

# Council agrees on strengthening the use of rapid antigen tests and on the mutual recognition of COVID-19 test results



Member states have unanimously agreed today, by written procedure, on a Council recommendation setting a common framework for the use of rapid antigen tests and the mutual recognition of COVID-19 test results across the EU. This is a central tool to help mitigate the spread of the virus and contribute to the smooth functioning of the internal market; the mutual recognition of test results for SARS-CoV2 infection carried by certified health bodies is essential in order to facilitate cross-border movement, cross-border contact tracing and treatment.

Key components of this recommendation include the validation and mutual recognition of rapid antigen tests and RT-PCR tests among member states, the sharing of a standardised set of data (through a digital platform), the development of a common list of COVID-19 rapid antigen tests, the prioritisation of situations for the use of such tests (e.g. contacts of confirmed cases, outbreak clusters) and more. The recommendation also includes future-proof provisions to address the challenges of the evolving pandemic: the common list of appropriate COVID-19 rapid antigen tests should be flexible enough for addition or removal of those tests whose efficacy is impacted by COVID-19 mutations.

## **Background**

European leaders invited in December 2020 the Commission to present a proposal for a Council recommendation on a common framework for rapid antigen tests and for the mutual recognition of test results. The Commission presented its proposal on 18 December 2020. This recommendation was negotiated in the relevant bodies of the Council and adopted under the Portuguese Presidency. The Council Recommendation is not legally binding; it sets out best practices, which member states are encouraged to follow.

---

## **Press release – MEPs: Juan Guaidó is the legitimate interim President of**

# Venezuela



In a resolution adopted on Thursday by 391 votes for, 114 against and 177 abstentions, MEPs state that they do not recognise the legitimacy or legality of the “fraudulent National Assembly established on 5th January, 2021 on the basis of (...) non-democratic elections”. MEPs call on the Council and EU member states to unequivocally recognise the constitutional continuation of the 2015 legitimate National Assembly of Venezuela and the legitimate interim President of Venezuela, Juan Guaidó.

## **Free and fair elections are the only way forward**

The only solution to the multidimensional Venezuelan crisis, which has an impact on the whole region, is a political, peaceful and democratic way forward, by way of credible, inclusive, free, fair and transparent presidential, parliamentary, regional and local elections, stress MEPs. They request the unconditional and immediate release of more than 350 political prisoners and reiterate that the respect and protection of human rights in Venezuela must be fully guaranteed.

Condemning the most recent crackdown on freedom of expression and the closure of newspapers and media outlets that are not politically aligned with the Maduro regime, Parliament welcomes the recent extension of the targeted EU sanctions against 11 individuals, which do not harm the Venezuelan population.

MEPs call on the international community to disburse the amounts committed to relieve the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, as agreed by the Donors Conference.

---

## Press release – ‘Right to disconnect’ should be an EU-wide fundamental right, MEPs say



In their legislative initiative that passed with 472 votes in favour, 126 against and 83 abstentions, MEPs call on the Commission to propose a law that enables those who work digitally to disconnect outside their working hours. It should also establish minimum requirements for remote working and clarify working conditions, hours and rest periods.

The increase in digital resources being used for work purposes has resulted in an ‘always on’ culture, which has a negative impact on the work-life balance of employees, MEPs say. Although working from home has been instrumental in helping safeguard employment and business during the COVID-19 crisis, the combination of long working hours and higher demands also leads to more cases of anxiety, depression, burnout and other mental and physical health issues.

MEPs consider [the right to disconnect](#) a fundamental right that allows workers to refrain from engaging in work-related tasks – such as phone calls, emails and other digital communication – outside working hours. This includes holidays and other forms of leave. Member states are encouraged to take all

necessary measures to allow workers to exercise this right, including via collective agreements between social partners. They should ensure that workers will not be subjected to discrimination, criticism, dismissal, or other adverse actions by employers.

“We cannot abandon millions of European workers who are exhausted by the pressure to be always ‘on’ and overly long working hours. Now is the moment to stand by their side and give them what they deserve: the right to disconnect. This is vital for our mental and physical health. It is time to update worker’s rights so that they correspond to the new realities of the digital age”, rapporteur [Alex Agius Saliba](#) (S&D, MT) said after the vote.

## Background

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, working from home has increased by almost 30%. This figure is expected to remain high or even increase. Research by [Eurofound](#) shows that people who work regularly from home are more than twice as likely to surpass the maximum of 48 working hours per week, compared to those working on their employer’s premises. Almost 30% of those working from home report working in their free time every day or several times a week, compared to less than 5% of office workers.

---

## [Press release – EU help for Croatia after devastating earthquakes](#)



The European Commission, together with other European and Croatian institutions, should minimise the administrative requirements to access help and support for people on the ground, MEPs say in the resolution on mitigating the consequences of the earthquakes in Croatia. They warn that

Croatian authorities are under considerable financial pressure and that the extremely serious situation in affected areas may lead to an irreversible decline in population with devastating social and economic consequences.

### **Start reconstruction as soon as possible**

MEPs welcome the solidarity shown by member states, EU institutions and the international community through mutual assistance in emergency situations. They stress the importance of the [European Union Civil Protection Mechanism](#) in fostering cooperation among national civil protection authorities across Europe.

They state that together with Commission experts, Croatian authorities should now swiftly assess the overall damage in Sisak-Moslavina County and begin reconstruction as soon as conditions allow. MEPs encourage authorities to ensure the works comply with requirements for earthquake-resistant buildings and infrastructure, and to employ best professional practices and expertise from other member states

Finally, MEPs emphasise that recovery from severe earthquakes – such as those in Croatia – takes considerable time. This should be taken into account when revising the [European Solidarity Fund](#) (EUSF) to ensure that there is sufficient time for funds to be absorbed beyond the current application deadlines.

The resolution was adopted on Thursday, by 677 vote for, five against, and one abstention.

### **Background**

On 29 December 2020, a 6.4-magnitude earthquake struck central Croatia, killing several people and causing extensive damage to numerous homes and infrastructure around the town of Petrinja. Through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, 15 countries sent immediate assistance, including housing containers, winter tents, sleeping bags, beds, and electric heaters. Croatia had already been hit by a strong earthquake in the Zagreb area in March 2020 that caused over 11.5 billion EUR of damage. One person died and at least 27 others were injured. To help the country deal with the devastating effects of that earthquake, Parliament made 683.7 million EUR available from the European Union Solidarity Fund (EUSF).

---

## **[Article – Parliament calls for action to solve housing crisis](#)**





Lack of affordable housing is increasingly becoming a problem in the EU, with housing prices and rents steadily growing relative to incomes over the years.

On 21 January, Parliament adopted a resolution calling on EU countries to recognise adequate housing as a fundamental human right that is enforceable through legislation. Everyone should get equal access to decent, “healthy” housing, with connection to [high-quality drinking water](#), adequate sanitation, sewage and reliable energy, MEPs said.

## **Housing crisis: a problem for everyone**

The situation has especially got worse for low-income owners and private renters, but also for people with an average income are burdened by housing and maintenance costs. Especially single parents, large families and young people on their first jobs have an income that is too low to afford market rents, while too high to make them eligible for social housing.

The [coronavirus outbreak](#) has also exacerbated the housing problem, as many people need to spend the lockdown in poor standard homes. In the medium-term, the crisis is expected to further increase homelessness rates.