



COUNTRY RESPONSES TO PHASE 1 OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN PAM REGION

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges for governments and parliaments to ensure not only the health of their citizens but also public service continuity. Aspects of economic stability, social responsibility, and political procedures have been affected since the first cluster of COVID-19 cases on December 31, 2019¹.

Parliamentarians across the world have been forced to take emergency provisions in parliamentary procedure, innovating techniques to connect with the citizenry, and legislating actions on urgent relief packages for communities in need. Many parliaments have adjusted their parliamentary rules of procedure to work remotely and convene virtually, hold parliamentary sessions, but require limited numbers of MPs in the room to abide by social distancing recommendations. Some parliaments have also instituted measures that permit voting virtually or are considering the possibility of doing so.

This report provides a snapshot of the immediate responses in the initial phase of the COVID-19 by governments and parliaments of Member States, Associate and Partner countries, to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM), predominantly as countries ease restrictions once placed to contain the pandemic. The report was developed as a response to requests from some PAM members to collect evidence on how countries were responding to these unprecedented challenges.

Response measures adopted by each country are separated into four main topics. The first section of the report deals with governmental responses, parliamentary action and related constitutional challenges. The second part of the report analyzes the economic policy responses adopted through fiscal, monetary, and labor policies to respond to the pandemic and compounding shocks to the market. The third section focuses on social measures, including public health, human rights protection, gender equality, support for people with disabilities, migrants, and educational assistance for students. The fourth section is about international cooperation and describes the assistance of medical supplies, loans, and grants across PAM members. This section also includes cooperation between countries in conflict (or in the absence of diplomatic relations).

¹ WHO Timeline - COVID-19. (2020, April 27). Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/27-04-2020-who-timeline---covid-19>

1. POLITICAL RESPONSE AND CONSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

For most of the affected countries the Covid-19 outbreak has posed unprecedented institutional challenges. By mid-March, almost all PAM Member States were in a state of emergency, whether they officially declared one or not.

While some Member States' constitutions include mechanisms allowing for recourse to a 'state of emergency' or the entrustment of special powers to specific institutions, other Member States' legal orders do not, either for historic reasons or owing to institutional tradition. Notwithstanding the possibility to apply a state of emergency to the health crisis, on 23 March, the French Parliament adopted a law on urgent measures (Law No 2020-290) in response to the coronavirus pandemic and declared a public health emergency for the first time ever. Turkish presidency and administration preferred to introduce the measures against the pandemic in the form of circulars instead of declaring a state of emergency. On the other hand, Israel and Egypt continued to operate domestically in the same legal framework of the state of emergency they declared in 1948 and 2017, respectively. The government of Lebanon declared a "state of general mobilization" under by Article 2 of Legislative Decree No. 102/1983 (Law on National Defense), on account of the health emergency caused by Covid-19.

In Greece, the coronavirus pandemic has given birth to consecutive Acts of Legislative Content (submitted to the Parliament for approval) and ministerial decisions restricting various constitutional rights and establishing an atypical "emergency law". The exercise of rights is not fully suspended but provisionally limited in order to protect the individual (article 5 (5) of the Constitution) and the social right (a positive obligation of the State, article 21 (3) of the Constitution) to health.

The Italian response to coronavirus was characterized by prominent use of governmental legal instruments in the form of decree-laws, prime ministerial decrees and ministerial orders. The usual guarantees of the Italian legal system remain applicable to the adopted legal acts. Decree-laws are subject to the conditionality of necessity and urgency for their adoption and to double scrutiny: first by the President of the Republic (Article 87 of the Constitution) who promulgates them and, in that capacity, performs an initial scrutiny of their constitutional compliance; second by Parliament (Article 77 of the Constitution) through their conversion into law within 60 days, failing which they become *void ex tunc*. Concerning ministerial decrees or civil protection orders, although they do not enjoy the parliamentary scrutiny of a decree-law, they are subject, like other administrative acts, to ordinary means of redress before the administrative jurisdiction for violation of a legitimate interest (or civil jurisdiction in case of violation of legal rights). The possibility of such decrees to introduce restrictive measures was initially provided by Decree-Law 6/2020, which also contained a highly controversial 'open clause' allowing the prime minister to adopt 'any other necessary measure'. Under Decree-Law 19/2020 this controversial aspect was corrected and a more precise perimeter of governmental powers in the adoption of prime ministerial decrees was

established. Redress against these decrees also remains subject to the ordinary rules on jurisdiction (administrative or ordinary).

