the occupational safety and health challenges of women in the essential care sectors;

• Collect, analyse and disseminate data broken down by sex for the purpose of monitoring gender equality in decision making and implement targeted, achievable and measurable policies, and to analyse issues from a gender perspective;

• Adopt positive action policies, preferential treatment, special measures and/or quotas to pro-

mote women's participation at all levels of decision-making and to set targets based on parity;

• Consult women and have gender-balance in decision-making during crisis situations;

• Promote the work of women and make their contributions visible and valued during crisis situations;

• Ensure increased financial support for all frontline and essential services across the EU to ensure all have equal access to social protection measures;

• Provide gender-responsive social and economic measures to support women and girls in precarious situations, including those at risk of losing their jobs, at risk of living in poverty, and/or are experiencing in-work poverty.

Ensuring and protecting the health of women and girls

During the pandemic, it has become starkly clear the impact and effects of the austerity cutbacks in EU's healthcare systems. Good access to permanent health care is a basic human right and it will be necessary for many survivors of the pandemic with long-term health problems like breathing issues. Now more than ever, we see the need to invest in healthcare infrastructure and the equipment needed.

Traditionally, all women and girls across Europe face specific challenges accessing full healthcare.

Discrimination of older women, Romani women, ethnic minority women, women and girls with functional diversity, women and girls affected by prostitution and those with underlying health conditions in accessing health care services cannot be tolerated.

Provision of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)

In a moment of crisis, it is important to ensure we continue to recognise that SRHR are essential for the wellbeing and health of women and girls everywhere. Whether it is in relation to childbirth, contraceptives, abortion services or access to information, these services remain crucial. In those cases, where 'non-essential' services and surgeries are being cancelled or postponed, we must ensure all pregnancy-related care continues to be recognised as essential.

The impact of COVID-19 on the birthing experience of every woman should be kept to an absolute minimum and there must be clear ongoing communication to pregnant women outlining all developments in service provision and COVID-19 advice for pregnant women. For medical abortion services, a EU-wide introduction of teleconsultations for prescription of the abortion pill is needed.

During the pandemic and lockdown, there has been extra pressure on single parents, the majority of which are women.

Protecting the health of women and girls too often left in the margins of society

During this crisis, older people have faced the highest risk of impact by COVID-19. This is particularly concerning for older women who represent more than half the older population. Across the EU, 19.8 million older women live alone, making this the largest proportion of women living alone overall. Older women face challenges that are further aggravated while living in long-term, often under resourced care facilities and are adjusting to self-isolation measures.

They also face disruptions to routine health services, in obtaining medicine, or are already impacted by pre-existing health conditions. Adequate support mechanisms must therefore be in place to ensure that older women are treated with dignity and respect without discrimination when receiving medical treatment. Regularised and safe access to household supplies, financial support, medicine and social support must be made available for older women, particularly those living alone.

Women and girls with functional diversity have faced compounding issues during this crisis. It is crucial that services offering information, emergency contact numbers and helplines are all accessible, including relay services for deaf, hard of hearing, visually impaired and deaf-blind women and girls. Women and girls in asylum seeking centres are being held in already overcrowded facilities that are not fit-for-purpose. Now more than ever they must be provided with measures to ensure they are able to self-isolate and have access to facilities that permit them to wash their hands frequently.

Roma and traveller women and girls have too often been left at risk to their health due to substandard sanitation facilities, lack of access to healthcare

systems, stigmatisation and discrimination leading to poor service or discriminatory practices (such as forced sterilisation). Across Europe, FRA has found that 30% of Roma persons live in households with no running water. During the pandemic, we must ensure that all women and girls across Europe have quality standards of living so that everyone can live safely during isolation periods, and long term investment must be made so that these additional health risks faced by Roma and Traveller communities come to an end.

Therefore, we recommend:

- Identify which groups are at higher risk of discrimination and social exclusion and to propose targeted measures to mitigate these risks;

- In order to identify and understand intersecting discrimination, data and research with an intersectional perspective need to be strengthened. This will enable the development of policies and legislation that adequately address these inequalities

Gender-based violence

Violence against women is a major public health problem and a violation of women's human rights. Global estimates published by World Health Organisation indicate that about 1 in 3 (35%) of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime.

Globally, 64% of women who are killed die at the hands of an intimate partner or family member. Men's violence against women is a long-term systemic and structural issue worldwide. In the EU, more than a fifth of women have been physically or sexually abused by an intimate partner.

In times of COVID, lockdown and isolation measures have created an enabling environment for abusers' coercive control of victims, leading to more physical, psychological and sexual violence. Women and girls who are victims of intimate partner violence and sexual violence have been confined at home, or in institutional settings, with their abusers, with less possibilities of seeking help without further endangering their lives.

At Member State level some figures have been provided showing a rise in domestic violence during lockdown. France saw a 32% jump in domestic violence reports in just over a week and Lithuania observed 20% more domestic violence reports over a three-week lockdown period than over the same period in 2019.

Sex workers, who are often exposed to insecurity and situations of violence and exploitation, are significantly at risk of further exploitation and violence and should receive adequate consideration and support in this moment through clear access to health, social and financial supports without risk due to migration status.

Recommendations:

- Address the impact of COVID-19 keeping the issue of gender-based violence as a priority as lockdown measures increase vulnerability and violence;

- Implementation of risk management measures to ensure a coordinated response to the increased risk of gender-based violence;

- Data collection on violence against women should be harmonised within the EU to ensure it can be adequately measured and addressed. This would help identify changing patterns of violence in times of crisis;

- Ensure that shelters for women and girls who are victims of male violence, for homeless women and for asylum seeking women remain open with the appropriate measures taken to protect women and workers in these shelters from the spread of the virus;

- Ensure that sex-disaggregated data on male violence against all women and girls is made available, particularly to inform emergency responses and plans for redesign and renewal of our systems post-COVID;

- Ensure that public protection services and mechanisms are in place and running to support all women and girls who are victims of male violence and exploitation;

- Fully implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, the Istanbul Convention.

LGBTI+

The LGTBI+ community has also suffered especially during these challenging times.[1] From lower health outcomes due to stigma and discrimination to the interruption of mental, sexual and reproductive health services due to the collapse of public health systems, Covid-19 has presented numerous challenges for all LGBTI people. Teenagers quarantined with a hostile families, sex workers who have lost their income or HIV positive people with no access to HIV centres are only some of the examples of this situation.

Recommendations:

- Ensure that the challenges presented by the pandemic to the LGBTI+ community are fully considered by policy makers and public health authorities.

- That measures be put in place to facilitate access to vital services during the crisis e.g. HIV centres, shelters or protection services for those at risk from quarantine with hostile families or violent situations.

