

Mobility, transport and coronavirus

SUMMARY

One of the first, and most visible impacts of the Covid-19 crisis was on transport, travel and mobility. In early March 2020, European Union (EU) Member States had already reintroduced border controls at internal Schengen borders on the grounds of an immediate threat to public policy and on 17 March 2020, the Heads of State or Government agreed to reinforce the external borders by applying a coordinated temporary restriction on non-essential travel to the EU. Travel restrictions and containment measures adopted to limit the spread of the disease, within and at the external border of the EU, have led to drastic reductions in traffic in all transport modes.

In a communication on the coordinated economic response to Covid-19 published on 13 March 2020, the European Commission underlined that the pandemic is having a major impact on transport systems and that disruption in the flow of goods leads to severe economic damage. The Commission mentioned that, in addition to the coordination and guidance efforts and the actions to limit the spread of the virus, it would act to tackle and mitigate the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic, which are exceptionally strong in the key areas of transport, travel and tourism.

The Commission has already adopted measures on mobility and transport and is working with Member States to stop the spread of the disease; ensure essential goods and services such as food, medicines and protective equipment circulate freely in the internal market; and to guarantee the free movement of workers, especially those that exercise critical occupations such as health professionals and transport workers. To tackle the risk of serious economic downturn, the Commission has adopted a temporary framework for State aid measures that allows EU countries to provide assistance to companies. Some sector specific measures have already been approved, including on transport.



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Introduction

One of the first and most visible impacts of the Covid-19 outbreak was on transport, travel and mobility. While air transport was the first affected, with flight bans and travel restrictions imposed by states (the authorities closed the first airport in the People's Republic of China on 23 January 2020 and bookings on Italian routes in early March 2020 had dropped already by over 50 % with load factors as low as 40 %), many EU Member States subsequently reintroduced border controls at internal borders¹ on the grounds of the immediate threat to public policy.

On 17 March 2020, EU Heads of State or Government [agreed](#) to reinforce the external borders by applying a coordinated temporary restriction on non-essential travel to the EU. According to the [European Commission](#) update of 8 April 2020, all EU Member States had adopted restrictive measures and introduced some border/travel restrictions.

While some Member States are now in the process of progressively relaxing their containment measures, the Commission in cooperation with the President of the European Council, has put forward a European roadmap to phase out the containment measures. According to this Joint European Roadmap internal border controls will need to be lifted [gradually](#) and in a coordinated manner, before restrictions at the external borders can be relaxed in a second stage.

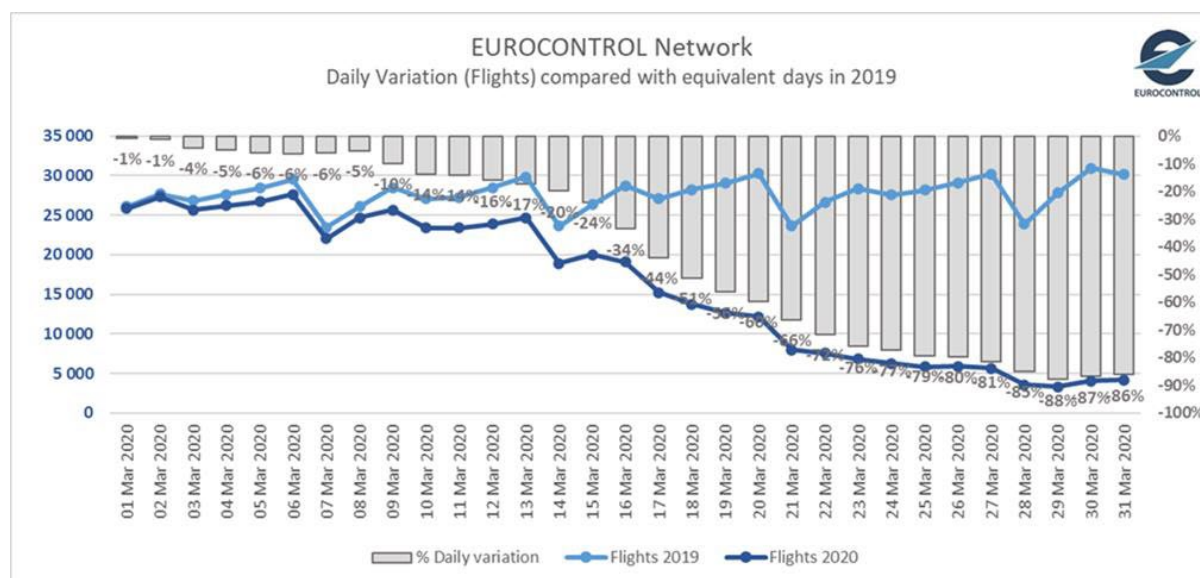
Coronavirus impact on transport

Impact on traffic – passengers and freight

The [travel](#) restrictions adopted to limit the spread of the disease worldwide, within and at the external EU borders, have led to drastic reductions in travel and traffic since early March 2020 in all transport modes.

