

# EU countries adopt common travel guidelines amid pandemic

October 13 2020, by Samuel Petrequin



In this May 13, 2020 file photo, a barrier blocks the road at the closed border crossing from Austria to the Czech Republic near Reinthal, Austria. European Union countries are set to adopt a common traffic light system to coordinate traveling across the 27-nation bloc, but a return to a full freedom of movement in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic remains far from reach. (AP Photo/Ronald Zak, File)

European Union countries on Tuesday approved a series of guidelines including a "traffic-light" system aimed at facilitating free movement across the bloc and avoiding further travel disruption during the coronavirus pandemic.

During a meeting in Luxembourg, envoys for the 27 member states agreed on a common approach to travel restrictions and testing to help citizens and workers get more clarity on how they can transit across the continent.

In March, several EU nations hastily closed their borders in an attempt to stop the spread of the virus, even though the EU's Schengen agreement allows residents to move freely between countries without visas. The action blocked traffic and medical equipment.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted our daily lives in many ways. Travel restrictions have made it difficult for some of our citizens to get to work, to university or to visit their loved ones," said Michael Roth, the German minister for Europe. "It is our common duty to ensure coordination on any measures which affect free movement and to give our citizens all the information they need when deciding on their travel."

Member states agreed to provide coronavirus data to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), which will publish a weekly map sorting regions according to the severity of coronavirus outbreaks.



Minister of State for Europe at the German Federal Foreign Office Michael Roth, second right, greets delegation members with an elbow bump during a meeting of EU General Affairs ministers at the European Council building in Luxembourg, Tuesday, Oct. 13, 2020. European Commission's Head of Task Force for Relations with the United Kingdom Michel Barnier will brief ministers Tuesday on the state of play in EU-UK Brexit negotiations ahead of a key EU summit on Thursday. (AP Photo/Virginia Mayo, Pool)

The criteria used to define the colored zones—green, orange and red—are the number of newly notified cases per 100,000 in the past 14 days as well as the testing rate and the test positivity rate in the past week.

Member states agreed that they should not restrict free movement of

people traveling from or to green areas, but national EU governments will continue to set their own restrictions such as quarantines or mandatory testing upon arrival for people coming from orange or red zones.

A region will be classified as green if the 14-day notification rate is lower than 25 and the test positivity rate below 4%. Under the criteria adopted Tuesday, most EU regions would be either red or orange.

"This agreement avoids border closures and favors the least penalizing health control measures, such as testing," said Clement Beaune, the French minister for Europe. "Last but not least, essential movements, especially those of frontier workers, will be secured."

Severely hit by the coronavirus crisis, the aviation sector was less enthusiastic, branding the compromise a "political failure."



In this Tuesday, March 17, 2020 file photo, the UME (Emergency Army Unit) work in the train station in Granada, Spain. European Union countries are set to adopt a common traffic light system to coordinate traveling across the 27-nation bloc, but a return to a full freedom of movement in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic remains far from reach. (AP Photo/Carlos Gil, File)

In a statement, aviation bodies ACI Europe, Airlines for Europe and IATA rued that member states didn't adopt a common pre-departure COVID-19 testing procedure to replace quarantines for passengers travelling from high-risk zones.

"The current lack of coordination between member states has killed the nascent recovery of travel and tourism, thus jeopardising millions of jobs associated with the sector," they said.

The EU council said member states should not deny access to persons traveling from other EU nations and urged them to "respect the differences in the epidemiological situation between orange and red areas and act in a proportionate manner" if they decide to apply restrictions.

EU countries also agreed to provide timely information to their neighbors about new restrictions—if possible 48 hours in advance—and to develop a harmonized passenger locator form for all means of transport.

The guidelines are not legally binding as border controls and health matters remain the responsibility of national governments.

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