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[1] https://www.ilga-europe.org/sites/default/files/covid19-lgbti-assessment-2020.pdf

3
The Impact on Young People:
A Youth Perspective by EFAy

The ongoing COVID pandemic has, in one way or another, changed the lives of everybody. Old and young have been affected by it, be it from the direct health implications of the illness, or from the indirect effects that it has caused on society. And for the youth of Europe, this socio-economic crisis is the second that we will have to live through during our relatively short adult lives, the first being the 2008 financial crisis. Even though the origins of these two crises are clearly very different, both will have huge implications on the economy and on the lives of young people across Europe. For EFAy, it is clear that we cannot allow, once again, for the same economic "solutions" to be applied. After the 2008 financial crisis, the economic downturn created a culture of poor working conditions, precarious contracts and created a larger gap between rich and poor. What became normal then cannot be returned to as we rebuild after this pandemic. We must use the need to rebuild as an opportunity to create a Europe for all peoples, a Europe that's fairer and economies that are inclusive of everyone.

For EFAy there have been 5 main concerns regarding COVID and its effects on the lives of young Europeans:

- The biggest effect that COVID has had on young people is in relation to education. One of the first measures implemented in the fight against the virus was to close down all educational centres, from schools to universities. In many cases, there was little coordination, and students suffered from this lack of preparation. We strongly believe that students cannot be adversely affected, and European Governments must support students at all

levels so that they are not disadvantaged in any way due to the current pandemic.

- Secondly, COVID also greatly affected young workers. Economic shutdowns were key in providing a quick response to the spread of the virus, but they caused significant pressures across all sectors, on large and small companies. No matter how long it takes to rebuild economies, we cannot revert to the exploitation especially of young people and migrant workers which occurred after the 2008 financial crash. EFAy calls for people to be supported at work and for governments to take this change to legislate against poor and exploitative contracts without fair terms and conditions. The priority should be to secure safe working environments and stable contracts for all those in employment to build a Europe post-COVID without exploitation.

- Thirdly, we refer specifically to the challenges caused by social distancing and lockdown measures. The huge changes to how we live our lives along with job insecurity, bereavement and health fears have had an immense effect on people's mental health and well-being. Since the beginning of the pandemic we called for adequate mental health support to be in place for all to cope with isolation and social distancing, this support needs to continue as lockdown measures are eased. A worrying statistic across the continent has been the increase in domestic violence cases through periods of isolation and social distancing, a threat that affects young women as much as women of any other age. We also demanded that a feminist perspective is also applied when dealing with the

resources allocated to social services as we come in to the "new normality".

• Fourthly, COVID affected national and ethnic minorities communities as well as stateless nations in a similar manner as majority groups across Europe. However, the responses given by the state institutions have mostly ignored the specificities of these groups. Special measures should be taken so that these communities do not have to face the worst of any economic crisis caused by this pandemic – re-building economies must include everyone. In the case of devolved governments, many of which are responsible for health matters, EFAy noticed and denounced a complete lack of respect for devolved powers, with many central governments using the pandemic to take away powers from the "regional" level and brought back to the "state". These attacks on the self-government of many areas in Europe must not continue. Devolved legislatures should receive the necessary funding to protect and support all citizens.

• Finally, during these months, EFAy also campaigned to safeguard the future of funding for young minority communities. Funding for key European projects aimed at young people, such as funding for the ERASMUS+ programme should not be reduced, since they are already quite limited. We also campaigned for funding for the arts and culture sector to be increased, since many young individuals, companies and institutions will need specific financial support to start up again. With any economic downturn there is a risk that funding for minority languages could be cut when budgets become tight, EFAy wants to see guarantees that this will not be the case and that minority languages across Europe will be fully supported.

"Governments must support students at all levels so that they are not disadvantaged in any way due to the pandemic"

To summarise, COVID has had a deep impact on the European society, and the youth is no exception to that. Recently there has been lots of talk about supposed irresponsibility of the youth in some aspects, as if the pandemic would not have had hardly affected young people across Europe. What EFAy demands is for less patronising attitudes, and more action from our governments to ensure that young people are not, once again, paying for the hard socio-economic consequences of a crisis. We see COVID as an occasion to reflect on the current state of our health services in particular, and on the state of the welfare state in general, and it is clear to us that public health and the public sector will move Europe towards recovery. We must therefore let no one behind while framing this "new normality" that will accompany us for the coming months and years.

4
Geography and Mobility

A number of geographical factors must be taken into account in terms of the pandemic. The virus remains a constant, but its spread and its impact can vary greatly depending on location. We tend to associate dense urban areas with a high level of transmission, but we have seen a number of rural communities with very serious outbreaks too. We think that islands might logically be safer given their isolation, but what are the other effects of being so separated?

EFA represents a wide variety of communities across the European continent. We represent a diverse number of geographical territories, whether they are island nations, peninsulas, coastal regions, mountainous, or well-connected central hubs. Many of them are extremely reliant on tourism and, with restrictions on travel and the crisis continuing over those crucial peak summer months, will continue to be severely affected.

"The pandemic has exposed existing inequalities"

Tourism

Tourism is one of the world's most important industries, accounting for an estimated 300million jobs in the global economy. It is particularly important in Europe, with 5 of the top 10 tourist destinations in the world (the French and Spanish states occupy 1st and 2nd place respectively) according to the World Tourism Organisation. Barcelona, a city of 1.6 million inhabitants and one of Europe's most visited cities, saw a record 30 million visitors recorded in 2019. But since the pandemic, local trade associations predict that 1 in 4 restaurants and at least 15% of businesses in the city will close permanently, with thousands of jobs at risk.[1]

However, Barcelona is one of the lucky ones in this sense, given its favourable geographical location and diversified economy. Tourism-dependent islands such as Sardinia, the Canaries, and the Greek archipelago are at an unprecedented risk, given that tourism represents a much higher proportion of their income, and that they stand much more affected by travel restrictions given their isolation. Their geographical beauty and distinctiveness are what make them so desirable as tourist destinations, but conversely it also makes them much more vulnerable to volatility in the sector, and to crises.

In drastic fashion, the pandemic has exposed existing inequalities and problems of which we were already aware. Tourism is no different in this regard, and has shown us that a very delicate balance needs to be stricken. On one hand, tourism forms a vital part of the European economy and the lifeblood of many communities, and on the other it can be a destructive force. The negative effects of mass tourism before the pandemic in Venice, Barcelona and Amsterdam have been very well-documented. But now faced with no tourism at all, how can an

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[1] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/20/how-coronavirus-is-reshaping-europes-tourism-hotspots

economy reliant on its annual summer visitors survive, particularly vulnerable island communities?