In the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, King Abdullah issued a royal decree authorizing Prime Minister Omar al-Razzaz to declare a state of emergency, under Art. 124 of Jordan's Constitution, and activate emergency provisions of Defense Law 13 of 1992. According to the decree and the Defense Law, the Prime Minister is charged with enacting measures to respond to the emergency and he has authority to suspend certain individual rights, including freedom of movement and expression, impose curfews, close businesses, and place restrictions on freedom of movement to limit the spread of COVID-19.

Government introduced a range of measures to reduce the spread of the virus, including school closures, the ban of all non-essential activities, outings and long-distance travel, and the introduction of night-time curfews in some cities. Government surveillance on private citizens were also expanded, and in some countries the army was deployed to enforce COVID-19 mandates on the citizens. Election cycles were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting constitutional law and norms. In particular, parliamentary elections were postponed in Syria, North Macedonia, and Jordan, local elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina, France (second round), Italy (national referendum concerning cuts on the number of seats in Parliament, as well as regional and municipal elections), Montenegro, Romania and Tunisia.

Crucial aspects of the exercise of public powers under a pandemic threat include not only the extent of the measures adopted, but also their legitimacy, raising the question of their duration and of the degree of parliamentary oversight. The parliamentary activity has been drastically affected by the pandemic, as parliaments were forced to limit their meetings and plenary sittings and adopt remote system of meetings. The Parliaments of Croatia and Romania had to adopt changes to the Rules of Procedure and the Standing Orders respectively to provide for holding of remote meetings. The Chamber of Deputies of Italy limited the work of the Plenary to the consideration of urgent non-deferrable bills, with particular regard to bills for the enactment into law of pending decree laws, and met in plenary session in case of parliamentary questions requiring an immediate reply or of urgent interpellations.

The purpose of these arrangements is to maintain constant dialogue with the Government on the COVID-19 emergency and to enable the Government to keep Parliament apprised of developments, including through urgent information updates and reports. In Israel, the Supreme Court has ruled that a parliamentary committee must be set up to oversee emergency powers given to the Israeli Security Agency that allow it to use surveillance technology to track the movements of people with COVID-19.

On April 22, the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina concluded that ordering prohibition of movement of the persons less than 18 years of age and over age 65 on the territory of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is violation of the right to freedom of movement. Following its ruling, the Constitutional Court then issued an order to the Headquarters of Civil

Defense and Government of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina to adjust the restrictions in question according to the constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The issue was finally resolved on April 24, by the adjusting condition of the ban. On March 24, Personal Data Protection Agency in BiH delivered a decision to ban public disclosure of personal data of COVID-19 patients and persons respecting the measure of isolation and self-isolation. In response to increased surveillance, the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that there must be checks and balances on encroaching privacy rights on citizens, which placed limits on expanding government power

Many parliaments adopted urgent bills and resolutions on the COVID-19 crisis. The Parliament of Albania adopted amendments to the penal code, legislating harsh punishments for those breaching the lockdown or quarantine.

The Egyptian parliament passed a package of important laws to address the repercussions of the pandemic, amending the emergency law to include allowing the President of the Republic or whoever he delegates to take appropriate measures to deal with the health emergency, in addition to giving the military judiciary jurisdiction over violations of emergency orders.

The common interrogation is whether the extraordinary measures of confinement are necessary in a democratic society, according to the proportionality principle and public interest. The number of measures that can be taken under the state of public health emergency in France are strictly limited to 10 (Public Health Code Article L3131-15), they must be proportionate to the health risks, they can be terminated at any time when the specific conditions are not met anymore. Most recently, in March 2020, the Council of State noted that emergency measures must be proportionate to the health objective they serve. Both the French National Assembly and the Senate must be informed of the measures taken by the government and may request further information at any time (Public Health Code L3131-13). Moreover, because the public health emergency introduces the possibility to limit fundamental rights and liberties enjoyed fully by citizens under normal circumstances, there is the possibility to appeal against them before the administrative court (Public Health Code L3131-18). Within the limits of Article 38 of the French Constitution, the government can issue orders containing temporary measures that are usually in the domain of the law, however a ratification law must be introduced by Parliament within three months of publication of the order.

