



May 5th, 2020

Covid-19 Outbreak

EUROPE

Europe begins to ease lockdown measures as it passes peak of virus

European countries are beginning to ease restrictions as the number of reported cases and deaths continue to fall. Whilst three of the worst-hit countries—Italy, Spain and France—have each now recorded over 20,000 deaths, the rate of transmission has slowed enough for them to announce phased plans to lift lockdowns, with Spain aiming to reach a “new normality” by the end of June, some shops and factories reopening in Italy, and non-essential shops and markets reopening in France from 11 May. Other European countries easing restrictions include Austria, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, and Germany, whilst Denmark, the first European country to ease its lockdown measures, has continued to report falling numbers of Covid-19 infections.
[*BBC News*, May 3, 2020]

European schools set to reopen under varying exit strategies

Most countries in Europe are preparing to reopen schools in the coming weeks, with some schools and nurseries already open in Denmark and Norway. Most European countries have now released lockdown-easing timetables with many opening sectors progressively from the 4 May. The reopening of schools, in particular, has become an issue of contention, as the danger of children’s potential to spread the coronavirus is balanced against the need to allow parents to return to work.
[*The Guardian*, May 1, 2020]

EU agrees huge economic rescue plan

European Union leaders have agreed to set up a massive recovery fund, closely tied to the bloc’s seven-year budget, of up to €1 trillion of investment, although the details of how to fund the aid have yet to be agreed. The issue of how to fund the long-term recovery plan has created deep divisions within Europe, with northern European countries opposed to mutualising debt with their southern neighbours. €540bn of financial support through existing mechanisms was also confirmed to be released from 1 June.
[*BBC News*, April 23, 2020]

Eurozone economy shrinks by fastest rate on record

Preliminary estimates from Eurostat have found that the gross domestic product of the eurozone fell by 3.8 per cent in the first quarter compared with the previous quarter. This is the largest drop since the series began in 1995, including the Financial Crisis. Furthermore, the region’s economy is expected to fall even further in the second quarter, given that most European governments only started to impose a lockdown on households and businesses in early March, meaning that the pandemic is expected to trigger the worst recession in the region and globally since the Great Depression of the 1930s.
[*Financial Times*, April 30, 2020]

Coronavirus pandemic looms over Europe’s tourism sector

Europe’s tourism sector is braced for a summer of heavy losses as lockdown measures and travel bans continue to hamper the industry. The sector employs 22.6 million people, equivalent to 11.2% of the EU’s total and accounts for 9.5% of the bloc’s economy. The situation is particularly dire in Spain and Italy, Europe’s worst-hit countries from coronavirus, in which tourism accounts for 14% and 13% of their economies, with some regions almost entirely dependent on the sector.
[*Politico*, April 27, 2020]

EU launches legal action against Poland

Brussels has launched legal action against Poland for allegedly undermining judicial independence, warning of the danger of autocratic governments using the coronavirus crisis to tighten their grip on power. Poland’s new disciplinary rules for judges posed “clear risks” of political control of court decisions, according to Vera Jourova, a European Commission Vice-President. Brussels has given Poland two months to alter its position or face a possible case at the European Court of Justice.
[*Financial Times*, April 29, 2020]

Brexit talks remain blocked over three key areas

Talks between Britain and the EU over their future relationship have remained at an impasse with both sides unwilling to alter their red lines. Britain is insisting on the question of fisheries that it should be able to exercise full control over its coastal waters like Norway, whilst also maintaining that it cannot accept the EU’s so-called “level playing field” provisions on issues like environmental legislation, state aid and labour laws. The third deal-breaker relates to the oversight of any final agreement, with Downing Street unwilling to accept the EU’s desire for a single all-encompassing treaty giving the European Court of Justice a role in enforcing the agreement.
[*Financial Times*, April 30, 2020]

DOMESTIC

Hungary’s government moves to end legal recognition of trans people

In one of its first move since being given the right to rule by decree indefinitely, the Hungarian government has put forward legislation that would make it impossible for individuals to change their gender status after birth. The move has prompted human rights activists to criticise Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban for using the coronavirus crisis as a pretext to consolidate his power and clamp down on the country’s liberal elements. Meanwhile, the Commissioner for Human Rights at the Council of Europe has labelled the law a violation of European human rights case law.
[*The Independent*, April 28, 2020]

Germany designates Hezbollah a terrorist organisation

The German government has criminalised public expression of support for Hezbollah and banned the organisation’s activities in the country. The German police also raided four mosque association in Berlin, Dortmund, Bremen and Münster accused of belonging to Hezbollah. Germany had previously distinguished between the groups’ political and military arms, but will now classify the group as a terrorist organisation in its entirety. The move has been welcomed by Israel’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Israel Katz, who called on other European countries to follow Germany’s lead.
[*Deutsche Welle*, April 30, 2020]

Foreign Affairs

EU chides US for blocking Iran loan

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell has criticised the US for blocking an Iranian request for a loan from the International Monetary Fund, stating that it should have been accepted from a humanitarian standpoint. The Iranian government had requested a five-billion-dollar loan from the international organisation, but it was blocked by the US government which claimed that Iran has billion-dollar accounts at its disposal. Iran is one of the world’s worst-hit countries from coronavirus and is having to equally contend with damaging US sanctions.
[*Politico*, April 22, 2020]

EU rebukes President Trump over suspension of WHO funding

EU leaders have chided US President Donald Trump’s suspension of WHO funding, stressing instead the need for strong multilateral cooperation in response to the crisis. The US, which gives over \$400m per year to the WHO, has accused the Geneva-based organisation of failing to properly respond to the disease and being too closely allied to China.
[*Politico*, April 17, 2020]

EU foreign policy chief Borrell denies report on China disinformation altered

The European Union’s foreign policy chief has rejected allegations that a report on Chinese disinformation and the global coronavirus pandemic was watered down in response to pressure from Beijing. The report notes “a continued and coordinated push by some actors, including Chinese sources, to deflect any blame for the outbreak of the pandemic and highlighting bilateral assistance”, as well as “significant evidence of covert Chinese operations on social media”. However, Borrell was forced to deny claims that the content of the report was altered after the New York Times reported EU officials had delayed and then rewritten the report after China tried to block its release.
[*The Guardian*, April 30, 2020]

EU ambassadors warn new Israeli coalition government against West Bank annexation

Eleven European ambassadors, including the EU ambassador to Israel, have warned of severe consequences if Israel moves ahead with plans to annex parts of the West Bank as part of a government coalition deal. During a videoconference with the Israeli Foreign Ministry’s Europe deputy, Anna Azari, the ambassadors stressed that the move would violate international law, harm regional stability and Israel’s international standing, whilst also calling for Israel to freeze plans to allow construction in the Givat Hamatos neighbourhood in East Jerusalem.
[*Times of Israel*, May 1, 2020]

EU calls for humanitarian truce in Libya as conflict escalates

The foreign ministers of Germany, France and Italy, as well as the EU’s top diplomat, have made a joint call for a humanitarian truce in Libya, saying all sides must resume peace talks. The conflict in Libya has escalated sharply this month on several fronts in the country despite urgent calls from the UN and aid agencies for a truce to tackle the coronavirus crisis. The EU has also launched a new naval and air mission in the eastern Mediterranean to try and stop more arms from reaching Libya.
[*France 24*, April 25, 2020]

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