According to Eurocontrol, on 31 March 2020, an overall reduction of 86.1 % in the number of **flights** had taken place, corresponding to 25 948 fewer flights compared to 31 March 2019. Overall, passenger traffic almost dropped to zero, with a few remaining flights mainly restricted to cargo and repatriation.

Figure 1 – Daily variation of flights in March 2020 compared with 2019



Source: [Eurocontrol](#).

Drastic reductions in passenger traffic were also seen in other transport modes, such as ferries, coach and rail transport.

According to the International Road Transport Union ([IRU](#)), international **coach transport** and national passenger transport markets have been worst affected. Tourist services halted and inter-urban services fell to almost half normal levels. Recent economic slowdown has also affected many types of **freight transport**. In early [March 2020](#), land-based supply chains, particularly road, which today accounts for 75 % of freight transport, had been particularly severely affected by such restrictions and waiting times at certain internal EU borders went beyond 24 hours, even for medical supplies. Following the reduction in inter-continental shipments, container freight also fell dramatically.

In most EU Member States, **rail passenger traffic**, both domestic and international, is heavily disrupted, with only a few trains running. International passenger traffic is almost at a standstill due to travel restrictions within the EU and the closure of some intra-EU borders, while at national level, passenger [traffic](#) is reduced by more than 90 % in some countries. The number of bookings is close to zero. Several facilities in train stations as well as on board (e.g. catering services) are closed. Passenger trains have been used, in some cases, to transport [patients](#) from hospitals in heavily affected regions to other hospitals. **Rail freight traffic**, although also heavily [impacted](#), has been able to continue to operate, with adaptations.

A drastic reduction of traffic in **maritime transport** was observed as early as February 2020. The first effects of the coronavirus on supply chains were felt in Europe when China, a vital shipping player, reduced its port throughput due to a lack of port workers. On a major Asia to North Europe route, an estimated [46 %](#) of ship departures were cancelled over four weeks in February 2020, while another [estimate](#) suggested that more container ship tonnage was idle than during the 2008 global financial crisis. As the virus spread, countries across the world, seeking to mitigate its impact, have adopted individual contingency measures. At [sea](#), these range from delayed port clearance to refusal of entry for ships, disrupting maritime traffic and affecting ships, their crews, passengers and cargo. The pandemic acutely impacts maritime transport in social, operational and economic terms and the economy as a whole, as maritime transport is of key strategic importance in the supply of goods. Indeed, 75 % of goods arriving in and leaving the EU and 30 % of [goods](#) circulating in the internal market are transported by sea. Passenger transport, both on cruises and ferries, has almost halted. [Cruise](#) lines have stopped operating new voyages since early March, meaning the drop is therefore 100 % compared to last year, except for ships returning to port. EU **inland navigation** is also 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 [impact](#) varies according to the type of cargo and country.

Economic impact on transport

In its [communication](#) on the coordinated economic response to Covid-19, published on 13 March 2020, the European Commission highlighted that the pandemic is having a major impact on transport systems and that disruption in the flow of goods leads to severe economic damage. The Commission also underlined that in addition to its significant social impacts and human dimension, the coronavirus outbreak is a major economic shock to the EU, and therefore in addition to the existing coordination and guidance efforts, and the actions to limit the spread of the virus, the Commission would act to tackle and mitigate the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic.

All transport modes have already been seriously affected economically by the crisis, even though in a rapidly changing environment, it is extremely difficult to estimate the full economic impact, by mode and for transport as a whole. Key stakeholders or business associations are nonetheless already providing some indications.