In this thorough exercise of balancing, the legal argument is inevitably mediated, not to say absolutely determined by the overwhelming scientific data on the coronavirus (the suggestions of the World Health Organization, the cases and the rate of deaths, etc.) and their correlation with the temporary restrictions on rights. In any case, these actual limitations should not be confused with a total suspension or suppression of the core of constitutional rights.

2. ECONOMIC RESPONSES

The containment measures brought in by most governments were necessary to slow the spread of the virus and limit the death toll, but they have also closed down business activity in many sectors and caused widespread economic hardship. All countries implemented socio-economic measures promptly, recognizing the critical impact of lockdowns on their economies. The main area of intervention was monetary policy measures to increase liquidity and fiscal alleviation, with particular emphasis on employers and employees in MSMEs.

Parliaments took legislating actions on urgent relief packages for communities in need. The Senate of Algeria passed a supplementary finance law (SFL) which includes provisions to mitigate the health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. The Parliament of BIH adopted the Law on Mitigating the Negative Economic Consequences” and amendments to the Law on VAT, thus alleviating some of the impact of the economic crisis for business entities in the country. The Croatian Parliament adopted a package of government-sponsored bills to help the economy affected by the COVID-19 outbreak, with 63 measures primarily aimed at preserving jobs and ensuring payment of wages. The Parliament of Egypt passed a package of important laws to address the repercussions of the pandemic, making an additional appropriation in the state's public budget to counter the consequences of the pandemic. The National Assembly of France voted a new crisis budget, adds EUR 2 billion dedicated funding to increase partial unemployment coverage and bonuses for healthcare professionals and civil servants as well as to buy masks and support the most deprived households. The Knesset approved a package, which includes for health expenses, funding a relaxation in the requirements for unemployment benefits and grants for self-employed workers, liquidity assistance through, infrastructure projects, including IT support for SMEs and government digitalization. A one-time grant for families with children, the elderly and other vulnerable population groups was also approved by parliament.

EU and Middle Eastern countries responded at regional levels to macroeconomic support through the ECB and sovereign wealth funds respectively. The Central Banks were quick to react with monetary policy tools: they reduced their policy rate (Algeria, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, Qatar, Romania, Serbia, Tunisia, Turkey, Russian Federation).

The European Union has taken a series of financial support measures since mid-March (purchase of government securities amounting to €750 billion), supplemented by a package of financial measures decided by the Eurogroup on April 9, 2020 amounting to €540 billion; it has announced that it will invest more than €138 million in research on Covid-19, targeting vaccine, treatment and diagnostic projects through the “Horizon 2020” programme. In accordance with the 2013 Basel III agreement, the European Central Bank (ECB) has supported measures in European countries to lower the Liquidity Coverage Ratio (LCR) in Germany, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia, Cyprus, France, Greece, and Bulgaria. The financial intervention of the ECB has spurred

challenges about the intent of its original mandate to stabilize market prices and fiscal coordination.² In addition, the response from the ECB reinvigorates European fiscal federalism.³

Governments have also responded to increasing liquidity in the market by lowering the reserve requirement, specifically in Algeria, Croatia, Mauritania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and Moldova. Lowering the reserve requirement as a form of expansionary monetary policy increases the money supply, in addition to a foreshadowing of high inflation rates.

To alleviate the impact of COVID-19 on small businesses, countries have deployed a series of measures, including support to labour force, deferrals of payments (e.g. taxes, utility payments, temporary moratorium on debt repayments, rent, social security contributions, etc.); financial support (e.g. credit guarantees, direct loans, introducing dedicated working capital credit lines can ease SMEs access to finance by allowing them to cover operational costs, such as staff salaries and rents and others); and structural measures (e.g. helping SMEs to adopt digital technologies, access new markets, etc.). Enterprises that converted to other productions, such as manufacturing masks and sanitary products received financial support (Italy, Morocco). Other countries have allocated additional funds for job retention for SMEs and self-employed, covered workdays, adopted measures to reduce or eliminate payment of benefits for the hardest hit sectors (Italy, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Portugal).

