

How coronavirus infected sport

SUMMARY

Nearly a year after its initial outbreak, the deadly strain of the coronavirus, Covid-19, is still raging across the world and the sports ecosystem has not been spared. Whilst countries' responses have varied widely, the global response prompted the almost total shutdown of competitions at all levels, including multiple postponements of mega sports events such as the Olympic Games and the European Football Championship. Estimates show that nearly a million sports-related jobs have been impacted in the EU, not only for sports professionals but also for those in related retail and sporting services such as travel, tourism, infrastructure, transportation, catering and media broadcasting, to name but a few. Additionally, Covid-related measures are estimated to have caused the loss of some €50 million in GDP across the EU-27.

The results of a 2020 survey among European national Olympic committees show that over 93 % have had to significantly review their work-related practices, and over two thirds (67 %) reported their elite athletes were unable to use training facilities. While larger clubs in major sports are likely to have the financial resources to cope with a temporary loss of income, the same is not true for grassroots sports facilities that rely on self-employed coaches and volunteers and face a greater risk of shutting down.

Even though its role in the area of sport is limited to 'soft' policy instruments, the EU has responded promptly to limit the spread of the virus and help EU countries to withstand its social and economic impact. In addition to the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative (CRII) and the CRII+, both approved by the European Parliament and the Council of the EU in record time, the European Commission has set up a temporary framework allowing EU countries to derogate from State aid rules, and proposed a European instrument for temporary support (SURE) to help protect jobs and workers affected by the coronavirus pandemic.

To keep their players and fans engaged, traditional sports have had to adapt their models by blurring the lines between traditional sports and Esports. However, research reveals that Covid-19-related restrictions have only increased the appeal of outdoor activities and made initiatives such as the European Week of Sport more necessary than ever.



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Background

In 2018, the sports industry saw a 7 % [gain](#) globally – largely owing to mega events such as the [FIFA World Cup](#). This spurred participation in sports activities and led analysts to optimistically estimate the value of the global sports market at US\$627 billion by 2023 – up 33 % from 2018. However, nearly a year after its initial outbreak, the coronavirus (Covid-19) infection is still raging across the world's health, educational, financial, and commercial institutions, and the sports ecosystem has not been spared. With one person dying every 17 seconds, [Europe](#) accounts for some 30 % of global cases and 26 % of deaths. Whilst country responses have varied widely, the global response has prompted the almost total shutdown of competitions at all levels, including multiple postponements of mega sport events, such as the [Olympic Games](#) and the [European Football Championship](#), not to mention various competitions in sports as diverse as [tennis](#), [hockey](#) and [Formula 1](#).

The entire sports world has been impacted – from small grassroots clubs to professional teams, and from athletes and coaches to competition officials, fans and sponsors. Amongst those hardest hit are non-professional sports clubs and federations, which, owing to their non-profit status, face liquidity shortages and even bankruptcy due to the lack of revenue. Evidence of the long-term impact of Covid-19 on sport is yet to emerge. Notwithstanding, few industries have experienced such immediate impact as that seen in professional sport, in which the cancellation of a single event, competition or even a match has seemingly placed severe and urgent strain on wage payments, prize monies and the livelihoods of those concerned.

According to a recent forecast, Covid-19-related measures have had a double negative [impact](#) on EU-27 sport, translating into a 15 % loss (or €47 million) of direct sports-related GDP and a 16 % loss of sports-related jobs (or 845 000). The scale of those affected extends beyond sports professionals to also include those in related retail and sporting services such as travel, tourism, infrastructure, transportation, catering and media broadcasting, to name but a few, in which case the proportions of the losses will reach respectively €79 million in GDP and 1.2 million in jobs. Among the EU countries, the sports sectors that have a high relative importance to the national economy are estimated to suffer the greatest loss in terms of GDP and employment. This is the case in Austria (respectively 20 % and 20 %), Spain (19 %, 20 %), Cyprus (19 %, 19 %), Croatia (18 %, 16 %) and Denmark (15 %, 15 %). Those expected to be the least impacted are Greece (3 %, 4 %), Bulgaria (5 %, 6 %) and Belgium (5 %, 7 %).

As the world begins to recover from Covid-19, it will become essential to address and ensure both the safety of sporting events at all levels, and the well-being of athletes and sporting organisations. In the short term, this will include the adaptation of events to guarantee the safety of athletes, fans and staff, among others. In the medium term, in the face of an anticipated global recession, there may also be a need to introduce measures to support participation in sporting organisations, particularly for youth sports.

The importance of sport

Sport plays a vital role, not only in individual health and fitness, but also in shaping wider society. It can improve general well-being and help overcome wider societal issues such as racism, social exclusion and gender inequality, especially if accompanied by inclusion policies. Crucially, sport provides significant economic benefits across the EU and is an important tool in EU external relations. Nearly 6 million people work in [sport-related](#) jobs (roughly equivalent to 3 % of total EU employment), and sport-related goods and services amount to €280 billion (or slightly over 2 % of total EU GDP). In other words, every 47th euro and every 37th job in the EU is sports-related.