As far as air transport is concerned, the International Air Transport Association ([IATA](#)) issued an updated analysis on 14 April 2020, showing that the coronavirus crisis will see airline passenger revenues drop by US\$314 billion in 2020, which represents a 55 % decline compared to 2019. The full-year passenger demand (domestic and international) is also expected to be down by 48 % compared to 2019. As passenger demand closely follows progression of gross domestic product

(GDP), the anticipated reduced economic activity in the second quarter of the year alone could result in an 8 % fall in passenger demand in the third quarter. Notably, IATA's Director General and Chief executive officer has highlighted that airlines could burn through US\$61 billion of cash reserves in the second quarter alone and that without financial relief measures, many airlines will not survive to lead the economic recovery. Some airlines, such as low-cost [Flybe](#), have ceased operation.

On land transport, [IRU](#) pointed out that the road passenger transport sector, consisting of some 360 000 companies and directly employing two million people, is close to collapse. IRU also underlines that many road freight operations are carried out at low margins by companies without cash reserves. This implies that stopping or massively reducing road freight activities is pushing transport operators to the brink of collapse and that very few road transporters would remain operational without financial support once the restrictive measures have been lifted.

Rail freight and rail suppliers are also facing financial [difficulties](#). As pointed out by representatives of the railway sector in a letter to the European Commission, European railways, combined transport and wagon load operators, wagon keepers, workshops and mobile services are hit by the crisis and its final impact will be considerable. Besides, infrastructure managers that maintain infrastructure availability and operations at the highest possible levels will also suffer, if fewer services run on rail lines and the liquidity provided by track access charge revenues are cut in proportion to the reduction of traffic. As an example, Europe's Alliance of Passenger Rail New Entrants ([AllRail](#)) estimates a loss of about €540 million of revenue for private passenger rail operators from the middle of March until the end of 2020.

As for maritime transport, the European Community Shipowners' Association ([ECSA](#)) and the European Transport Workers' Federation ([ETF](#)) jointly called on the EU institutions for coordinated measures and support for the industry and its workforce. For the industry, they demanded a regulatory framework supporting EU banks, so that they can continue to finance the shipping industry, and for flexibility in applying the maritime state aid guidelines. ECSA [warned](#) that more sector-specific actions would be needed, otherwise shipping companies ensuring essential connections to European islands and coastal regions, may disappear.

Initial European Commission response

Confronted with this extraordinary situation, the Commission also adopted measures, in particular guidelines in the area of mobility and transport, and worked with Member States to stop the spread of the disease as well as to ensure essential goods and services such as food, medicines and protective equipment circulate freely in the internal market, and to guarantee the free movement of workers, especially those that exercise critical occupations such as health professionals, care workers, transport workers, or persons working in the food sector. These measures include:

- 16 March 2020 [communication](#) on temporary restriction on non-essential travel to the EU.
- 16 March 2020 [guidelines](#) for border management measures to protect health and ensure the availability of goods and essential services.
- 18 March 2020 [interpretative guidelines](#) on EU passenger rights regulations in the context of the developing Covid-19 pandemic.
- 23 March 2020 [communication](#) on the implementation of 'green lanes' to expedite traffic under the guidelines for border management measures to protect health and ensure the availability of goods and essential services.
- 30 March 2020 [guidance](#) on the implementation of the temporary restriction on non-essential travel to the EU, on the facilitation of transit arrangements for the repatriation of EU citizens, and on the effects on visa policy.
- 30 March 2020 [guidelines](#) concerning the exercise of the free movement of workers during the Covid-19 outbreak.

The European Commission also adopted some mode-specific measures, such as for air cargo, and measures to support the wider economy that include the transport sector.

Travel restrictions

In its initial phase, the rapid spread of Covid-19 led several EU Member States to adopt unilateral uncoordinated travel restrictions at the external part of their own [borders](#). Irrespective of their potential ineffectiveness, these measures could have impacted the functioning of the single market, as the EU and the Schengen Area are characterised by a high degree of integration.

This situation made it essential for the EU and its Member States to take urgent, immediate and concerted action to protect the public health of the European population, but also to prevent the virus from spreading further, from the EU to other countries. Consequently, the European Commission presented a [communication](#) on temporary restrictions to non-essential travel to the EU on 16 March 2020. The text of the communication recalls that 'the EU's external border has to act as a security perimeter for all Schengen States' and that 'any action at the external border needs to be applied at all parts of the EU's external borders. A temporary travel restriction could only be effective if decided and implemented by Schengen States for all external borders at the same time and in a uniform manner', as any unilateral decision to apply a temporary travel restriction could be easily undermined by those who could enter the Schengen area at another part of the external border.