Parliaments in Libya, Algeria, Kuwait, Russian Federation, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Syria have responded to a steep drop in oil and hydrocarbon prices. International assistance has encouraged multilateral and regional support through donations, loans, and grants from sovereign wealth funds.

Most MENA economies took immediate investment policy responses to address the crisis. They provided specific sectoral support and encouraged shifting production, notably in free zones, introduced fiscal and financial measures to release pressure on some industries and support contracted economic activities, expanded access to their local market to foreign investors (e.g. in Tunisia and Egypt). Investment promotion agencies (IPAs) are taking emergency actions to sustain and retain existing investment. They set up crisis units to inform and communicate with investors, to respond to their queries and to follow on production disruptions. They are refocusing, redesigning and reinforcing their aftercare services aiming at investment retention, in particular in strategic and essential sectors.

Many governments have taken initiatives to support the tourism industry in their countries. Measures include specific credit lines for tourism enterprises, as introduced by the Central Bank

² Europe, U. (2020, April 28). Video recording of our Websalon "European Solidarity and the European Single Market". Retrieved from <https://www.united-europe.eu/2020/04/recording-of-our-websalon-european-solidarity-and-the-european-single-market/>

³ *Ibid*

of Egypt, exemptions from tourism levies and other fees, as implemented in the United Arab Emirates, and debt rescheduling such as in Tunisia. Particular attention has also been given to the tourism sector in countries' deconfinement strategies. In Egypt, hotels have been authorised to reopen for domestic tourists at 25% capacity until end of May and 50% capacity from June onwards,

The Mediterranean economies have responded to the COVID-19 crisis also by taking a variety of measures intended to protect workers and prevent job loss centred around the following elements: reducing workers' exposure to the COVID-19 virus in the workplace, contributing financial support to employees' salaries; extended and simplified access to unemployment support; widening access to social protection systems. Wage support or cash transfers to households have been supported by 66 percent of PAM member countries across the MENA and Euro-Mediterranean region. Labor policies have strengthened paid leave for workers, health code standards, and wage support. In addition, Morocco, Mauritania, Tunisia, Georgia, and Egypt have directed labor policies to support workers in the informal sector. Price controls on essential goods and services have been placed across the Mediterranean region, mainly in the form of subsidies. In sixty-six percent of PAM-associated countries, there has been an increase in wage support and cash transfers to households.

To support the agriculture sector and food security, response has come from 34 percent of evaluated countries in the form of multilateral summits or direct financial assistance: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, Croatia, France, Jordan, Mauritania, Montenegro, Turkey, Bulgaria, Georgia, Slovakia, Switzerland, UK, China.

3. EMERGENCY SUPPORT MEASURES FOR VULNERABLE INDIVIDUALS

Exceptional measures have been taken to ensure that the response also targets groups which usually fall outside of social safety nets, such as informal and seasonal workers, and joint initiatives have been initiated with the private sector and civil society organisations to reach the most vulnerable populations. Countries have been able to react rapidly and activate policies to mitigate the crisis, showing high levels of adaptability to cope with the social aspects of the crisis. Most have expanded social assistance programmes, by extending cash transfers to households and, in some cases, to informal workers, or by waiving social security contributions.

PAM countries have provided social assistance through mobile health clinics, wage support, and multinational food security programs. During the impact of COVID-19 on the healthcare system, there has been a decrease in sexual and reproductive services in Albania, while a registered increase in Algeria, Jordan, and Slovenia. For example, the Family Protection Department in Jordan⁴ is ensuring to have female staff to respond to cases of sexual and gender-

⁴ COVID-19 and Gender: Immediate Recommendations for Planning and Response in Jordan. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://jordan.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/covid19-and-gender-in-jordan>

based violence under quarantine restrictions. Domestic violence cases have increased during quarantine restrictions, exacerbated by issues related to money, health, and job security.⁵