Sport can also directly and indirectly impact regional development and cohesion and can be a very valuable way of engaging with a variety of social groups. In some areas, sport and physical activity can make virtually unique [contributions](#), for instance, in getting through to marginalised and alienated groups which other schemes have failed to engage. At the same time, it can also be associated with advanced forms of economic development, making use of sports science and cutting-edge training facilities, as well as making a contribution to resolving societal challenges such as obesity-related health issues. Interestingly, large-scale sports events can help develop the tourist offer, increasing employment opportunities and lengthening the tourist season. Sports businesses are also a significant element in many local economies.

EU sport policy and its specificity

The EU first obtained a specific competence allowing it to build up and implement a coordinated sports policy through the Lisbon Treaty. However the EU can only act through 'soft' policies – such as dialogue, policy cooperation, the development of guidelines and recommendations – as opposed to using its legislative powers. With the support of the European Parliament, funding for sport was available for the first time in the form of a specific allocation in [Erasmus+](#), the EU programme for education, training, youth and sport for the 2014-2020 period. The allocation – corresponding to less than 2 % of the programme's global budget – amounts to some €266 million over the entire period and serves to fund a range of [projects](#).

The term 'specificity of sport' refers to the long-running debate about the application of key rules under EU law – such as those relevant to competition and free movement – to sports, and the existence of a 'sporting exception', notably as regards competition rules. On the one hand, there is the specificity of sporting activities and rules (including the 'rules of the game' and selection criteria for sports competitions), and on the other, there is the specificity of a sport's structure (i.e. a [monopolistic](#) pyramid structure, with a single national association per sport and per EU country, operating under the umbrella of a single European and a single global federation – see Figure 1). Importantly, the 2007 [white paper on sport](#) made it clear that the recognition of this specificity can in no way be interpreted as a blanket exemption from the application of EU law, and that assessment of the compatibility of sporting rules with EU law can only be made on a case-by-case basis.

The impact of Covid-19 on sport in the EU

The Olympic movement

There is perhaps no greater symbolic illustration of the impact of Covid-19 on sport than the decision to postpone the 2020 Tokyo Olympics for a year. Since the first edition of the modern Olympic Games in 1896, this international sports competition has only been [cancelled](#) three times: once during World War I (1916) and twice during World War II (1940, 1944). The current pandemic brought professional sports around the world to a standstill. Events at all levels have been postponed or cancelled. While it is too early to quantify the extent of the economic damage, in April 2020 the European Olympic committees unveiled the results of a [survey](#) aimed at assessing the impact of the current Covid-19 crisis on Olympic Movement stakeholders in Europe.

Forty-five of the 50 European national Olympic committees (ENOCs) took part in the survey. Of these, over 93 % have had to significantly review their work-related practices to match recommended health precautions and help reduce the spread of Covid-19. More than two thirds (67 %) reported their elite athletes were unable to use training facilities, with less than one third (29 %) being able to use national training facilities under certain circumstances, such as social distancing, limited number of athletes at a time, etc.

With the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games postponed, the immediate actions ENOCs were planning to take include re-balancing their budgets, negotiating with sponsors and suppliers, and providing athletes with the necessary support. An overwhelming percentage of ENOCs (78 %) expressed the opinion that local and national governments could help sport recover from the crisis by implementing three key measures: introducing financial assistance and tax reductions, allowing athletes to train while respecting social distancing measures, and safeguarding public health.

Support for National Olympic Committees

The European Olympic Committee has not only continued to provide [funding](#) to national Olympic committees (NOCs) through normal routes but has been able to temporarily increase and extend such payments. This has been particularly important given the postponement of the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics.

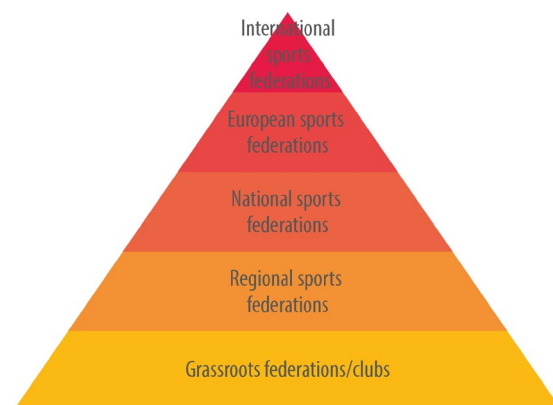
Concretely, an additional €1.1 million has been shared equally among the 50 European NOCs, thus making funding in the amount of €22 000 immediately available for each NOC and enabling them to sustain additional costs in this period, including for training of athletes, for materials and equipment, for NOC administration, and for communication and advocacy. A further €1.4 million payable on a case-by-case basis has been availed for specific requests, to support NOCs with issues that could not be covered by the initial funding.

Grassroots sport organisations

While larger clubs in major sports (such as professional football) are likely to have the financial resources to cope with a temporary loss of income, the same is not true for lower-level leagues or less popular sports whose mere existence can be threatened. The Covid-19 fallout on semi-professional and grassroots sports could be devastating.