Understandably, many tourism-reliant economies are feeling the pressure to reopen as soon as possible, even when it may not be safe to do so.

Many tourist hotspots have enjoyed a calmer summer because of restrictions on travel and because many are unwilling to take the risk. This has allowed a number of destinations and attractions a period of recovery from the heavy burden of mass tourism. We must take this opportunity to move forwards and to build a more sustainable form of tourism for all. In the Coppieters Foundation study 'Transforming Tourism', Aurkene Alzua-Sorzabal and Marina Abad say that "Education and awareness-raising are needed to move towards a shift to tourism values disconnected from excessive commodification and exploitation. Tourism must trigger a positive interaction and connection with locals."[2]

Despite all of our advances, tourism has not changed much in decades, and is based on an unlimited growth and consumption model. What Europe needs now is a new form of sustainable and responsible tourism, which strikes the balance between being accessible to all, whilst also meeting local needs and ensuring the protection of the natural and built environment, and also to protect and promote local traditions and languages rather than endanger them. There must be far more investment to promote 'slow' tourism, which focuses on meaningful and genuine experiences, that also have far less negative impact on the environment and local cultures.

There are a number of tourism networks across Europe such as the Network for European Regions for a Sustainable and Competitive Tourism (NECSTouR), the European Cultural Tourism Network and the European Route of Industrial Heritage. These offer the chance for cities or regions to work together for a more sustainable tourism based on certain themes (e.g. cycling, gastronomy, post-industrial areas etc), and a chance to revitalise communities.

As lockdowns became imminent, we saw the phenomenon across Europe of more affluent urban people 'fleeing' to second homes in rural areas, sometimes bringing coronavirus with them and putting undue strain on an already chronically underfunded healthcare system in these. It has been reported that 40% of all property sales in the country of Gwynedd in the north-west of Wales between 2019 and 2020, were as second homes.[3] This fundamentally alters the character of the area which is

> "We must ensure the protection of the natural environment, and to promote local traditions and languages"

2 https://ideasforeurope.eu/activity/publication/transforming-tourism/
3 https://www.dailypost.co.uk/news/north-wales-news/second-homes-crisis-putting-future-18754517

a heartland of the Welsh language, and is a worrying trend that will almost certainly be exacerbated by the pandemic as people lose enthusiasm for urban living. This was not a phenomenon unique to Wales however, and similar instances have been reported all across Europe, to a variety of governmental policy responses and varying degrees of controversy.

Digitalisation training programmes and support should be offered to small businesses in the field of tourism to improve their online presence and resilience in the digital age, and local schemes to incentivise consumption in local culture and arts should be explored. Cultural centres and festivals should receive similar support, in particular to adapt their activities during the pandemic.

Geographical impact

Tourism is a lifeline in some areas, usually because of unique natural features and distinct cultures that make them outbreak of COVID-19 and had one of the highest relative numbers of confirmed cases in terms of proportion of the population, with around 1 case per 280 inhabitants. This number is high because of the islands' small population of just around 60,000 people, but is also because of comprehensive testing, with 10% of inhabitants having been tested. The Faroe Islands now have the highest proportion of its population tested in the world, with Luxembourg in second place. Tests for salmon isa-virus were repurposed for use with the coronavirus, and results were able to be analysed in Tórshavn,

rather than being sent to a laboratory in Denmark over 1000km away.

Even in what may be the most geographically isolated community in Europe, this confident decentralised thinking and autonomous action has offered a creative and innovative solution in extremely challenging times, and serves as a model of good practice for others. Equally, it demonstrates that even though it is geographically peripheral, it still felt the effects of the pandemic. In today's interconnected world and facing a virus which is easily-transmissible and asymptomatic for several days, isolation does not necessarily mean safety. These vulnerable communities must receive the due financial support and consideration as lawmakers legislate.

The Åland Islands have also faced a unique challenge as an island nation as a result of the closure of state borders in Europe. As freedom of movement was suspended, so too was inter-state cooperation. The Finnish Government's travel restrictions meant that Swedish-speaking doctors from Sweden could not travel to work and treat Swedish-speaking patients on the Åland Islands, despite an agreement between the two states and without consultation with the Åland autonomous government. This left many without access to their doctors and the hospital without specialists, and unable to access medical attention in their own language. Even more bizarrely in this case was that on the Finnish-Swedish border in the north, cross-border travel of medical personnel was permitted. There are certainly many lessons being learned on all levels during these testing times, not least that large states bypassing or

undermining regional or national sub-state authorities can have devastating consequences on public health.

Nagorno Karabakh faces a unique challenge, as a territory that is not recognised by the state in which it is landlocked, and as a conflict-affected area. The UN has set out special measures in its Global Humanitarian Response Plan to address the needs of those in conflict zones,[4] but with limited access to the World Health Organisation because of Artsakh's political situation, this means even more difficulties. As the Republic is not recognised by Azerbaijan, there are complications regarding the operations of international bodies such as the WHO in the territory. The vulnerability of Nagorno Karabakh in this international legal grey area only serves to re-emphasise the urgent need for the self-determination of the people of the Republic of Artsakh.

Agriculture and food production

The agricultural sector faces very unique challenges, but is also an area which has huge potential for change to make our lives and our planet healthier. In times of crisis, the production of food – often taken for granted – immediately becomes

"This is not due to a lack of food, but because of existing inequalities and vulnerabilities in the distribution chain"

a priority. The current model of food production in the EU is an 'extractivist', neoliberal one. Profit, free trade, and market demand are the most important factors which drive it, and is prioritised over actual need, labour conditions, or environmental concerns. These problems were evident before the outbreak of the pandemic, but have been further amplified and long-term solutions are desperately needed.

Having shaken the food system to its foundations, it is predicted by many that coronavirus will cause millions more worldwide to fall into hunger and poverty. The UN has predicted there will be an 82% rise of those falling into crisis level hunger worldwide compared to 2019.[5] This is not due to a lack of food, but because of existing inequalities and vulnerabilities in the distribution chain having being exacerbated, and with even more people falling into unemployment as the virus causes economic disruption on an unprecedented scale. It is estimated that around 30% of global food production is wasted each year whilst local markets are being shut, and farmers become price-takers rather than price-makers. Small and medium-sized farms are at particular risk, in addition to the sometimes burdensome bureaucracy that needs to be navigated to get subsidies, and it is these small producers that need particular support.