Prisoners have also been released from regional and local prisons or placed under judicial control in Turkey and Libya to prevent fatalities in overcrowded areas. However, local authorities should accompany the temporary release of abusers with monitoring and prevention plans, such as notifying victims of their release.⁶

The closure of schools to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 has exposed structural inequities to food insecurity, homelessness, access to digital learning, internet, disability services, and housing.⁷ Out of all PAM countries researched, 77 percent provided e-learning services for their students, teachers, and school systems, majority of which collaborated with the Ministries of Education in their respective governments. Without computers and internet, students -- particularly those from low-income households -- were be unable to participate in more dynamic forms of distance learning. To address this issue, Serbia now requires schools to provide any students who lack home computers with printed materials or school resources such as computers or tablets. Likewise, Bosnia and Herzegovina) has collaborated with internet service providers to give students free internet connections for the duration of the COVID-19 crisis. In addition, 32 percent of PAM countries which provided e-learning services, broadcasted lessons as TV programs for their students. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Malta, Georgia, Tunisia, Mauritania, Egypt, Russia, Bulgaria, and Cyprus, disability services were also provided for individuals and families.

With the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, conflict-affected countries such as Syria and Libya, and the OPTs, were are at particular risk as health systems already were deeply weakened by the conflicts, and social and economic conditions were already unstable. Many people who have been affected by humanitarian crises live in camps or camp-like settings in host countries. A majority of reception centers were in the first place not well suited or equipped to allow for special measures in order to contain COVID-19, overcrowded with not enough sanitation facilities. In Italy, migrants living in reception centres have written an open letter to authorities expressing their concerns about living in close, confined spaces. Officials have voiced concerns about the conditions of asylum seeker camps on the Greek islands. The Lebanese Ministry for Social Affairs unveiled early March a preventive plan elaborated in coordination with representatives from NGOs and international organisations to prevent the spread of the virus in areas hosting refugees. The plan involves awareness campaigns targeted at refugees and provision of disinfection equipment in camps. In Jordan, the government, in coordination with UNHCR, has put in place measures to ensure continued access to national health services for refugees, including the referral of suspected cases to quarantine sites, and the provision of requisite treatment. Temperature screening has been

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ Bettinger- Lopez, C., & Bro, A. (2020, May 13). A Double Pandemic: Domestic Violence in the Age of COVID-19. Retrieved from <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/double-pandemic-domestic-violence-age-covid-19>

⁷ Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean. (2020, April 28). COVID 19 - PAM Calls for Urgent Attention to the Adaptations Required by Educational System. Retrieved from <https://www.pam.int/default.asp?m=news&id=909>

implemented at the entrance of two major refugee camps, electricity provision has been enhanced and the supermarkets are running extended hours to facilitate social distancing. In-kind aid distributions are offered through JHCO (Jordanian Hashemite Charity Organisation), including to refugees.

In Europe, many countries introduced temporary measures with regard to the processing of applications for, and issuance and renewal of, residence permits to prevent legally-residing migrants from falling into an irregular situation, and for those who have lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic. The measures taken include, inter alia, extension of authorisation to stay to migrants who were unable to leave because of the pandemic, facilitated online applications, easing of employment restrictions, and facilitated access to unemployment benefits for migrants. In Portugal, the government took a big step in ensuring that all migrants have access to health care and other necessary services during this time, providing temporary residents' status for migrants who had been 'illegal' before in that territory. The Portuguese government has also published a technical document on obtaining health care, aimed at medical professionals as well as migrants and refugees. The government of Malta launched the Covid-19 Malta website which provides information in both Maltese and English, with the latest updates and FAQs. Greece has paid particular attention to the need of raising awareness about prevention and response to COVID-19 among migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in urban settings and in the refugee camp. With the agricultural sector being highly dependent on migrant labour, the Italian government approved pathways for regularisation of status for agricultural and domestic care workers.

4. INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the many consequences that globalization has on our daily lives. The rapid spread of the virus across the world has highlighted more than any other event the huge interdependencies of our world economy, and the risks that come with it. In a sign of solidarity with its neighbor and main trading partner, Albania has sent teams of doctors and nurses to help fight against the COVID-19 pandemic in north Italy, one of the worst hit areas in the world. The Sovereign Order of Malta and the Holy See have initiated funds and projects to assist local and regional healthcare infrastructure. The Sovereign Order of Malta is also providing healthcare assistance to refugees in Germany and Syria.