European sport largely relies on a microcosm of small clubs and associations that play a key role in allowing citizens to take part in affordable physical activity on a daily basis. These entities are the backbone of sport in the EU. However, being non-profit by nature, they rely on self-employed coaches and volunteers, which exposes them to a [greater risk](#) of shutting down due to the crisis, and ultimately endangers the future of all grassroots sport in Europe.

Figure 1 – The pyramid structure of sport



Data source: European Commission, [White paper on sport](#), 2007.

Impact on young athletes

For children and young adults, sport is often a way to socialise and build additional skills. When school and other social interactions are inaccessible, lack of physical activity can cause younger athletes to experience isolation, loneliness and grief.

Worryingly, there is growing concern that the disruption of physical activity caused by Covid-19 and the subsequent mental health implications are fuelling behaviours that could lead to eating disorders, especially in young adults and athletes. [Experts](#) warn notably about high numbers of young athletes struggling with disordered eating – including frequent dieting and anxiety associated with specific foods or food restriction – triggered by experimenting with new ways of eating during the pandemic. Indeed, many young athletes are drawn to intermittent fasting – an eating plan that switches between fasting and eating on a regular schedule – as a way to control their weight or limit their energy intake while they are away from sport or unable to train as they did before the pandemic.

While intermittent fasting is a pattern of eating that is applied by nutritionists, it is not suitable for young athletes. Moreover, without proper guidance it could lead to eating disorders in a population already at a higher risk of being diagnosed with such issues.

While the impact of the pandemic on eating disorders in teens or young athletes has not been examined specifically, several [studies](#) have asserted that individuals with eating disorders are at significant risk of relapse and [diminished treatment access](#) during the pandemic.

Keeping sport alive

An appeal from 44 European sports stakeholders

Early on in the Covid-19 outbreak, the European Olympic Committees EU Office in collaboration with sports stakeholders involved in the [SHARE Initiative](#) – launched by the European Commission in 2018 to raise awareness on the role of sport and physical activity in the context of regional and local development – started reflecting on the situation.

Forty-four sports stakeholders, including European sports federations such as the [European Athletics Association](#), the European branch of the [International Basketball Federation](#), the [European Handball Federation](#), the [European Volleyball Confederation](#), and [Rugby Europe](#), as well as 18 national Olympic committees launched an appeal to the EU institutions to raise awareness of sports organisations' needs during the crisis.

Their [joint position paper](#) highlighted the following key issues confronting sport:

- **loss of revenue for sports organisations** due to cancelled training and competitions, and impossibility to collect various types of fees accounting for a significant part of the regular income e.g. membership, licensing, participation or subscriptions;
- **loss of revenue and opportunities for athletes** owing to cancelled competitions and the impossibility to secure funding from sponsors and public sources and to receive financial support (such as scholarships and traineeships) due to sports organisations' diminished revenue;
- **cash flow difficulties:** organisations have fixed costs which are due regardless of the loss of revenue;
- **unemployment:** layoffs of employees, athletes, coaches and other staff, especially those whose salaries depend on income sources such as those listed above;
- **issues for freelancers:** self-employed persons operating in the gig economy are neither able to provide services nor entitled to claim public support;
- **loss of volunteers:** organisations have lost a significant part of their unpaid workforce, due to lockdown measures;
- **impact on sports-related industries:** companies need to revise their short- and long-term business strategies, which in turn affects a large number of jobs.

Salary cuts in professional sport

Like any other entity, sports clubs can take advantage of short-time work schemes (see below) and reduce employees' salaries by reducing working time.

Clubs have also resorted to striking collective private salary reduction agreements with their professional players. In March 2020, the board of directors of Football Club Barcelona [announced](#) that all staff, including first-team players on its football and basketball clubs, would see salary reductions for the duration of the delayed seasons caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

Following up on this announcement, Barcelona star Lionel Messi [made public](#) the team players' decision to accept 70 % wage cuts and make other contributions to help the club's workers during Spain's state of emergency.

According to research estimates, the cost of finishing the 2019-2020 season for the top 10 European football leagues behind closed doors could have eroded [players' value](#) by 18 %, resulting in the worsening of both the overall financial situation of clubs and players' physical condition.

Implications for professional women's football

The *Fédération Internationale des Associations de Footballeurs Professionnels* (FIFPro) warned in an April [report](#) that the pandemic is likely to present an 'almost existential threat to the women's game' because of its 'less established professional leagues, low salaries, narrower scope of opportunities, uneven sponsorship deals and less corporate investment'. In addition, the lack of written contracts, the short-term duration of employment contracts, the absence of health insurance and medical coverage, as well as of basic worker protection and rights leaves many female players at great risk of losing their livelihoods.

Indeed, the report reveals that just 18 % of players are considered professionals according to the FIFA regulations, meaning that they have a written contract and earn more from their footballing activity than the expenses incurred. The remaining 82 % have amateur status.