More generous subsidies are needed, and co-oper-

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4   https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/Global-Humanitarian-Response-Plan-COVID-19.pdf
5   https://www.oxfam.org/en/world-brink-hunger-pandemic-coronavirus-threatens-push-millions-starvation

atives and local farmers must be supported. Food security and safety must be protected as a human right, and it must be a priority to move towards a more sustainable food system. The EU must ensure that environmental criteria are included in the Farm to Fork strategy, damaging free trade deals must be stopped, and more strict measures to tackle food waste must be put in place. The working conditions of those working in the food production chain must also be improved, with better labour protections. In many instances, the lack of proper protective equipment and working conditions led to Covid-19 being spread amongst those working in food production, with local outbreaks linked to slaughterhouses, for example.

Consumption of local products must be incentivised, with generous support given to small producers. Support to help small producers to develop an online presence, by means of training and sharing good practice can help them to become more resilient. Incentives such as these could also encourage the next generation to continue to work and run these small farms for example, reversing the trend of young people moving away from agricultural work to find work in the city. Not only does a sustainable food system depend on the move back towards small producers, but it is also an important part of cultural heritage, which is particularly vulnerable to this type of demographic shock.

When talking about border closure, we tend to think of the human aspect, but one of the knock-on effects

"We must move beyond our current model, and create a sustainable, healthy, and locally-focused food system"

has been that of dangerous conditions for animals, namely live exports trapped whilst in transit. For example, when Poland closed its borders, queues of 60km formed on the German-Polish borders with huge waiting times. EU law means that animals cannot be transported for more than 8 hours without being fully rested. The food supply chain is extremely vulnerable to disruptions of this nature, and live animal exports between Ireland and the rest of the EU post-Brexit is also a matter of concern.

It is clearer than ever that we must move beyond our current model, and create a sustainable, healthy, and locally-focussed food system. Access to food must be guaranteed and universal, without additional burden on the consumer or the producer.

Migration

The past few years has seen a resurgence of anti-migration rhetoric come to the forefront of politics, all across Europe. Many extremist or populist movements have used inflammatory anti-migrant language whilst campaigning and introduced inhumane legislation whilst in power. However in a twist of irony, the closure of European state borders has in fact made many European citizens and their governments realise the true value of migrants to our societies. Such a large demographic which contributes so much to our society and economies and in such

> "Many industries and services that kept our societies functional during lockdown are often heavily dependent on migrant workers"

Older People

an interconnected world cannot simply be ignored, especially as so many industries and services that kept our societies functional during lockdown are often heavily dependent on migrant workers.

As lockdowns came into force across the continent, chartered flights were hurriedly organised by agricultural companies to bring in workers from Bulgaria and Romania to Germany and the UK, given their food production chain's reliance on migrant workers.[6] 98% of fruit pickers in the UK are non-UK nationals, for example. This is of course not a one-way relationship, as the economies of Bulgaria and Romania are also very reliant on workers supporting their families and sending their money back to be spent at home. Seasonal workers like these and those working in food production and processing are at particular risk of catching and spreading coronavirus, given the lack of labour protections and often grossly inadequate working conditions.

Economic migrants is one thing, but what about those that flee conflict and oppression? As borders closed in Europe, so too did the system for accepting asylum seekers. Many states shut down their entire asylum and migration administrations, leaving many people across Europe in limbo - unable to register for asylum, and unable to continue to their destinations. This has left some of the most marginalised and vulnerable people in our societies at even greater risk and even more marginalised than before.

The pandemic has had a unique impact on elderly people, in particular those in care homes. Given the ease of transmission, vulnerability of residents and the inadequate situation in many of Europe's care homes, it is perhaps not surprising that they bore the brunt of deaths caused by the virus in many countries. Long-term care systems must be improved through dedicated measure to better protect the rights and the dignity of older persons in need of care. The OEWG (Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing) in the UN has developed frameworks to guide the development of good policies.[7] The Sällbo multigenerational living project in Helsingborg is an example of a very successful model of good practice that could explored and replicated.[8]

But it is not only those in care that have been affected. Lockdowns have meant difficulty for many, as restrictions on movement meant that families could not always see each other, particularly if they were far away. Loneliness amongst older people was already a profound problem, which has only been exacerbated by the pandemic. Many people reliant on care or just company from their closest family and friends were unable to have any outside contact for extended periods of time. This clearly has a very detrimental effect on mental and physical health for a very vulnerable part of the population. Digital tools and connectivity meant that there has been the possibility of connecting with family members over the

6 https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-flying-in-fruit-pickers-from-countries-in-lockdown-is-dangerous-for-everyone-136551
7 https://social.un.org/ageing-working-group/index.shtml
8 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/15/its-like-family-the-swedish-housing-experiment-designed-to-cure-loneliness

internet, but of course, knowledge and use of such technology is low amongst older people, and they are much more likely to not have internet connections at home, for example.

Beyond Borders

One of the first measures that was taken in response to the pandemic was to immediately close borders, with states across the world practicing what can be said to be an act of geopolitical social distancing. For many people, it has been their first time experiencing hard and closed internal European borders.

The crisis has highlighted just how arbitrary borders can be, as well as how unrepresentative they are, even in present-day Europe. These lines between states needlessly divide people from the same communities and even the same nations.

The issue of the EU internal borders must be dealt with a contemporary vision in 21st century Europe. The EU is trapped within its own internal borders. It is now time to move beyond the Europe of the States. On the eve of the opening of the 2 year public consultation on the Future of Europe it is time to redefine the EU structures.

"It is now time to move beyond the Europe of the States"

The concept of variable geometry is already accepted in the EU to describe the idea of a method of differentiated integration in the European Union. It would enable groups of countries wishing to pursue a given goal to do so while allowing those opposed to hold back. It acknowledges that, particularly since the EU's membership almost doubled in the early 2000s, there may be differences among countries and that there should be means to resolve such stalemates.

It is necessary to name things in order to foster a change in mentality. That is why EFA thinks that it is time to go beyond that concept and start implementing the principle of "variable geography" because Europe's true wealth is the diversity of its Peoples. The EU needs to become the "European Union of Peoples" and find the way to achieve it. The construction of this post-pandemic Europe must rest on 2 pillars: solidarity and pragmatism.

Europe must be seen as it really is, through a kaleidoscope with multiple, changing shapes and patterns, not a single colour. It is necessary to change perspectives: relations between different territories have to be favoured according to their needs and specificities. EFA defends the principle of "variable geography", a modular geography that favours the emancipation of all territories because the EU is much more than the sum of its constituent Member States.

There are many ways in which the principle of "variable geography" should be applied:

1. Stateless Nations

The fact that health powers are devolved in the British state has probably saved lives, with Scotland and Wales having the freedom to pursue their own often more cautious strategies than that of neighbouring England and the UK Government. There have been notable divergences in policy during the exiting-lockdown phase, with England reopening non-essential retail services, pubs and restaurants ahead of Scotland and Wales. England is also no longer encouraging people to work from home where possible, whereas Scottish and Welsh Governments continue to do so.

