

Presidency Summary
Informal Video Conference of the of the Employment and Social Policy Ministers
on the recovery plan and the demographic challenges related to the COVID-19

On 5 May 2020, the Croatian Presidency of the Council of the EU organised a second videoconference of Employment and Social Policy Ministers of the Union's Member States where the recovery plan and the demographic challenges related to the COVID-19 were discussed. The conference confirmed that the rapid spread of the virus has had serious socio-economic consequences requiring the EU and its Member States to introduce measures aiming to protect citizens. Although the intensity of the outbreak is lessening, its negative effects will continue to impact our society and economy. The Presidency therefore deemed it important that employment and social policy ministers together with the Commission and representatives of the EU-level social partners had the opportunity to exchange views on the medium and long-term strategy for recovery from the crisis.

It was stressed that demographic changes in Europe are profound and the negative trends in most Member States are expected to intensify due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The upcoming *European Commission Report on the Impact of Demographic Change* is expected to be published timely and to help identify actions at the Union level in order to mitigate or to adapt to the impacts of demographic change, also in the light of COVID-19. Many ministers said that Europe as a whole, its Member States and its regions have a shared interest in managing demographic change to the benefit of people living in the EU, across generations, and that special attention should be given in particular to the most vulnerable groups, such as the elderly and the young. Some ministers consider investment in health and long-term care systems as an important element to support an ageing population. Several ministers stated that it is particularly important to address the needs of a changing demographic landscape and to make the most affected regions, in particular rural and remote areas, more attractive. Some ministers emphasized the importance of support to families with children in order to achieve better work-life balance especially in the time of crisis. The provision of social services of quality child care and long term care are considered key in this respect. Others emphasised the importance of fighting child poverty and called on the European Commission to keep to its initial work plan as regards the Child Guarantee and the Updated Youth Guarantee.

Most of the ministers stressed that ensuring quick economic recovery and stability after the end of the pandemic requires that recovery strategies be built on a coordinated approach, safeguarding employability, supporting businesses and protecting groups in need. Member States have taken action to help their economies, employers, workers, self-employed and welfare systems. National authorities have launched packages of support measures especially for small and medium-sized enterprises, the self-employed, as well as workers in non-standard forms of work. Several ministers confirmed that the re-start of economic activity will require industry to adapt to new circumstances, change their work patterns and business processes or even undergo a radical transformation. Furthermore, many ministers stressed that the opening of internal borders is key for many workers and enterprises.

Importantly, they consider seasonal workers to be essential for many economic sectors, like agriculture and tourism, and therefore it is important to ensure their adequate working conditions as well as health and safety protection. The need to fully restore free movement of persons and goods and functioning of the Single Market was stressed as well to ensure equal treatment between national and European workers.

Many ministers emphasized the importance of upskilling and reskilling which will be needed to adjust to the challenges and changes in the labour market. Several Ministers also called on the European Commission to stay on track with the initiatives on pay transparency, the EU unemployment reinsurance and minimum wages.

In addition to national measures and actions, ministers confirmed that joint efforts and horizontal approaches are required at the EU level. In this regard, many ministers stressed that the European roadmap for lifting the coronavirus containment measures recognises the specificities of each country and establishes key principles, and that good cooperation and communication at EU level is of great importance in order to get national economies on a path of sustainable recovery and growth. In this context, several ministers expressed hopes for ambitious proposals for a revamped MFF 2021-2027 and a reinforced ESF+. Several ministers, the European Commission and social partners' representatives emphasised the importance of speeding up the process and finding a swift agreement on the SURE instrument, so that it can be operational by 1 June, in order to ensure a timely response.

Several ministers emphasised that it is important to stay committed to the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights, and that the digital and green transitions should be fully taken into account. Ministers concluded that no one should be left behind and that joint efforts from all stakeholders are needed in order to fight social and economic challenges. The key role of Social Partners in the recovery was stressed by a number of ministers.