Female players have a 12-month average length of contract and 47 % have no contract at all.

Worryingly, many professional female players worldwide are unable to make ends meet solely through their club income. Over 60 % of paid players earn less than US\$600 a month. Only a few make more than US\$4 000 a month and 37 % declare they are paid late.

National response measures: A non-exhaustive overview

Over the past months, governments, national and international sports bodies across the EU and beyond have been scrambling to limit and/or mitigate the economic impact of the pandemic through both general blanket measures and/or specific industry-related funds and grants. The aim of these initiatives has been to provide specific financial support to sports organisations, so that they can continue to offer services, pay bills and meet costs during the pandemic. Typically of a large scale, these initiatives have been financed by national governments and sports bodies.

For example, the **Irish** government has [granted](#) €70 million to support national sport federations and organisations, as well as sport clubs and grassroots organisations. A more focused [fund](#) – worth €96 million – was launched by the **Swedish** government and the Swedish Sports Confederation to relieve organisations that have lost revenue due to the restrictions on public gatherings.

Most [initiatives](#) granting exemption or postponement of tax, rent and social security obligations have been implemented by national governments and have taken on various forms to meet specific needs. For example, the **Dutch** government set up a compensatory mechanism covering rental costs for sport clubs for three months during lockdown. Similarly, the **French** government suspended the requirement for SMEs in the sports sector to pay social security contributions. Likewise, the municipality of Vilnius (**Lithuania**) exempted sports organisations from rent, land taxes and sports equipment rental costs for six months.

Changes in broadcast agreements and obligations have been yet another response. For example, in **Germany**, the Deutsche Fußball Liga reached an agreement with its broadcast partners for the payment of fees in tranches: a first instalment payable upfront and the rest due upon resumption of the competition. In **France**, an agreement was struck between the *Ligue de Football Professionnel* and broadcasters BeIN Sports and Canal+ over rights payments, with broadcasters paying reduced rates for matches that had already taken place. A state-guaranteed loan of some €224.5 million was made available to cover the shortage in broadcast revenue caused by the early termination of the 2019-2020 season.

Other initiatives made use of legislative instruments to protect organisations against unexpected costs, notably in the case of ticket reimbursements. Specific measures in **Germany, Italy and Poland** have allowed the introduction of vouchers instead of cash refunds.

An interesting scheme launched by the **Romanian** government provided support to both grassroots sports organisations and sports retail organisations. Indeed, the initiative encouraged 30 000 children to participate in sport by granting each child a €100 voucher for the purchase of sports equipment, provided the candidates kept their club membership for at least a year.

To reduce the risk of financial exposure, various governments and international sports bodies proposed advanced payments. For example, the **French** National Sports Agency brought forward the payment of public subsidies to sports associations. This helped limit the extent to which sports federations and associations were forced to take out loans, cut costs, and lay off staff. In **Spain**, the High Council for Sports advanced the payment of grants to sports federations ahead of schedule, so that money could reach organisations as quickly as possible.

Similar action was also taken across Member States. The Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) brought forward benefit payments to professional football clubs initially due upon completion of the EURO 2020 qualifier matches. Nearly €68 million thus reached 676 clubs across all of UEFA's 55 member countries, with payments ranging from €3 200 to €630 000.

In **Romania**, the government set up a scheme specifically to support freelancers and those working under 'sport activity contracts' so that they could benefit from the same provisions as those working under individual employment contracts. This provided 75 % of average gross income for many athletes, trainers, and physicians.

EU response

European Commission

In spite of its limited powers in the area of sport policy, the EU has acted promptly to limit the spread of the virus and help EU countries withstand the [social and economic impact](#) of the coronavirus pandemic.

To assist national governments in supporting their economies, the Commission has adopted a [comprehensive economic response](#), including notably the adoption of a [Temporary Framework](#) allowing them to derogate from State aid rules, now extended until summer 2021. The framework authorises four types of aid:

- **a direct grant or tax advantage**, allowing EU countries to set up grant schemes for companies for up to €800 000;
- **subsidised guarantees on bank loans**, authorising EU countries to grant State guarantees or set up guarantee schemes supporting bank loans taken out by companies;
- **subsidised interest rates**, offered by EU countries to enable public and private loans with a fixed base rate to provide more certainty for companies in the current volatile context;
- **aid to the real economy via banks**, underscoring that, if EU countries decide to channel economic aid via banks, this should take the form of direct aid to the banks' customers, not to the banks themselves.

Temporary support to mitigate unemployment risks

In addition, the Council adopted a [European instrument](#) for temporary support to mitigate unemployment risks in an emergency ([SURE](#)) in May, intended to help protect jobs and individuals from the effects of the coronavirus pandemic. Through this instrument, the EU will grant loans worth up to €100 billion in total to its Member States on favourable terms. These loans will help EU countries to cover the costs directly related to the creation or extension of the scope of national short-time work schemes and other similar measures they have put in place for the self-employed as a response to the pandemic.