The approach proposed by the European Commission was that the temporary travel restriction should apply to all non-essential travel from third countries to the EU+² area and for 30 days. Any possible prolongation of this period should be assessed in light of further developments. Those exempt from this restriction, for the purpose of returning to their homes, are:

- all EU citizens and citizens of the Schengen Associated States,³ and their family members;
- third-country nationals who are long-term residents under the Long-term Residence Directive and persons deriving their right to reside from other EU Directives or national law or who hold national long-term visas.

The European Commission also exempts other groups of people, e.g. healthcare professionals, health researchers, who have an essential function or need for transport and mobility:

- Transport personnel engaged in haulage of goods and other transport staff to the extent necessary;
- Passengers in transit (including those having been repatriated through consular assistance).

On 17 March 2020, the Heads of State or Government [endorsed](#) this approach, and on 8 April 2020, the Commission proposed to [extend](#) this coordinated temporary restriction of non-essential travel to the EU until 15 May 2020.

Subsequently, the Commission issued [guidance](#) on 30 March 2020, on the implementation of the temporary restriction on non-essential travel to the EU, on the facilitation of transit arrangements for the repatriation of EU citizens, and on the effects on visa policy. The guidance follows up on the [joint statement](#) of the Members of the European Council of 26 March 2020, which highlighted the need to step up efforts to ensure that EU citizens who are stranded in third countries who want to return home can do so. It seeks to provide advice and practical instructions to implement measures adopted by the Member States and Schengen Associated Countries following the 16 March 2020 communication.

Regarding transit and facilitating transit after repatriation via commercial flights, the practical guidance provides details for Member States to coordinate, the purpose of which is 'to ensure that the flights available to EU citizens stranded abroad are used to best effect, by carrying passengers returning to all possible EU destinations'.

Supply of goods and services

In parallel to the 16 March 2020 provisions on travel restrictions, the Commission adopted [guidelines](#) for border management measures to protect health and ensure the availability of goods and essential services. These guidelines underline the importance of preserving the functioning of the single market in order to avoid shortages and further deterioration in the social and economic situation, as well as the importance of avoiding disruption to the free movement of persons while at the same time ensuring the delivery of essential goods and services which are essential, in particular to supply chains.

These guidelines set out the principles that should underpin Member States' actions in five policy fields: transport of goods and services, supply of goods, health-related measures, external borders, and internal borders.

When it comes to the **transport of goods and services**, the Commission recognises that the transport and mobility sector is essential to ensuring economic continuity, that collective and coordinated action is indispensable and that emergency transport services should have priority within the transport system (e.g. via 'green lanes').

The Commission also underlines that 'control measures should not undermine the continuity of economic activity and should preserve the operation of supply chains' and that 'unobstructed transport of goods is crucial to maintain availability of goods, in particular of essential goods such as food supplies including livestock, vital medical and protective equipment and supplies', as well as for the services of general and/or national interest and the EU economy.

It also mentions that 'professional travel to ensure transport of goods and services should be enabled' and in this regard recalls that facilitating safe movement for transport workers, including truck and train drivers, pilots and aircrew is essential to ensuring adequate movement of goods and key workers.

Finally, the guidelines point out that Member States' restrictions should be transparent, duly motivated, proportionate, relevant, mode-specific and non-discriminatory and recall that the Commission and all other Member States should be notified of all planned transport related restrictions before they are implemented, regardless of the specific emergency measures applicable in the aviation sector.