Despite the strong calls for co-operation, for the most part the immediate regulatory reactions to COVID-19 have been unilateral, including at the European level, where strong co-operation mechanisms are in place. Although countries have reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic with policies demonstrating international solidarity, there has simultaneously been efforts of national protection by closing national borders, port systems, and trade of essential goods. Many countries have sought national solutions and sometimes isolationism to protect from a threat perceived as largely coming from outside.

The totally un-coordinated closure of borders within the European Union has been particularly harmful for certain countries that rely strongly on the free movement of labour and goods across Europe. In the same vein, even non-EU Members within the Schengen zone have suffered from unilateral restrictions on EU external borders.

In the initial stages of the pandemic, the European Commission decided to temporarily change the policy of exporting medical equipment⁸ outside the EU. This move was perceived in a negative light by many EU neighbouring states, including MENA region, and particularly in the Western Balkans, as they depend on EU supply chains for such equipment.

On 25 March, the Presidents of the Parliaments of Montenegro, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Northern Macedonia and Serbia signed the Appeal for Assistance to the Region of the Western Balkans in Combating the Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19). This letter, addressed to the President of the European Parliament and the President of the European Commission, stated that the Western Balkans should be exempted from the decision to restrict the export of medical equipment from the European Union. PAM strongly supported this request thought a series of dedicated initiatives.

Moreover, the European Union helped its Southern neighbouring countries⁹ to address the most immediate needs, to provide assistance for the health systems and to mitigate the socio-economic consequences of the crisis. This includes €30.8 million for immediate needs, €572 million to strengthen national health systems and €1.5 billion to support the socio-economic recovery of Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine and Tunisia. It will also help respond to the needs of those inside Syria through health provision and community-driven development support.

As an emergency response at the regional level, the Commission launched a new €9 million programme with the European Centre for Disease Control (ECDC) to provide tailor-made support to all neighbourhood and enlargement countries to enhance their preparedness and response capacities. Epidemiologists and frontline health staff will receive help and advice from dedicated ECDC staff to respond to heightened needs caused by the pandemic.

Similar requests were made from the MENA countries, and the EU is also helping in MENA region, as an example we have Tunisia¹⁰ and Morocco¹¹ but appears to be excluding Algeria¹² at this time.

⁸ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32020R0402&from=EN>

⁹ <https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/south/stay-informed/news/covid-19-european-union-stands-its-southern-partners>

¹⁰ <http://northafricapost.com/39470-eu-helps-tunisia-in-fight-against-coronavirus-with-e250-million.html>

¹¹ <http://northafricapost.com/39421-morocco-to-spend-200-mln-on-medical-equipment-to-counter-covid-19.html>

¹² <https://www.echoroukonline.com/%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a7%d8%aa%d8%ad%d8%a7%d8%af-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a3%d9%88%d8%b1%d9%88%d8%a8%d9%8a->

In response, the President of the European Parliament affirmed that the EU would take action to make sure that its neighbors in the Western Balkans and the Southern shore of the Mediterranean would be included in response mechanisms. This development is good example of the effectiveness of parliamentary diplomacy to reach a more common and coordinated pandemic response in the Euro-Mediterranean region that is rooted in solidarity, as has been consistently supported by PAM since the beginning of the outbreak.

Production in certain parts of the world has been seriously disrupted (or even fully stopped) due to the restrictive measures introduced by the governments in order to stop or at least slow the outbreak of the epidemic. Some countries imposed export prohibitions and restrictions on essential goods (export ban on medicines in Serbia, essential foods in Syria, and hygiene products in Algeria), such as masks and ventilators to mitigate critical shortages at the national level. Measures such as requisitions, advanced shipment notifications, stockpiling requirements, confiscations, or export restrictions on specific products only adopted unilaterally by certain countries have created significant costs for businesses, seriously affecting the trade in medical and protective equipment and medicines - from raw materials to finished pharmaceutical forms.