Short-time work schemes in the EU

[Short-time work schemes](#) are arrangements that, under certain circumstances, allow firms experiencing economic difficulties to temporarily reduce the hours worked by their employees, who receive public income compensation for the hours not worked. Similar schemes involve income replacement for the self-employed. A majority of EU countries have such [schemes](#). However, considerable institutional variation exists in terms of coverage, types of income support, level of wage compensation, and application procedures:

- Austria, Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal and Sweden have relatively large short-time work schemes and conditions for access to them have been temporarily eased and/or broadened;
- Hungary and Latvia have relatively well-established schemes;
- Denmark, Ireland, Finland and Spain provide support under the short-time working schemes through 'partial unemployment benefits'.

Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Greece, Latvia, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia have introduced temporary emergency measures to avoid dismissals and grant support to workers and companies.

Support measures for Erasmus+ beneficiaries

For beneficiary organisations under the Erasmus+ programme, the Commission sought to provide maximum flexibility within the limits of the legal framework, applicable through the following [measures](#):

- National agencies have been authorised to invoke the force majeure clause in all cases where the application of national limitations affects the implementation of Erasmus+ and to assess the possibility of accepting additional costs justified by the Covid-19 containment measures not exceeding the total budget granted to the project.
- Deadlines for all planned activities may be postponed by up to 12 months per project.
- Several thousand ongoing Erasmus+ partnership projects have had the opportunity to reschedule activities that could not take place in spring 2020.
- Deadlines for ongoing calls were extended.
- National agencies were asked to closely follow the problems faced by participants, especially young people abroad, so that immediate and adequate support could be provided to them.

European Parliament

The [European legislator](#) has contributed to anti-pandemic efforts by approving the [Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative \(CRII\)](#) – unlocking €37 billion through the structural funds, and a complementary set of measures – [CRII+](#) – in support, inter alia, of SMEs and employment schemes.

Council of the EU

During a [videoconference](#) of 21 April 2020, EU sports ministers pointed out that every opportunity to reallocate existing and planned funds at national level should be taken. Considering the nature of the pandemic, special emphasis in the discussion was placed on ensuring the continuity of athletes' training, on preparing for and building capacity to enhance the physical activity of citizens, while at the same time ensuring their safety and preventing the spread of the coronavirus. Ministers highlighted that EU countries have already implemented various awareness-raising measures to help maintain physical activity at home or outdoors. EU Commissioner, Mariya Gabriel, also expressed readiness to support Member States' efforts in helping sport in the crisis and post-crisis recovery.

Acknowledging the unabated character of the crisis, sports ministers adopted further [conclusions](#) in June 2020, calling on EU countries to promote the various support measures implemented through EU programmes, funds and initiatives, such as the Erasmus+ programme, the European Solidarity Corps, the CRII and the CRII+. Additionally, the Member States invited the Commission to regularly inform about possibilities for flexible arrangements regarding the implementation of Erasmus+: Sport, taking into account the different national circumstances, and provide possibilities in the future annual programmes and calls for proposals to support the recovery of the sports sector. Ministers also called on the Commission to reflect on the possibility and relevance of introducing more flexibility mechanisms into future funding programmes in the field of sport, thus enabling the EU to respond promptly to the consequences of the Covid-19 crisis and other challenging situations in the future.

Finally, the conclusions encouraged the sports movement to follow the guidelines issued by competent international bodies and national health authorities to prevent the spread of Covid-19, and explore possible solutions for the update of the national sports calendars, while taking into consideration European and international calendars.

More recently, in October 2020, ministers renewed their [call](#) on EU countries to promote cross-sectoral cooperation in areas that are relevant to sport at all levels, including with the sports movement, the sport-related business sector and other relevant stakeholders, in order to effectively address the challenges facing the sports sector as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and to strengthen the position of sport in society.

The impact of Covid-19 on physical activity and well-being

The pre-pandemic levels of physical activity in the EU were worryingly low. The global outbreak of Covid-19 will arguably make this situation even worse. The results of a 2018 Eurobarometer [survey](#) on sport and physical activity showed that nearly half of respondents (46 %) never exercise or play sport (see Figure 2). Moreover, data from [research](#) based on [WHO](#) estimates revealed that a quarter of European adults and four-fifths of European adolescents are insufficiently active. Unsurprisingly, [obesity statistics](#) show that in the majority of EU countries, more than 50 % of adults and over 40 % of youth are overweight or obese.

To make things worse, efforts to curb the pandemic have resulted in closures of stadiums, pools, gyms, dance and fitness studios, parks and playgrounds. Many have therefore not been able to pursue their regular individual or group physical activities outside their homes, but instead tend to have longer screen time, irregular sleep patterns and unhealthy diets resulting in weight gain. Low-income families are especially vulnerable to the negative effects of lockdown measures, since they tend to have less than optimal accommodation, making it difficult to practice sport at home.