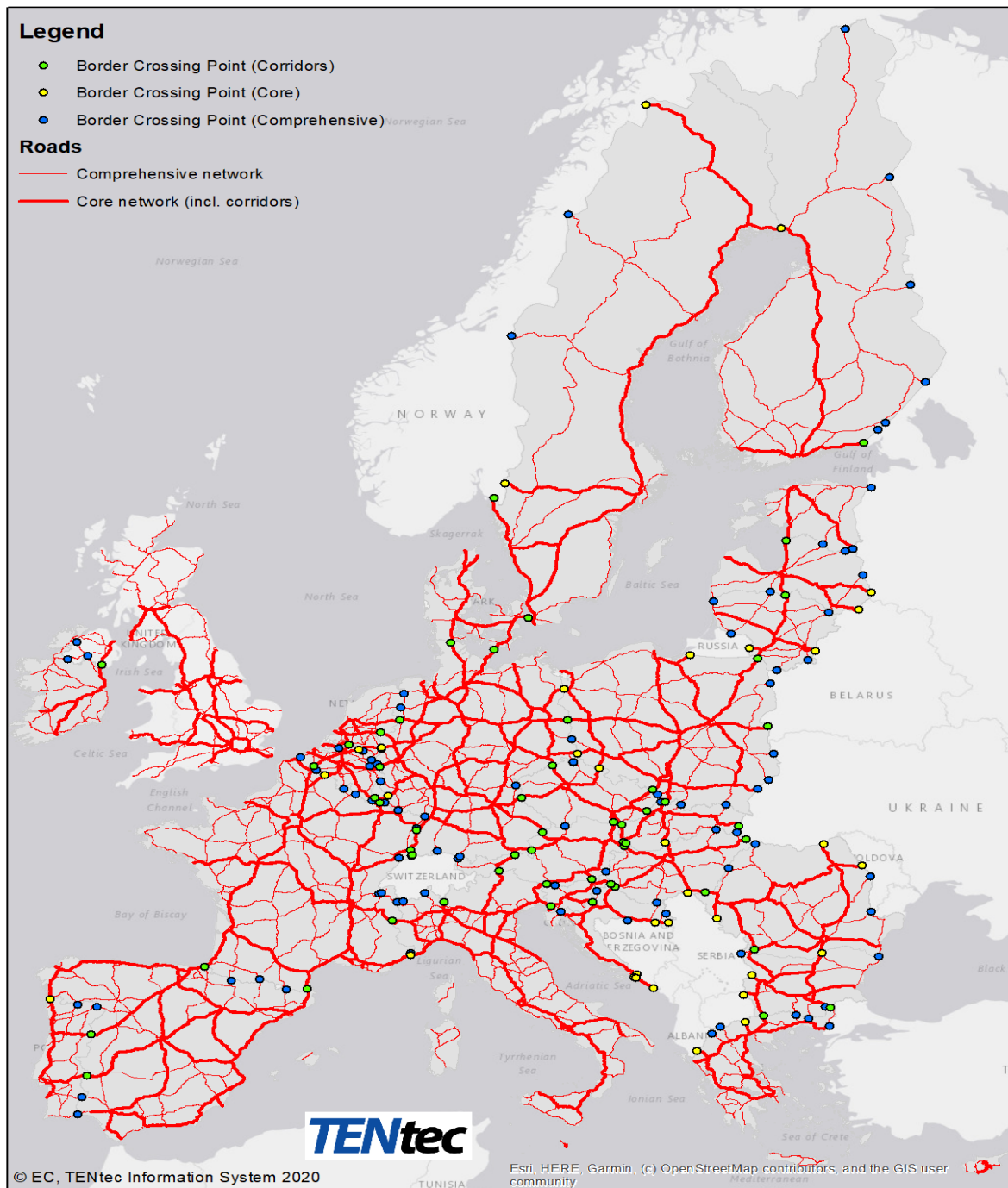
Regarding **goods supply**, the guidelines underline that 'Member States should preserve the free circulation of all goods' and in particular, guarantee the supply chain of essential products such as medicines, medical equipment, essential and perishable food products and livestock. The guidelines add that Member States should designate priority lanes (see Figure 2) for freight transport (e.g. via '**green lanes**'). Regarding transport workers, the text specifies that 'especially but not only those delivering essential goods, should be able to circulate across borders as needed and their safety should in no way be compromised'. Finally, it mentions that specific transport nodes such as ports, airports and logistics hubs should be reinforced as required.

On 23 March 2020, these guidelines were complemented by a [communication](#) from the Commission on the implementation of the **green lanes**, the purpose of which was to provide practical advice to Member States on how to implement the guidelines on green lanes, to promote cooperation across the EU so that all freight reaches its destination without any delay. The green lanes are also specifically [designed](#) to protect transport workers and include recommendations to afford them safer and more predictable working conditions.

Member States are thus requested, wherever internal border controls exist or have been introduced, 'to designate immediately all the relevant internal border-crossing points of the trans-European transport network⁴ (TEN-T) and additional ones to the extent deemed necessary, as 'green lane' border crossings – for land (road and rail), sea and air transport'. The additional border crossings

should be focused exclusively on goods transport, should the TEN-T network borders reach saturation, and located as close as possible to the TEN-T network border crossings (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 – TEN-T network road border crossings



Source: [Communication](#) from the Commission on the implementation of green lanes, 2020.

