

Mr Dombrovskis
Member of the European Commission
Rue de la Loi 200
1049 Brussels

Brussels, 22 March 2020

Dear Vice-President Dombrovskis,

Re: COVID-19 is no justification for cash restrictions – the cash cycle must be protected

We are writing to you in relation to very concerning developments which can be observed in a number of countries concerning the fear around the use of cash, and which we think require your attention.

The fear of COVID-19 contamination through cash, coins and notes, has been unduly exacerbated by media stories reporting of an exceptional risk when handling cash. These claims are totally unsubstantiated, and WHO has even made a clarification that it did not suggest there was such a risk.

There is indeed no additional risk of contamination with cash, than there is in touching any object, whether a handrail, a ticket machine, a payment card or the buttons of a payment terminal of a card payment when entering a PIN code.

Despite this, a huge number of retailers are refusing cash payments without any reason, and doing so against the rules prevailing in relation to legal tender of cash. No business should be allowed to take advantage of the sanitary crisis at the detriment of other activities.

We also are concerned that emerging rules concerning the lockdown of activities and citizens in some countries may have an adverse impact on the circulation of cash. ESTA does not oppose actions taken for fighting the spread of the contamination within the population. ESTA however claims that, for the avoidance of doubt, cash services must be considered a part of business continuity plans. Cash professionals must be authorised to continue their activities to ensure that cash remains available to the population and that retailers can rely on efficient cash services.

In some cases, a slight increase in demand for cash has been noticed, which is, considering the nature of the crisis of the current pandemic, a logical factor, as people turn to cash when they have limited confidence in the future. This is particularly so for a vulnerable part of society which is confined at home, or quarantined itself by precaution and rely on others for their daily shopping: they have limited other resources than cash to pay their relatives and friends who help them with their food and other primary needs supply.

This calls for specific considerations that ESTA wishes to draw to your attention:

- cash professionals should be granted similar levels of protection against contamination as other activities considered as essential, and be provided with adequate personal protection equipment where needed;
- Cash transport vehicles need to be able to circulate without restrictions to ensure a smooth cash cycle throughout the territory of countries adopting travel restrictions;
- Cash processing and management companies need to be able to rely on their staff who should not be restricted to go to their place of work;
- Monetary authorities must rebut firmly and rapidly any allegations of additional risk of contamination through banknotes and coins.

Considering that telecom systems in a number of countries may be reaching their limits with increased demand, notably from teleworking, it is essential that the cash cycle is protected in case of network failure. Cash is what works when nothing else works. For a significant and particularly vulnerable part of the population, it is the only payment instrument available.

An economy where cash is not accepted is not “*an economy that works for people*”, as President von der Leyen wants the EU to be.

We hope that monetary authorities will be able to take the appropriate measures with policy makers to limit to a minimum the already very wide consequences of the sanitary crisis. Cash is an essential element of business continuity. It is important to stress the urgency of a reaction: experience in a number of countries where cash in circulation has been let to decrease too much has shown that damages on the cash cycle and the cash industry are not always reversible and can quickly come beyond repair. It is therefore urgent that the circulation and use of cash is protected during the COVID-19 crisis, regardless of spurious fears that may be circulated as an excuse to refuse it.

Yours sincerely,



Thierry Lebeaux
Secretary general*