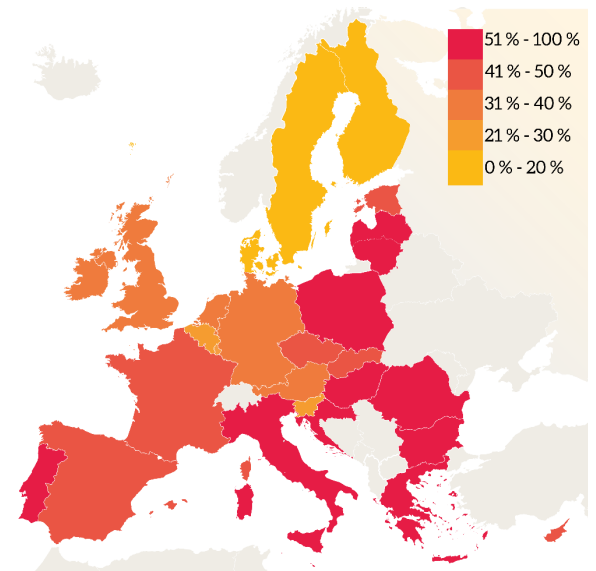
Worryingly, lack of physical activity can impact mental health by compounding stress and anxiety that many teleworkers experience in the face of isolation from regular social life. Loss of family or friends and financial difficulties can further exacerbate these effects.

However, exercising at home in a limited space and without any equipment is still possible. Fitbit, a popular exercise tracker, revealed a [massive rise](#) of non-gym exercises amid the pandemic. Similarly, data from Strava – a social network where around 70 million people globally record and share exercise sessions – show the number of people setting records for cycling or running a particular stretch was up 50 % between April and June 2020.

Many fitness studios offer reduced rate subscriptions to apps and online classes. Live fitness demonstrations are also available on social media platforms. Many of these classes do not require special equipment, and some feature everyday household objects instead of weights.

However, access to such resources is far from universal, as not everyone has access to mobile devices or even broadband internet. The digital divide across the EU has decreased substantially, but it still exists. Indeed, [broadband coverage](#) of rural areas remains challenging, as in 2018, 87 % of rural homes (compared to 97 % in general) had at least one fixed broadband technology and just over half of them (52 % vs 81 %) had access to high-speed next generation services (providing at least 30 megabits per second, which is a measure of internet bandwidth and represents the maximum speed at which one can download data from the internet onto a device).

Figure 2 – Physical inactivity in the EU



Data source: [Sport and physical activity](#), Special Eurobarometer 472, TNS opinion & social, 2018.

WHO physical activity guidelines

The World Health Organization (WHO) identifies [physical inactivity](#) as the fourth risk factor for global mortality, provoking 6 % of cases of coronary heart disease, 7 % of type 2 diabetes, 9 % of breast cancer and 10 % of colon cancer, resulting in 1 million deaths and 8.3 million disability-adjusted life years lost per year on the European continent. In 2002, the WHO [recommended](#) a minimum of 150 minutes of physical activity per week for adults and 60 minutes per day for children. Following up on its 2007 [white paper on sport](#), in 2008, the European Commission developed the [EU physical activity guidelines](#) proposing concrete policy-related actions based on the WHO recommendations. In a further effort to expand the monitoring and surveillance of physical activity in EU countries, the Commission provided an overview in 2018, through [country factsheets](#), the results of which show wide differences among Member States.

Also, [experts](#) argue that individual outdoor sports practice, which is increasingly encouraged, could eclipse participation in group sports. Indeed, [individual outdoor sports](#) have seen growing popularity in Europe, but it remains to be seen whether this upward trend will remain stable.

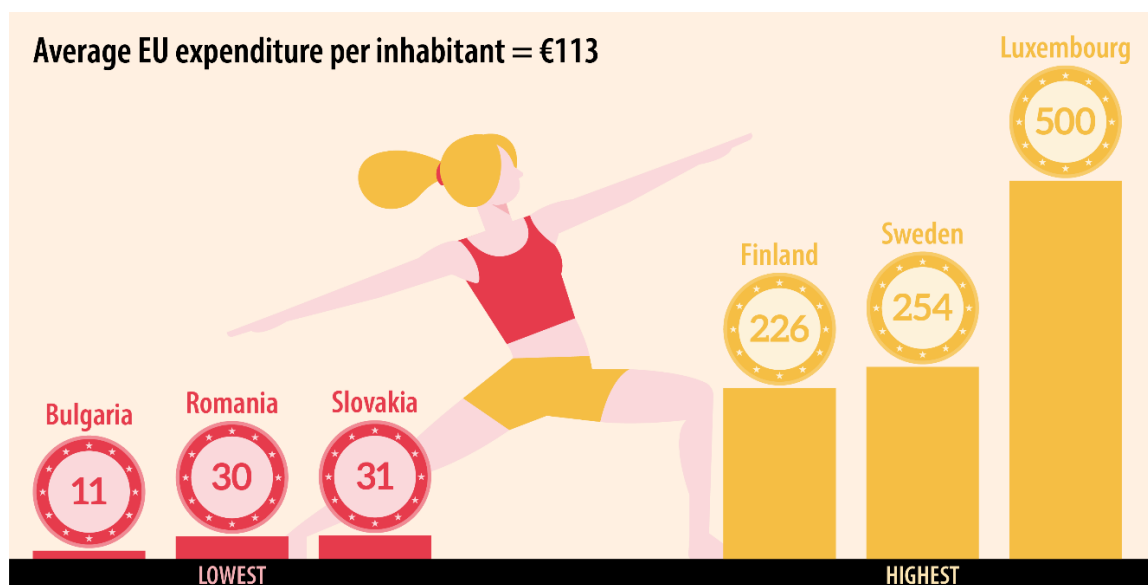
Interestingly, [research](#) undertaken during the lockdown period (April-May 2020) revealed that Covid-19 restrictions increased the appeal of outdoor activities. A survey among consumers in France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden and the UK showed that 70 % of respondents were looking forward to participating in outdoor activities after lockdown eases. In addition, 67 % declared that they missed being able to take part in activities such as hiking, climbing, cycling, snow sports and other mountain activities during lockdown, while 86 % asserted that outdoor activities were essential for people's well-being. Finally, nearly 60 % of consumers agreed that they had missed outdoor activities above all else while restrictions were in place.