In the Valencian Country too, subsidiarity has translated into a better management of material and human resources, when compared to the rest of autonomous regions of the Spanish State. The Valencian Region has had the fewest deaths in nursing homes or the only authority to have a plan for children returning to school in September, with almost 5000 more teachers and the distribution of over 29.000 tablets to bridge the still existing digital gap.

Not only has this crisis revealed the differing priorities and powers of the constituent nations within states, but also of the inequalities within them, and often highlighting constitutional issues that are becoming ever more pressing. The case for self-determination has been strengthened as devolved authorities, even with their limited powers, have shown that they are able to run themselves more effectively when not encumbered by state governments.

2. Cross-border Territories

Many of the nations and communities represented in EFA span across the borders of the current Europe of the States. For example, the territory of the Basque Country lies partly in Spain, and partly in France. During lockdown a citizen from Hendaye could travel 100 km north or east but not southbound which meant that free movement in the Basque Country ceased to exist. The impact has been most detrimental on cross-border workers, cross-border trade, cross-border logistics platforms employing thousands of people and families that could not see each other for weeks.

Crossing the border is a vital part of the daily life of the German and Danish minorities. There is extensive cooperation and cultural exchange between the two communities, economically but also socially and culturally. Young Danish-speakers on the German side cross the border daily to attend university for example. Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen announced that although the border would be open only partially, a special arrangement would be found for those in the borderlands.

3. Islands

EFA is represented in Corsica, Sardinia, the Balearic islands, the Canary Islands as well as in the Åland Islands. Although geographically disconnected, they share some of the same basic problems: sustainable tourism, transport, health facilities and the same

"The case for self-determination has been strengthened"

expectations: the respect and support for their distinct cultures and languages. The principle of variable geography should be applied to overcome the otherwise complicated issues arising from the strictly one size fits all, state-focussed policies implemented by the different EU Member States.

4. Displaced peoples

There are many peoples trampled by history, mainly in Central Europe, which share the same culture and language but are scattered in different EU States. Once again, the principle of variable geography should be applied to lift all barriers to the promotion and use of their languages and distinct cultures. It is a concrete example on how the EU could support and promote diversity beyond State policies. As a result, the pro-European attitudes in those territories would certainly be enhanced.

EFA considers that it is time for the principle of subsidiarity to be implemented to its true extent, and not just left to varying interpretation by Member States. Specialised support must be given to all those unique communities by the EU. With a federal spirit in mind and out of efficiency and pragmatism the EU should stand up for devolved powers.

The EU should even be bold enough to pave the way to the establishment of the principles and conditions to exercise the right to Self-Determination in the 21st century, to establish the right of all Peoples to decide on their own destiny under full democratic principles and conditions. That is why EFA supports all efforts to write a EU Convention to that end.

Recommendations

• The true geographical diversity of Europe and its nations must be accounted for in line with the principle of Variable Geography.

• Specialised support must be provided by the EU for those communities that are geographically isolated, for example in mountainous regions, coastal and island territories, and so on, that generally have lower levels of access and investment in public healthcare, internet connectivity, and infrastructure.

• Specialised support is needed in areas that have seen negative impacts of mass, unlimited-growth tourism, and more investment is needed to promote more sustainable and 'slow' tourism sensitive to the language and customs of the area, and meets the needs of both locals and tourists.

• The needs of minority communities or those in situations of conflict must be met, in line with UN recommendations.

• Refugees and asylum seekers must be treated with dignity and European asylum systems must remain open with the proper protective measures in place, and operate on the principle of international solidarity, even when borders are being closed.

• More generous subsidies for small food producers are needed, and food cooperatives and local farmers must be supported. Food safety and access to food must be protected as a human right. The EU must ensure environmental criteria in the new Farm

to Fork Strategy, reduce food waste, protect social conditions of farmers, promote local producers, and stop damaging free trade agreements.

• Long-term care systems must be improved through dedicated measure to better protect the rights and the dignity of older persons in need of care, and specific measures put in place to ensure that no older person is left alone during this pandemic.

5

Attitudes towards the EU, and the crucial role of sub-state authorities

Crises often mean drastic responses by those in charge. However, unlike other recent crises such as the debt crisis, the never-ending Brexit saga, or mass data collection, the coronavirus pandemic is relatively easy to quantify. The number of cases testing positive for COVID-19, excess deaths, or whether there is a lockdown in place in a particular state are very broadly and unambiguously understood, spinning off statistics notwithstanding. Because of this, it has been clear to see which authorities are doing a good job, and which ones are not. Results being so apparent has meant that critical thinking towards governments and authorities have also led to some interesting changes in attitudes.

The initial slowness of the European Union and its constituent states to act and show solidarity has been worrying, particularly as other superpowers made very public displays of support. In the early weeks of the pandemic in Europe with personal protective equipment and testing kits very scarce and with Europe seemingly on the side-lines, China sent teams of doctors, equipment and medications to northern Italy. Russian military doctors were also sent to hospitals. International solidarity is always to be welcomed, but the move was seen as controversial and as a public-relations move by many.

In EU accession countries, notably Serbia, this brand of corona-geopolitics is extremely sensitive. In a time when Serbian enthusiasm for EU membership is waning, other powers are taking advantage of this situation in an important strategic area. EFA supports its member party the LSV in Vojvodina and Serbian membership of the EU, but the stance of the Serbian state is now murkier. President Vučić has been giving off rather ambiguous signals, claiming that "European solidarity does not exist"[1] and publicly kissing the Chinese flag[2], whilst also reaffirming Serbia's strategic objective is full EU membership.[3]

An interesting survey[4] published by the European Council on Foreign Relations think tank on how the pandemic has changed the public's world view provides data on European citizens' attitudes towards the role of experts in public discourse, trust in governments and crucially, opinions of the role and effectiveness of the EU during the crisis. As borders immediately closed, sometimes in contradiction to EU rules on the Single Market, it would seem natural that opinions towards the EU might be negative, particularly in a context of recent years of widespread populist Euroscepticism. There was a worry that people would revert to state nationalism in this moment of panic, undoing years of progress of European co-operation. However, the results present a far more nuanced picture: one that offers a lot of hope and potential for the future.