Going through these 'green lane' border crossings should not take more than 15 minutes on internal land borders, including any checks and health screening of transport workers. The 'green lane' border crossings should be open to all freight vehicles, whatever the goods they are carrying. Member States are also invited to immediately temporarily suspend road access restrictions in place on their territory, such as weekend, night and sectoral bans on goods transport, and transport workers, irrespective of their nationality and place of residence, should be allowed to cross internal borders. Travel restrictions and mandatory quarantine should be waived for transport workers not

displaying symptoms, without prejudice to proportionate and adapted measures taken by competent authorities to minimise the risk of contagion.

Procedures at 'green lane' border crossings should be minimised and streamlined. Checks and screening should be carried out without drivers having to leave their vehicles. Health screening can be carried out before or after crossing the internal border, depending on the infrastructure available. To prove that a worker is active in international transport, internationally recognised certificates of professional competence should be considered sufficient and temporarily be deemed valid for a reasonable period beyond their date of expiry during the Covid-19 outbreak.⁵

Following the video-conference between EU transport ministers on 18 March 2020, the Commission established a network of national contact points that should support the effective functioning of the green lane border crossing points and a [platform](#) to provide information on national transport measures taken by Member States⁶ in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

The Commission urges Member States to put safe passage transit corridors in place 'to allow private drivers and their passengers, such as health and transport workers, as well as all EU citizens being repatriated, regardless of their nationality, to directly pass with priority through the country in each necessary direction along the TEN-T Network'. This passage should be effected, remaining strictly on the designated route and with minimum rest breaks. Member States should ensure that at least one airport remains functional for repatriation and international relief flights. The Commission also points out that the Member States should ensure the availability of adequate sanitary facilities, food supplies and catering on the main transport routes. As accommodation facilities along routes are likely to be unavailable, Member States are invited to consider a suspension of the ban on transport workers spending rest periods in vehicle cabins, in line with Article 14 of [Regulation 561/2006](#). In addition, the Commission recommends measures to deliver enhanced hygiene in airports, ports, railway stations and other land transport hubs, as well as the designation of priority staff in transport hubs and measures to ensure disinfection.⁷

Freight vehicles and drivers – irrespective of the origin, destination, or country of registration of the vehicle, or nationality of the driver – should be treated in a non-discriminatory manner and the Commission also concludes, in its last point in the communication, that 'all of the above principles should also apply to third-country nationals if they are essential to providing free movement of cargo in and to the EU'.

Support for the transport-sector economy and by mode

Air transport

One of the first measures adopted in view of the coronavirus epidemic, concerning air transport alone, was the suspension of EU rules on airport slot allocation. As [slots](#) are an essential economic resource for airlines, air carriers may initially have been inclined to operate flights with very low load factors (or 'ghost flights') to protect their 'grandfather rights', thereby increasing financial losses and the adverse impact on the environment. Temporarily neutralising the 'use it or lose it' rule was therefore vital to mitigating the impact of the crisis and to providing legal certainty for air carriers. An [amendment](#) to the EU Slot Regulation was consequently approved by the European Parliament and the Council of the EU in late March 2020, and entered into force on 1 April 2020.

Considering the importance of air cargo, which accounts for approximately 35 % of world trade by value but is also a key complement to land and sea freight, on 26 March 2020, the European Commission issued [guidelines](#) on facilitating air cargo operations during the Covid-19 outbreak. Tackling the issue of air cargo is even more important given that around half of all air cargo is carried in the hold of passenger aircraft, which are now no longer flying. All-cargo flights are unable to compensate for the loss of cargo capacity on passenger aircraft when operated at similar levels as this time last year (i.e. in March) and are confronted with practical difficulties in certain airports due

to flights and staff restrictions. Continued and uninterrupted air cargo is also essential for the quick delivery of highly critical medical supplies and to keep global supply chains working.

