

EU shipping and ports facing coronavirus

Maritime shipping moves around 75 % of the EU's external trade and 30 % of intra-EU transport of goods. As part of the wider international maritime community, it supports complex supply chains moving food, energy and raw materials, manufactured goods and components as well as medical supplies. To keep functioning during the coronavirus outbreak, maritime shipping, ports and inland navigation face a new set of challenges that require EU support and a coordinated approach from the world's governments.

Background

The first effects of the coronavirus outbreak on **maritime transport** in Europe were felt when China, a vital shipping player, reduced its port throughput due to a lack of port workers. On a major Asia-to-northern-Europe route, an estimated [46 %](#) of ship departures were cancelled over four weeks in February 2020, while another [estimate](#) suggests that more container ship tonnage was lying idle than during the 2008 global financial crisis. As the virus spread, countries across the world have adopted individual contingency measures, including delayed port clearance and even refusal of entry to ships. The resulting disruptions to maritime traffic affect ships, their crews, passengers and cargo, and impact maritime transport in social, operational and economic areas (see box). Around [600 000](#) seafarers and on-board workers of all nationalities work on EU-owned ships.

Impacts of the Covid-19 outbreak on maritime transport

Due to the restrictions on movement of people, reduced flights and port closures, crew rotations have come to a halt, leaving tens of thousands of seafarers stuck on ships. Instead of returning home, seafarers are asked to continue working and sail on to new destinations. Some port authorities force vessels to spend a 14-day quarantine period at anchor before entering the port, a situation often worsened by problems in providing the ship with fresh food supplies. A prolonged stay on board may result in one or more seafarer's certificates expiring, in turn rendering the vessel's safe manning certificates inadequate and compromising its ability to sail. With many vessels out of service due to operational limitations, lack of cargo or crew, maritime companies must adjust their operations and limit costs. The resulting job redundancies concern both on-board and shore staff. Ship inspections (unless done [remotely](#)) and the renewal of ship certificates, especially if requiring dry-docking, have practically stopped. Economic impacts are felt across the whole fleet, with the exception of oil tankers, which are much in demand due to low crude prices. Passenger transport has been hit hard. All cruise ship companies operating in Europe have [suspended](#) sailings and many ferry services are on hold or reduced to cargo-only. Cruise ships that were denied docking in ports of some countries had to return to their 'home port'.

Maritime sector mobilisation

At the global level, the United Nations International Maritime Organization (IMO) called on [governments](#) to consider seafarers and marine personnel as key workers providing an essential service, and exempt seafarers from movement restrictions, to allow them to join or leave ships and transit to an airport. Providing [advice](#) to its member states, seafarers and shipping companies, the IMO also informs on how its member states adapt their approach to delays in obligatory ship inspections and surveys, extensions of certificates for ships and crew, as well as regarding the extended periods of service on board. The International Chamber of Shipping (ICS) and the International Association of Ports and Harbours (IAPH) jointly addressed the G20 leaders, calling for a coordinated and pragmatic approach. ICS has also produced [guidance](#) to help protect the health of seafarers and passengers. Furthermore, ICS and the International Air Transport Association (IATA) urged governments to facilitate [crew change flights](#) for seafarers. In Europe, the EU Healthy Gateways Joint Action provided [advice](#) to European health authorities and ship operators who have decided to suspend sailings, and for the long-term docking of ships in ports. For its part, the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA) offers a single point of reference listing all the measures adopted by EU Member States and European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries. The European Community

Shipowners' Association ([ECSA](#)) and the European Transport Workers' Federation ([ETF](#)) jointly called on the EU institutions for coordinated measures and support to the industry and its workforce. ECSA [warned](#) that more sector-specific actions would be needed, otherwise shipping companies ensuring essential connections to European islands and coastal regions may disappear.

Impacts of the Covid-19 outbreak on ports and inland navigation

Ports, another vital element of supply chains, have adopted measures to preserve workers' health and limit the spread of the virus while ensuring the continuity of port operations, in particular the manning of critical services in port. To be able to maintain support to the flow of goods and materials, particularly food and medicines, European ports ([ESPO](#)) have called on the European Commission and the EU Member States demanding that operators of essential supply chain services be considered as a priority group in the distribution of prevention and protection equipment. Private ports and terminals ([FEPORT](#)) have urged EU Member States to consider ports as critical infrastructure (in line with Council [Directive 2008/114/EC](#)) and provide appropriate support to avoid disruption and prevent significant job losses.

Also EU **inland navigation** is severely affected by national measures to contain the pandemic. In [passenger transport](#), both on river cruises and day trips, all vessels are at a standstill. In goods transport, the [impacts](#) vary according to the type of cargo and country. For instance, as German automobile factories decided to suspend production for several weeks, the demand for steel, and therefore also for transport of related materials (about 25 % of all volumes transported on the Rhine) will be reduced. The sector needs financial support and measures to enable inland navigation companies to continue their activity. The European Barge Union ([EBU](#)) has called on the EU and the River Commissions for support in guaranteeing the free movement of crews (including non-EU nationals) and flexibility in applying regulations, in particular those concerning working conditions. For the continuity of navigation, the operation of inland waterway infrastructure needs to be ensured as well as fuel supply for vessels and their access to seaports. [Inland ports](#) have been particularly concerned with restrictions to multimodal shipments crossing intra-EU borders, warning of serious disruption to supply chains.

European Commission action

In areas which are in the competence of Member States, the Commission has produced guidance. In its general guidelines of [23 March](#) and [30 March 2020](#), it recommended to consider maritime and inland navigation personnel as essential workers exempted from travel restrictions for service purposes. On 8 April, the Commission published specific [guidelines on repatriation and travel arrangements for stranded seafarers and passengers](#), calling on Member States to create a network of ports for fast-track crew changes. Member States should grant the necessary visas to third-country nationals who could not apply for one in advance, to allow for their disembarkation and repatriation. Ship operators are responsible for bringing their passengers and crews home, including from non-EU ports. The guidelines also include sanitary recommendations, rules for submitting maritime health declarations and conditions under which seafarers' contracts could be extended. The Commission's steps in areas where the EU does have powers focused on temporarily easing the rules for State aid to support the [economy](#) through grants and loans to protect jobs.

On [29 April 2020](#), the Commission proposed lockdown-related changes to several existing EU legislative acts. Once these are adopted by Parliament and the Council, port authorities will be able to temporarily defer, reduce or lift port [infrastructure charges](#) for all port users, thus providing the needed liquidity to shipping companies, including ferries. Other [changes proposed](#) would allow, in inland navigation, six-month extensions of boatmaster certificates and vessel navigation certificates, and for maritime ports, extensions to renew the certificates, risk assessments and plans required by EU maritime security legislation.

EU stakeholders' reactions

ECSA and ETF [welcomed](#) the guidelines of 8 April and asked the Commission to put forward a concrete proposal to the Council to reach political agreement on designated ports for crew disembarkation and crew changes. Furthermore, they demanded that the EU External Action Service ([EEAS](#)) assist the repatriation of EU seafarers stranded in third countries or on vessels unable to dock. ESPO and FEPORT [opposed](#) the Commission proposal to designate specific ports for crew changes, urging Member States to enable crew changes in all ports. They also called on the Commission to strengthen the existing support and financial instruments for [infrastructure projects](#) in ports and allow continued funding to construction projects delayed due to lockdown measures.