VACCINATION

COVID-19 vaccine development is being accelerated; currently, at least 170 vaccines are under research in a dozen or more countries. As and when an effective and safe vaccine or vaccines become available, the challenge of distribution will be faced. An even more difficult problem is that of ‘vaccine hesitancy’ which refers to delay in acceptance or even refusal of vaccination despite availability of vaccination services. Studies indicate that this could be a significant factor in COVID-19 vaccine uptake. A major negative influence is the ‘anti-vaxxer’ lobby of people who are downright hostile. A segment of vaccine-opposers cite religious or libertarian reasons for opposing vaccines, but mostly the hostility stems from mis- information about vaccination and mistrust in health authorities and governments in general. To overcome that will be a huge challenge for policymakers and opinion-shapers.

With the prevalent lack of trust in governments and health experts in so many places, compulsory vaccination measures are likely to require considerable coercive enforcement which will further undermine trust, especially in the other public health measures which are equally essential in the control of COVID-19.

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5. PAM ACTIVITIES IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Acting as the principal parliamentary forum of the region, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM) has guaranteed a continued full support to and info-sharing with all its Member and Partner States during this unprecedented economic, social, political crisis.

During this exceptional situation, PAM reinforced its cooperation with WHO, and the PAM Secretariat served as support platform for the engagement of parliaments in facing the pandemic at the regional level. In particular, PAM disseminated, inter-alia, a set of tailored WHO guidelines for PAM Members to oversee and ensure an effective and coordinated governmental response to the current pandemic.

Addressing the security dimension during the pandemic, PAM, together with the UNOCT and OSCE-PA, held online, on 30 June, the first-ever joint Parliamentary Web Dialogue on “Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic”. The event provided an expanded platform to exchange views on how to retain counter-terrorism efforts high on government’s agendas during and after the COVID-19 pandemic and reinforce parliamentary co-operation at this critical juncture. As the COVID-19 pandemic has severely tightened external financing conditions for countries across the income spectrum, disrupting trade, supply chains, and investment flows in the Mediterranean region, PAM has worked in close coordination with regional and international key players to identify and share operational solutions for the recovery phase. On 8 July 2020, PAM organized a high-level webinar forum on governmental and legislative actions required to support the productive sector in the post-COVID Economic Recovery. The forum gathered policy and decisions-makers, senior experts and representatives of international organizations and financial institutions, and the productive and academic sectors to review best innovative strategies for a safe, swift, coherent and integrated economic recovery in the Euro-Mediterranean and Gulf regions. Speakers focused on strategies and instruments to sustain national efforts, entrepreneurs and workers, in terms of easier access to credit, fiscal and monetary instruments.

Being tourism one of the economic sectors first and most heavily affected by the COVID-19 in the Mediterranean region, PAM launched a reinforced partnership with the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) in terms of promoting the recovery of tourism sector. In the framework of this cooperation, PAM shared with its national parliaments and partners a set of Protocols and Standards, prepared by WTTC to ensure safe resumption and promotion of both Travels and Tourism, in light of the strategic role of parliamentarians in addressing the matter. In the same context, PAM launched a new partnership with the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). Moreover, PAM will organize a webinar, tentatively in November 2020, on the unique role of cultural heritage in the Euro-Mediterranean region, as a tool for economic recovery through the tourist sector.

In parallel to these effective activities, PAM issued a number of dedicated thematic papers on economic issues in the context of the pandemic, in order to provide the PAM constituency updated on the best practices and guidelines on legislative approaches to the recovery phases. The topics covered included, among others, use of economic and financial instruments, food security and trade barriers, climate change, safe resumption and promotion of both Travels and Tourism in the Euro-Mediterranean region, and Economic response in phase two of COVID 19 in PAM region.

Recognizing the extreme vulnerability of migrants and refugees to health hazards, PAM urged from the very beginning its Member countries to include migrants and refugees in national and international efforts, as an integral part of any effective public health response. This also to ensure equitable access to treatments, as well as to the social measures introduced to mitigate the economic downturn caused by COVID-19. PAM also reacted very quickly to the humanitarian crisis in the region and called on its Member States to adhere to the call for a world-wide ceasefire by the UN Secretary General and to contribute to the Global Humanitarian Response Plan.