National government spending on sport

In 2018, the 27 EU Member States spent collectively nearly €51 billion on recreation and sport, or €113 per inhabitant. The ratio of government recreation and sports expenditure to total expenditure varied across EU countries from 0.4 % of the total expenditure in Bulgaria, Ireland and Malta, to slightly over 2 % in Hungary.

However, these figures can be put into perspective considering the size of the population of each EU country. Thus, the relative expenditure per inhabitant was above €200 in six Member States: Luxembourg (€500 per inhabitant), Sweden (€254), Finland (€226), France (€204), the Netherlands (€202) and Denmark (€201), as shown in Figure 3. In contrast, the lowest recreation and sports expenditure per inhabitant was recorded in Bulgaria (€11), Romania (€30) and Slovakia (€31), followed by Lithuania (€35) and Croatia (€39).

Figure 3 – Government expenditure on recreation and sport, € per inhabitant, EU-27, 2018



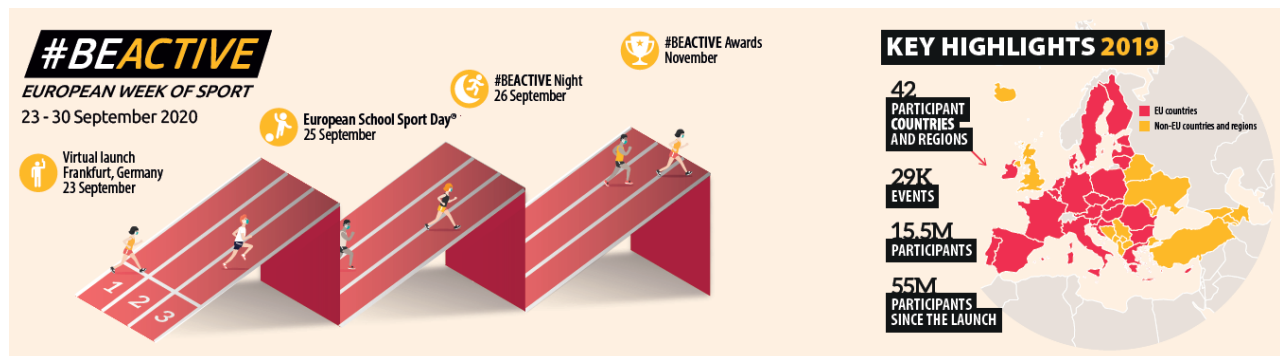
Data source: Eurostat, [How much do governments spend on recreation and sport?](#), September 2020.

The European week of sport

This year, the sixth round of the [European Week of Sport](#) (23-30 September 2020) kicked off in unusual circumstances (see Figure 4). The lockdown measures put in place to curb the coronavirus pandemic have made the initiative more necessary than ever. The **#BeActive campaign** that has accompanied the event since its launch by the European Commission in 2015 is driving its message home with a new urgency. Since mid-March, with teleworking and self-isolation becoming a daily reality for many Europeans, going to the gym – or even simply walking to the office – has turned into a distant memory. It has therefore become essential for many people to find new ways to remain physically active.

The **#BeActiveAtHome campaign** encouraged the use of social media as a way to exchange novel ideas about exercising while staying at home. By posting with the hashtag [#BeActiveAtHome](#) and mentioning [@EUSport](#) on Twitter and [@european_youth_eu](#) on Instagram, sports enthusiasts have had the opportunity to show what they are doing to stay fit. The best and funniest content has been shared on the social media accounts of the Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture.

Figure 4 – European Week of Sport: Key events and highlights



Data source: European Commission, September 2020.