When asked, a majority of respondents in all Member States believed that the EU responded poorly to the

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1   https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/08/china-serbia-aleksander-vucic-xi-jinping-coronavirus/
2   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=om7UlmD-hmE
3   https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2020-05-07/coronavirus-diplomacy-wont-change-serbias-path
4   https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/europes_pandemic_politics_how_the_virus_has_changed_the_publics_worldview

"An average of 63% of Europeans believe that the coronavirus crisis has shown the need for more EU cooperation."

crisis, and that attitudes towards the EU had worsened. Over half of respondents in every state surveyed believed that the EU had been irrelevant during the crisis. This is worrying news indeed.

However, amongst these results, there is a cause for optimism. Although the results suggest that the general feeling is that the EU did not really help in any meaningful or visible way, the answer to one question shows that there is an appetite for the EU to be much more present and active in future. An average of 63% of Europeans believe that the coronavirus crisis has shown the need for more EU cooperation. The EU must learn its lesson from these results, and international crises such as this represent an area where it could be both well-received by the people as well as very effective in tackling the problem. It is now up to us to hold the EU to account and to ensure that the new Europe that citizens want - and deserve - becomes a reality.

The divergences between the approaches within the EU have been considerable, with some states taking very strict measures, and others a more laissez-faire attitude. However, more interesting for EFA is the differences in attitude within multinational states themselves. For example, as health is a devolved competence in the UK, the Scottish and Welsh Governments have been able to take a different approach to that of the UK Government (which manages the public health of England). The Scottish and Welsh Governments have used their power both taken a stricter

line in terms of easing of lockdown measures. Many across the UK have for the first time realised how different things are in the constituent nations, and even within those devolved nations themselves. Support for independence has risen in both Wales[5] and Scotland[6] since the outbreak of the pandemic, with 32% and 53% respectively. Devolution in this sense has certainly saved lives, and the fact that Wales and Scotland can better manage their own affairs than London ever will, has not gone unnoticed.

With its focus on green and digital transformation in the most affected sectors, we welcome European Commission's call for expressions of interest in partnerships to pilot interregional innovation projects supporting the repose and recovery following the pandemic. Giving regional authorities more opportunities to work together like this is not only good for the regions themselves, but for Europe and all its people. Projects like this are beneficial, but parallel structural change is needed on the level of the European institutions if we are to really build back better. A much stronger role of the sadly often-overlooked Committee of the Regions is needed, and should function as a second chamber to the European Parliament. The European Parliament too must have the power to introduce legislation.

In her Europe Day address to the Committee of the Regions, Ursula von der Leyen paid tribute to regions and cities across Europe, calling them "the voice on the ground of our collective European efforts."[7] This

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[5] https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/yescymru/mailings/1551/attachments/original/YouGov_Data_for_YesCymru_August_2020.pdf?1598357448
[6] https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/sep/13/covid-crisis-changing-minds-scottish-independence
[7] https://www.facebook.com/European.Committee.of.the.Regions/videos/302821274040178

> *"From its inception, the EU has been a top-down affair. Now is the time for a bottom-up Europe, a Europe of the Peoples."*

is to be welcomed of course, but these regions must be more than merely the conduits of European policy; they should be active partners in shaping it too. The regions and cities are not passive authorities to simply implement decisions from above, given that they operate on a level much closer to the people of Europe than the EU institutions. Closer inter-institutional partnerships must be fostered, to break down the barriers between these authorities and governments. The mentality must be changed. And as well as a more prominent role for the 'regions', civil society must be integrated into decision making.

The Committee of the Regions itself has been vocal during the crisis, issuing a Declaration on COVID-19 Response: Local and regional authorities of the European response to the COVID-19 crisis.[8] This declaration sets out the official position of the CoR, and warns explicitly that "the focus on executive power during the immediate crisis response carries the risk of centralisation" and says "decentralisation, multi-level democracy, local self-government and participation are essential elements of the European governance model".

Public awareness of the various regions and devolved administrations of Europe is possibly higher than ever before. As flare ups reappear and sub-state authorities from national parliaments to local mayors deal with the crisis in unique ways, the differences within EU Member States can be stark. Italy, for example, was the first seriously affected Member State in the

EU, but a regional breakdown shows how diverse the experience of the pandemic has been. Lombardy has been one of the main European flash-points, but Sardinia and Valle d'Aosta have some of the lowest number of positive cases within the Italian state.

This awareness of the roles, responsibilities and successes of devolved governments , can only be good for the EU and for EFA in the long-term. A switch to thinking closer to the real people and communities of Europe as we combat the pandemic together, is both more effective, as well as more democratic in character than following the lines of out-of-touch centralised state.

As we move into the current stage of curtailing the spread of COVID-19 in Europe but also seeing individual outbreaks in certain areas, this will almost certainly mean a more important role for local, regional or devolved authorities. It is only real cooperation in line with the principle of subsidiarity - from the local level and those closest to citizens, all the way up to European and international level - that offers an effective response to and strong recovery from this crisis.

From its inception, the EU has been a top-down affair. Now is the time for a bottom-up Europe, a Europe of the Peoples.

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8   https://cor.europa.eu/en/events/Documents/Declaration%20of%20the%20European%20Committee%20of%20the%20Regions%20on%20local%20and%20region....pdf

Recommendations

- The European Union and its Member States must be quicker to react and quicker to show solidarity when areas of the Union are affected in times of crisis.

- Given the divergence of approaches even within Member States, the European Union must liaise directly with regional or sub-state authorities for a more effective coordinated response.

- Attacks on self-government across Europe must not be allowed to continue, and devolved legislatures must receive the necessary funding to protect and support all citizens.

- A Citizens' Assembly composed of a representative sample of European citizens and civil society, reflecting the true diversity of the continent.

- The European Parliament and the Committee of the Regions, as the democratic arm of the EU, must have more power, and the ability to introduce legislation.

- A strengthened Committee of the Regions could serve as a second chamber of the European Parliament.

- A separate EU Assembly for Cities should also be explored, as mixing city authorities with national/regional authorities in the Committee of the Regions leads to an imbalance.

- The European Union should have a greater role in the public health of its citizens, particularly in 'borderless' phenomena such as pandemics and should pursue a common European vaccine research in order to avoid the unnecessary competition posed by the current model led by big pharmaceutical companies which prioritises profits over people.

- To finance the massive investment plan and Green Deal, the EU must issue at least €1 trillion of coronabonds, and create new own-resources via Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, an EU-wide corporate tax, a digital tax on those new platforms that have seen unprecedented exponential growth as a result of the crisis, and a Financial Transaction Tax. Other sources must also be explored.

- The EU must adopt a 2 year stimulus package with the Green Deal (€750 billion) at its core, to be climate-proofed and full in line with the Paris Agreement. A Green European Investment Bank Programme of €275 billion should also be adopted.