Concerned by the alarming increase of domestic violence during the pandemic, the Assembly repeatedly echoed the call by the UNSG for urgent action to combat the worldwide surge in domestic violence and to make the prevention and redress of violence against women a pivotal part of member States' national response plans for COVID-19, decisions that require a proactive role for legislators. Thus, the PAM Bureau agreed to organize a webinar meeting on how to improve the current legislation and national prosecution and protection practices to defeat and weaken violence against women, and domestic violence in general.

Moreover, in September, PAM and Platforma, the pan-European coalition of towns and regions – and their national, EU and global associations, will organize a joint webinar to discuss the impact the COVID-19 pandemic on human rights and fundamental freedoms in the Mediterranean basin in general, and on vulnerable or disadvantaged groups in particular, as well as to highlight recovery solutions, multi-level partnerships, peer-partnerships, initiatives, and/or good practices involving local and regional levels of governance. The meeting will also dedicate a special focus to domestic violence, scheduled on 18 September 2020.

PAM also addressed the issue of the pressure and related challenges that COVID-19 pandemic put on the education systems and which have to be considered by PAM Member States, such as an urgent adaptation in the educational system, as well as a commitment to improve vocational training opportunities for ensuring growth in job creation in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

As the recovery phase has started for the majority of countries in the Euro Mediterranean area, PAM is also working with regional and international key players to act as a platform to disseminate best practices in such a crucial moment to reopen and rebuild the economic basis for a rapid recovery.

Moreover, a special brief for on the issue of COVID 19 vaccinations, prepared for PAM by its Senior Medical Advisor, Professor Mukesh Kapila, former Director for Emergency Response at the World Health Organisation, was recently distributed to all PAM Member Parliaments and partner organizations. The special brief reflects the most up to date information available on COVID 19 vaccine research and development, as well as outlines the key issues to be considered in successfully preparing for national vaccination campaigns.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed necessary infrastructure reform needed to prevent and respond to a future pandemic. It has also exposed challenges to constitutional law in the judicial, legislative, and executive branches of governments.

However, the novel COVID-19 pandemic has exposed inequality and inequity amongst healthcare coverage, social welfare, and educational assistance. Alterations to legal systems such as adjourned judicial branches, postponed parliamentary elections, and increased military presence will affect post-pandemic governance. In addition, there has also been closure of national borders, port systems, and trade routes. Amongst the legislative changes, parliamentary response during the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the power of global solidarity, in addition to exposing systemic changes necessary for sustainable post-pandemic governance.

This global crisis will certainly reshape the way governments are investing public money in essential goods, public services and infrastructure. It is likely that public procurement practices will not simply return to the “usual business”, but rather transform to a “new normal” building on the vulnerabilities revealed by the COVID-19 crisis. The crisis has revealed many weaknesses and fractures in our infrastructure from health care to digital technology at schools. More focus is needed on these vulnerable areas in the future, and with a clear ‘sustainability’ test. Procurement and infrastructure strategies should serve inclusiveness and sustainability as well as build resilience, beyond delivering economic goals.

In times of crisis, parliaments have a duty to ensure that all measures taken result in enhanced protection and support of the most vulnerable. Parliaments establish legislative measures to govern, enable and support risk management measures, passing unprecedented economic aid packages and emergency public health measures, while attempting to ensure democratic controls and securing effective checks and balances, where possible. It is crucial that national and international parliaments continue to provide oversight and contribute to the conceptualisation and design of support measures, not least in the social and economic spheres, targeting the most vulnerable segments of our societies. Parliaments will have a key role to play to ensure that emergency measures are implemented properly and in accordance with democratic standards, that restrictions on freedoms are proportionate and temporary, that economic relief funds are disbursed where they are needed, and that security and stability are upheld.

PAM shall continue supporting national parliaments in these efforts. Through parliamentary diplomacy, the Assembly has encouraged further assistance and coordination among its Member States countries from the two shores of the Mediterranean. By providing platforms for legislators to share experience and best practices, PAM regularly assists parliaments in sharing the lessons and best practices from this crisis and enhance preparedness, resilience and response. By ensuring access, by parliamentarians and the wider public, to accurate and trustworthy information, PAM also combats misinformation.