The objective of these guidelines is to assist Member States to maintain and facilitate air cargo operations and invite them to implement a series of operational measures, such as granting temporary traffic rights for additional cargo operations from outside the EU, even when conducted with passenger aircraft; temporarily removing, or applying flexibly, night curfews or slot restrictions at airports for essential air cargo operations; facilitating the use of passenger aircraft for cargo-only operations; ensuring that sufficient cargo capacity is maintained at airports and that open airports retain sufficient air cargo handling capabilities to ensure timely treatment and delivery; exempting asymptomatic transport personnel from travel restrictions. The Commission also underlines that flight restrictions incompatible with EU laws must be lifted and that these operational measures will be temporary for the duration of the coronavirus crisis.

Maritime transport

Approximately 600 000 seafarers of all nationalities serve on board EU-owned ships worldwide. To cater for their needs and those of passengers, on 8 April 2020, the Commission published specific [guidelines](#) on the protection of health, repatriation and travel arrangements for seafarers, passengers and other persons on-board ships, calling on Member States to create a network of ports for fast-track crew changes. These ports should have adequate facilities for seafarers to be accommodated as needed, undergo medical checks or be placed in quarantine and be able to use railway or air connections to travel onward to their home country. 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. Cruise operators are responsible for bringing their passengers and crews home, including from non-EU ports. The guidelines also include sanitary recommendations, guidance on submitting maritime health declarations and on the conditions under which seafarers' contracts could be extended.

Economic support

To tackle the risk of serious economic downturn, the Commission published a [temporary framework](#) for **State aid** measures (further [updated](#) on 3 April 2020 and on 8 [May](#) 2020), which will allow EU countries to provide assistance to companies, in addition to the possibilities available under the current State aid rules. Member States have since then [proposed](#) a number of economy-wide measures and some sector-specific measures. Under the State aid temporary framework in the area of transport, in early April 2020, the Commission approved, for example, a €455 million Swedish [loan](#) guarantee scheme to support airlines affected by the coronavirus outbreak. Taking the form of State guarantees on loans, the scheme will be accessible to airlines holding a Swedish commercial aviation licence at least as of 1 January 2020, except those operating non-scheduled passenger air transport services as their main activity. The measure aims at providing airlines operating in Sweden with liquidity. Concluding that the measure is necessary, appropriate and proportionate to remedy a serious disturbance in the economy of the Member State, in line with Article 107(3)(b) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) and the conditions set out in the temporary framework, the Commission approved the measure under EU State aid rules.

Under the same framework, the Commission approved a Belgian [scheme](#) deferring the payment by airports in the Wallonia region of concession fees, due in principle for 2020. The scheme will be accessible to the operators of Charleroi and Liege airports. The scheme aims at ensuring that the two airports have sufficient liquidity to cope with the economic damage caused by the coronavirus outbreak and to preserve the continuity of economic activity during and after the current crisis.

On 29 April, the European [Commission](#) adopted a package of measures consisting of four legislative proposals, the purpose of which is to provide relief to the transport sector. The proposed measures that together cover all modes – aviation, rail, maritime, inland navigation and road – seek to ease and resolve some of the practical issues transport operators are confronted with, by finding concrete

ways to ease their daily operations, and removing administrative burdens temporarily so that they can function more easily during the pandemic. These first transport-related measures may be expected to be complemented and extended with a number of economy-wide measures, as well as transport-sector specific measures.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ According to the [Schengen](#) Borders Code, Member States can, under specific circumstances and for a temporary period, introduce temporary border checks at their internal borders.
- ² The 30 March 2020 [guidance](#) on the implementation of the temporary restriction on non-essential travel to the EU, on the facilitation of transit arrangements for the repatriation of EU citizens, and on the effects on visa policy defines the 'EU+ area' as including all Schengen Member States (including Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus and Romania), as well as the four Schengen associated countries. It would also include Ireland and the United Kingdom if they decide to align. The Schengen associated states are Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland.
- ³ Until the end of the transition period, 31 December 2020, UK nationals will be treated in the same way as EU citizens.
- ⁴ The trans-European transport [network](#) refers to the most important arteries for road, rail and inland waterways. It integrates ports, airports and multimodal terminals and plays a key role in the circulation of goods and persons.
- ⁵ In the absence of such certificates, a letter signed by the employer (see template in [Annex 3](#) of the communication) should be accepted.
- ⁶ Non-EU neighbouring countries are also invited to work with this network.
- ⁷ [Annex 2](#) to the communication includes recommendations for drivers and transport-related undertakings and competent public authorities involved in freight transport following the Covid-19 outbreak.

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