- The ECB Pandemic Emergency Purchasing programme (PEPP) must be supported, inviting the ECB to purchase Eurobonds & consider support for the Green Deal through its purchase programs in accordance with its mandate under the treaty which includes the duty to support the general policies of the Union.

- A 10-year investment and regulatory reform plan (€3 trillion) to transform economies, make them truly resilient, truly climate-proofed and in line with the Paris Agreement, and fully gender-mainstreamed, on all levels from European to local in order to secure political ownership and a coordinated implementation.

- It must be ensured that 50% of the EU budget be climate-related , and the remaining 50% should respect the 'do not harm principle'.

- In the long-term, direct and indirect subsidies should be stopped to nuclear, coal, and fossil fuel industries, and financial incentives must be introduced for companies and sectors following the ecological transition.

- An EU Emergency Insurance system covering pandemics, natural disasters, humanitarian crises, and climate change consequences shall be created to strengthen European resilience to these challenges.

- In the upcoming Conference on the Future of Europe, the role of European Union Political Parties must also be reformed, giving them more powers to function as real and campaigning parties, complete with a revision of Regulation 1141 with input and consultation from all EUPPs.

- In the Conference on the Future of Europe, elected representatives from all levels must be involved in the consultation.

6
Language, education, and the future of work

Language and education

As the pandemic has brought with it new patterns in our daily lives, so too has it altered language. Technical and scientific terms such as 'R-rate', 'social distancing', and 'furlough' and their equivalents are now normal in the state languages of Europe. But as a political party that represents a number of lesser-used language speakers and those with semi- or no official status, the issue of linguistic inclusion, translation and access to public health information is a right that must be guaranteed.

A recent survey report published by FUEN ('*Do You Speak Corona?*') suggests that 44.2% of people from minority linguistic communities across Europe responding to their survey did not have COVID-19 related information available to them in their mother tongue.[1] In challenging times such as these, all people must have the right to full and easy access to comprehensive and accurate information in their own language. This is not just a matter of linguistic rights, but also one of public health. Understanding, awareness and being able to ask for help in a mother tongue can help save lives. The same report found that 69.8% of those surveyed did not have access to a telephone information hotline in their own language, should a COVID-19 related emergency arise.

In Western Thrace, the Turkish minority are experiencing problems as - although education is available in Turkish and Greek - Turkish is not allowed by the Greek state to be used in public life. This means that public health information is not provided by the state in Turkish to the area's ancient Turkish-speaking communities, which consist of around 150,000 people. Xanthi in Western Thrace has had lockdowns reimposed, but it is hardly surprising that there have been outbreaks given the historic lack of investment in the region by the Greek state, and deliberate lack of COVID-19 related information provided in the population's own language. Similar to the Silesians in the Polish state, the Western Thrace Turkish community now faces additional discrimination as it is being scapegoated for spreading the virus.[2]

Ceredigion County Council in Wales (a council run with a Plaid Cymru majority) published a mini dictionary of these newly-familiar coronavirus-related terms translated into Welsh, thereby establishing the official translation for extremely specific and scientific words. Initiatives like this are not only beneficial for the health of people as they are more able to fully understand these technical terms and health information in their own languages, but also for the health of the language itself, ensuring that it is not left behind after such a huge shift in the lexicon of public discourse.

Additionally, language is an issue given our new reliance on digital and distance learning. An unprecedented amount of young people are now receiving their education at home via the internet. Now, it is more important than ever that resources and educa-

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[1] https://www.fuen.org/assets/upload/editor/docs/doc_W2UHzbdt_CoronaJune.pdf

[2] https://www.fuen.org/en/article/Do-You-Speak-Corona-The-rights-of-Western-Thrace-Turks-in-Greece-were-arbitrarily-restricted-during-the-pandemic-period

> *"All people must have the right to full access to comprehensive and accurate COVID-19 information in their own language."*

tional tools are available for young people and their teachers in their mother tongues. The problem of the digital divide is well-known: the exclusion of those with a lack of access to the internet and equipment. Additionally, it has been shown that children in areas of high deprivation have been disproportionately affected in terms of school performance during the pandemic, compared to those in wealthier areas.[3] We cannot let that division be further exacerbated by shortfalls in the provision of quality education in the appropriate language.

Future of Work

It is not only education that is being done at a distance. Working from home has become the new normal for a huge percentage of the workforce. After an initial adjustment period, many people have reported increased happiness and even greater productivity, with many also enjoying being able to spend more time with their families. Given that the average commute in the EU is over 40 minutes in each direction to work it accounts for a significant portion of each day.[4]

Seemingly set in stone mere months ago, the patterns of working life were undone overnight for many. Although teleworking cannot completely replace physical presence, it seems likely that it will remain a feature of professional life for many jobs

for some time to come. This may even have an effect on the number of people residing in cities, given that working and learning at a distance makes the benefits of urban living become less relevant.

It is predicted that many people will leave cities, as urban life is no longer as necessary as it once was, with the popular advent of working from home.[5] This will mean that far more specific investment will be needed regionally and rurally, not just in state capitals and cities. This could lead to a reversal of trends and be a positive step to recover populations in rural areas which have been left dwindling for decades, and could contribute to an economic and social recovery in those areas. This of course necessitates a parallel investments in local infrastructure, that should benefit from EU funds. Rebalancing economic growth in this way is not only important for these regions, but for the EU as a whole. This, combined with the green transition and the circular economy will provide new and skilled opportunities for young people.

The recovery package must ensure that enough is put in those areas that need it more, for example, to provide high-quality internet connectivity for peripheral areas so that work opportunities and education can be accessed, and more investment in the healthcare system in more remote areas.

The pandemic has exposed the weaknesses in our health systems and our emergency response. The endless billions spent on military hardware could

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[3] https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/sep/01/disadvantaged-and-bame-pupils-lost-more-learning-study-finds
[4] https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=qoe_ewcs_3c3&lang=en
[5] https://www.politico.eu/article/the-death-of-the-city-coronavirus-towns-cities-retail-transport-pollution-economic-crisis/

"New economic structures as well as social welfare systems will be needed to survive the crisis, and thrive in future."

be far better invested in public healthcare and the social needs of citizens, and the focus of military personnel should now be on the distribution of aid and crisis response. The current crisis must be taken as an opportunity to reprioritise spending, investing instead in peace-building and disarmament - funding solidarity not soldiers.

Governments across the world, with huge portions of the population losing their jobs or being unable to work because of lockdowns, introduced 'furlough' or payment schemes for workers, with varying degrees of generosity. Even the most economically liberal states engaged in what was essentially an introduction of universal basic income (UBI) to support those that could not work. The mass furlough-type schemes have exposed that austerity is not an economic necessity as is often espoused by its proponents, but rather a political weapon.