Renewed opportunities for Esports

Coronavirus has forced the sports ecosystem to envisage sport differently. As the pandemic continues, traditional sports have had to swiftly adapt their models to keep players and fans engaged. This, in turn, has blurred the lines between traditional sports and Esports. Interestingly, a 2020 [study](#) revealed that over two thirds of under-35-year-olds were playing or watching gaming content during lockdown, while more than half were open to watching gaming or Esports. These results have been backed by [research](#) showing that 'watch hours' on gaming streams – such as Twitch, YouTube, Facebook and Mixer – grew from 4.8 billion in the first quarter of 2020 to 7.6 billion in the second quarter, as many countries entered Covid-19 lockdowns. According to another 2020 [study](#), total viewing hours (not just games) on the same four Esports streaming platforms increased by 99 % year-on-year. NASCAR, the American National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing, drew in more than [1.3 million viewers](#) on average per event for its series of virtual races in March and April 2020, while football, basketball and Formula 1 all saw popular events involving professional sportspeople, compete alongside non-sporting celebrities and gaming streamers. However, as Esports is not an entirely online industry, it too has been affected by considerable disruption to its physical-world tournaments and events. For instance, Epic Games did not hold a [Fortnite World Cup](#) in 2020, while planned tournaments for [League of Legends](#), [FIFA 20](#), [Apex Legends](#) and other key Esports games have been postponed or cancelled. Fan gatherings from [TwitchCon](#) to [BlizzCon](#) have also been affected. As the lockdown continued, efforts intensified to ensure some of those events could take place entirely online, which brought considerable challenges to ensure a level playing field for competitors – both in terms of the stability of their internet connection at home and measures to prevent cheating. The lessons learned during the Covid-19 crisis will no doubt help the Esports industry to run more (and smoother) online-only events, even as physical events return in the future.

Solidarity with efforts to reduce the spread of the virus and help vulnerable communities

Major sporting organisations, clubs and individual players have shown their solidarity with efforts to reduce the spread of the virus in the EU and beyond. Top-ranking [tennis players](#) have done their part raising money for charities or purchasing protective/medical equipment to support those on the frontlines. **Roger Federer** and his wife donated US\$1 million to vulnerable families in

Switzerland and the same amount to provide meals for young children and their families in Africa while schools are closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. **Rafael Nadal** and six-time NBA All-Star **Pau Gasol** launched the [#NuestraMejorVictoria](#) – Our Best Victory campaign – to encourage donations from Spanish sportspeople in the fight against Covid-19. The initiative, which forms part of the [#CruzRojaResponde](#) project, helped raise [€14 million](#) by June 2020 to assist citizens in need during the health emergency. Following a [campaign](#) by footballer **Marcus Rashford** and a petition signed by more than a million people, the government in England set up a £120 million 'Covid summer food fund' for children on free school meals. Additionally, a £170 million winter grant distributed by local authorities will help provide support for food and bills to poor families from early December. **FIFA** – the *Fédération Internationale de Football Association* – teamed up with the **WHO** and launched the 'Pass the message to kick out coronavirus' [campaign](#) led by [well-known football players](#) in 13 languages, calling on people to follow preventive measures to stop the spread of the disease. Similarly, all 12 **UEFA Champions League** clubs launched various [initiatives](#) to support fans and communities, including by raising funds to purchase life-saving medical equipment, delivering food to the elderly and vulnerable or using the power of sport to deliver vital health messages.

Champions League clubs vs Covid-19

The Spanish **FC Barcelona** offered its club facilities to be used for the growing number of Covid-19 infected patients. The club also donated 30 000 face masks through the Barça Foundation. Iconic player Lionel Messi donated €1 million to treat and contain the virus in Barcelona and his native Argentina. Former player and coach [Pep Guardiola](#) donated the same amount. Moreover, the club ceded the rights to its Camp Nou stadium to the Barça Foundation for the 2020-2021 season to raise money for research projects supporting the fight against Covid-19. **Bayern**, together with Germany's three other initial UEFA Champions League participants – **Borussia Dortmund**, **RB Leipzig** and **Bayer 04 Leverkusen** – set up a solidarity fund worth €20 million to help Bundesliga clubs struggling to cope with the economic consequences of football's shutdown. Additionally, [Borussia Dortmund](#) players gave up part of their earnings to help support the club's 850 employees and their families. With no matches or training taking place, **Manchester City** transformed its campus so that it could be used by local health authorities. The club's stadium was turned into a training facility for 350 nurses and offered a number of services for health staff including a rest, relaxation and exercise centre, while its car park served as a drive-through coronavirus testing site. Manchester City also teamed up with local rival **Manchester United** to make a substantial food bank donation. French club **Olympique Lyonnais** provided €300 000 through its foundation. A third of the donation was set aside to finance two clinical research projects carried out by the Hospices Civils de Lyon, while the remainder was dedicated to the purchase of hospital equipment and the provision of aid for the most vulnerable.

In spite of being severely hit by the [pandemic fallout](#) – with 45 % of the companies declaring a loss of turnover ranging between 50 % and 90 % – the **sporting goods industry** has mobilised and set up a series of solidarity initiatives to help communities across Europe and the world cope with the crisis. Initiatives thus range from the promotion of physical activity, to the production of protective equipment for health workers and to generous donations.

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