As COVID-19 continues to ravage the USA, ongoing Black Lives Matter demonstrations following the murder of George Floyd by the Minnesota police continue to attract large numbers of demonstrators. Indeed, many more citizens across the world are also more politically active and engaged in the democratic process. Digital tools can make activism and participation in politics far more accessible, and more democratic.

This is an opportunity for Europe itself too. An active civil society is fundamental to guarantee sound and lasting progress in the EU. The Conference on the Future of Europe should promote and guarantee its full, open and transparent participation. The European Parliament should set fair rules for it and monitor the process.

Challenges such as globalisation and automation are predicted to have a huge impact on the economies and industries of Europe, even before the pandemic. New, innovative and creative solutions must be sought, for example the idea of UBI or universal basic services (UBS) should be explored in future across Europe, as it is clear that new economic structures as well as social welfare systems will be needed to survive the crisis, and thrive in future.

SNP First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon was quoted in May 2020 as saying that "the time has come" for UBI to be introduced and will be seeking discussions with the UK Government, as more powers over taxation and social security would be needed to introduce such a scheme.[6] Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya have also proposed a Basic Confinement Income, a form of UBI to be paid to the most vulnerable during the lockdown, with the eventual aim of making it a universal programme.[7] Years of precarious work and unemployment await as economies try to recover from this profound recession. A European minimum wage must also be introduced. Measures such as mass-furlough and one-off payments have been hastily introduced as an emergency response, which have been generally well-received. However

6   https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/universal-basic-income-ubi-scotland-uk-nicola-sturgeon-coronavirus-a9498076.html
7   https://en.esquerra.cat/en/covid19-measures-erc-esquerra

these are temporary, and the next big questions to be asked are: what happens next, and what exactly are we actually building towards?

As billions of euros are being spent by the EU and its Member States in combatting and coping with the pandemic, another - potentially bigger - crisis looms. Understandably we have been distracted, but the Climate Emergency must also be reprioritized. Public health and the health of the planet itself are not, and cannot be, mutually exclusive. The recovery from the pandemic must mean much more invested into greener technologies, and recovery schemes must prioritise projects revitalising local economies and the transition away from fossil fuels. If the recovery is not green, then it will not be a recovery at all.

Recommendations

- As a priority, public health information and all updates related to measures related to the pandemic must be made available to all citizens' mother tongues, not just the official languages of the state.

- Minority communities must not be discriminated against or allowed to be scapegoated as the cause of spreading the virus.

- Good practices of the provision of pandemic-related information in minoritised languages must be shared and learnt from. A European platform to share this good practice should be created as minority or lesser-used language communities are at risk of being left behind or being perceived as irrelevant as public discourse and lexicon evolves rapidly.

- Digital tools, particularly in education, must be made more widely available, and the necessary funds provided to the competent authorities to do so.

- As many are predicted to move away from cities to rural areas, a higher proportion of investment must be demanded to revitalise local economies and public transport, with a particular focus on public health and internet connectivity. Local language learning must also be provided by local authorities.

- The EU's recovery package must be closely monitored by the Commission to ensure that the distribution of funding within Member States is fair, and is not abused or does not unfairly provide advantage or disadvantage to certain communities or regions.

- The development of Universal Basic Income must become a priority for devolved and state governments, and a European minimum wage.

- The looming Climate Emergency must continue to be a priority, even as we deal with the immediate crisis of the pandemic.

Conclusion
The post-pandemic European Union

We live in a time of great confusion and uncertainty, but also one of huge potential for positive change.

One thing is crystal clear. The pre-pandemic status quo is not an option for the post-COVID-19 future. This crisis presents an opportunity for real structural change in so many aspects of our lives. To not seize the moment collectively would be a betrayal of future generations of Europeans. We cannot continue with a European Union with its shortfalls in its representation of the true and rich diversity of the peoples of Europe.

People across the world have realised that huge change is possible very quickly with a little imagination and willpower. One can only hope that the citizens of Europe will now dare to imagine a different future - in which their language is not made invisible, in which they are able to govern themselves, in which decisions that affect them are made by them, in which solidarity, equality and justice are at the heart of society rather than inconvenient optional extras.

Stateless nations and the communities represented by EFA across Europe have shown their creativity and their resilience in dealing with the crisis, even with the sometimes small powers and little influence at their disposal. We hope that this will engender a new trust in our member parties and the communities they represent, as they show themselves to be more than capable of leading the way into this new era. The response of many Member States will certainly mean that a great many people will be considering new and perhaps non-traditional options at the ballot boxes. The solution to the crisis will be local, but it must also be European. We cannot allow this to be the moment when people turn their backs on Europe and on solidarity, when it is needed more than ever.

As we stayed at home and continued to learn, work, and grow, we have seen how digitalisation offers a whole new world of possibilities. The inherent dangers have also been exposed. We must harness new technologies rather than allow them to undermine our rights and our livelihoods. A stronger and more united EU is needed to stand up to tech-giants to ensure our digital human rights are respected.

We have had enough of the glacial pace of change when it comes to EU reform, and the half-measures hailed as revolutions. We welcome the Von der Leyen Commission's Conference on the Future of Europe. But if it is to be successful, then full involvement of the democratic arm of the union - the European Parliament - is needed, as well as extensive consultation and co-operation with devolved governments and regional authorities, as well as the Committee of the Regions. Civil society organisations must also be included, as well as a Citizens' Assembly.

We can only guarantee open and democratic Europe of the Future if the process of consultation is open

"People across the world have realised that huge change is possible with imagination and willpower."

"A Europe based on international solidarity and respecting the right to self-determination of peoples."

and democratic. We cannot build a successful EU only by listening to just a few voices that do not represent the peoples of Europe or reflect reality. Equally with the idea of joint European debt, or 'coronabonds' as they were initially dubbed. Their approval is a big step forward for the EU, but without the accompanying provision on the rule of law, it leaves huge room for abuses. Just days after the historic Council meeting, Poland opportunistically announced its intention to leave the Istanbul Convention on the combatting of violence against women.

In short, it is up to us to build the new European Union that lives up to its motto, *United in Diversity*. A Europe based on international solidarity and respecting the right to self-determination of peoples, combined with a stronger and fairer, more democratic European Union is the only way to recover after the immediate crisis recedes, and the only way to flourish in the future.

Lockdown brought us the opportunity for reflection. The next stage will be the time for action. Let us build a Europe of All Peoples, together.

European Political Party
Boomkwekerijstraat 1 - 1000 Brussels
info@e-f-a.org - www.e-f-a.org

European
Free
Alliance

European Parliament