

Remarks by President Charles Michel following the first session of the video conference of the members of the European Council



Today we focused on five critical areas in our fight against COVID-19: vaccinations; new variants; travel restrictions; vaccine certificates and international solidarity. We also discussed the lessons learned from this crisis – to strengthen our health systems and improve our EU coordination.

Vaccinations

Our top priority now is speeding up the production and delivery of vaccines, and vaccinations, across the EU. That's why we support the Commission's efforts to work with industry – to identify bottlenecks, guarantee supply chains, and scale up production. And we want more predictability and transparency – to ensure that pharmaceutical companies comply with their commitments.

Variants

We face new variants, so we need to adapt our strategy. We must continue to identify mutations as early as possible. That's why enhancing our sequencing capacity is key to these efforts. And we need to continue to invest in vaccine research to update our vaccines.

Travel Restrictions

When it comes to travel, we need to respect the common approach we agreed:
– Non-essential travel may still need to be restricted but measures should be proportionate.

– And we must ensure the flow of goods and services in the single market, by making use of the Green Lanes.

I trust the Commission to make sure that these principles are respected.

Certificates

We also discussed vaccination certificates. We agreed to continue our work on a common approach. More work needs to be done – on digitalisation and on cooperation with the World Health Organisation. But tonight we felt more and more convergence among us on this important topic. The European Council will revert to this matter.

Solidarity

This pandemic is global. We won't be safe until everyone is safe. So we reaffirmed our solidarity with third countries – through COVAX and the sharing of vaccines with our neighbourhood, and beyond. For instance, just yesterday, 600.000 doses of COVAX vaccines were sent to Ghana – the first to be shipped and delivered. With more than 2,2 billion euro already donated by the EU and Member States, we are a leading contributor to COVAX. And we

agreed to continue working on a way to share vaccines. And especially health workers should be among the first protected. Our help should go to all those in need, including in Africa, Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership and Latin America.

We also started discussions on the lessons learned from this crisis. And how to make our health systems stronger and more resilient for the future. Multilateral cooperation is key, not only to tackling COVID-19, but all future health threats. We are committed to improving global health security – through a strengthened World Health Organisation. I proposed an international treaty on pandemics. And we are getting more and more support for this idea not only in Europe, but also outside Europe.

Je voudrais adresser maintenant quelques commentaires sur la situation dans laquelle nous nous trouvons sur le terrain de la lutte contre le COVID-19.

Je pense qu'il faut tenir un langage de vérité. La situation actuelle est en effet difficile. Il y a une pression très forte dans l'ensemble de nos États membres, il y a une attente très grande de l'ensemble de nos citoyens pour pouvoir retrouver une capacité de vivre dans une société ouverte, avec davantage d'interactions et avec un impact sur le plan économique et social.

Nous le savons, les prochaines semaines vont demeurer difficiles sur le terrain de la vaccination. Mais dans le même temps je veux aussi donner un message d'espoir et un message d'optimisme parce que nous l'avons bien vu aujourd'hui dans le débat, nous avons les moyens, nous avons les ressources, nous avons les capacités pour réussir dans les prochains mois à faire en sorte que l'Union européenne joue un rôle clé, pas seulement pour l'Europe, mais aussi sur le plan international, pour garantir que l'on sorte de cette crise dans laquelle nous nous situons depuis maintenant plus d'un an.

Effectivement, nous sommes un an après la première vidéoconférence qui a été convoquée pour appréhender cette crise. Depuis un an, nous avons connu des succès. Nous avons connu aussi des difficultés. Nous avons connu aussi des moments plus difficiles, mais il est certain qu'un an plus tard, nous avons une plus grande connaissance de ce virus, des variantes, des mutations.

Un an plus tard, nous avons démarré sur le plan mondial à produire des vaccins et avec un volume de production extrêmement important sur le plan européen, qui doit s'accroître tout au long des prochains mois. C'est donc ce message à la fois de vérité, mais aussi ce message d'espoir que je veux adresser aujourd'hui.

Finally one word on Russia: we will have a strategic debate in March on our relationship with Russia. And I would like to repeat: we condemn the treatment of Alexei Navalny and we demand his immediate release. On Monday, Foreign Ministers reached a political agreement to impose restrictive measures against those responsible for his arrest and sentencing. The decision will be formalised next week, in the framework of the new EU's Global Human Rights sanctions regime.

We also strongly condemn the attack on a delegation travelling on a World

Food Programme field visit, in the Democratic Republic of Congo. We express our deepest sympathy to Italy and our condolences to the families of the victims.

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Venezuela: head of mission to the EU declared persona non grata



On the initiative of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the Council today agreed that the head of the Mission of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the European Union be declared *persona non grata*.

This is a response to the decision by the Venezuelan government to declare the head of the EU delegation to Venezuela as *persona non grata*. The EU considers this declaration as wholly unwarranted and contrary to the EU's objective of developing relations and building partnerships in third countries.

Press release – COVID-19: MEPs discuss ways to increase roll-out of vaccines with pharma CEOs



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MEPs quizzed CEOs and representatives of leading pharmaceutical companies, including AstraZeneca, Moderna, CureVac, Novavax, Pfizer and Sanofi, on how to remove obstacles to faster commercialisation, manufacturing and distribution of vaccines.

You can watch a recording of the hearing [here](#).

During the discussion, MEPs asked about global technology transfers, sharing patents, and how industry intends to update the vaccines in order to keep up with emerging variants. They also grilled CEOs on how the European Medicines Agency could speed up market approval at European level. Some MEPs asked whether an EU export ban on vaccines would help Europe compared to other countries that have introduced export bans. In their remarks, industry representatives highlighted the challenge of building production capacity for entirely new and complex products, and the international nature of supply chains.

“This was a world first: CEOs of the main vaccine manufacturers appearing before elected representatives. It’s good for transparency, and it’s good for democracy. It is crucial to regularly check accountability and commitments made. Moreover, the race to produce vaccines is intensifying and we are gearing up to use all available tools to support it. This was the point of this hearing”, said Environment, Public Health and Food Safety Chairman Pascal Canfin (Renew Europe, FR). “The European Parliament will play its role fully to win the vaccine deployment battle. The contact group put in place by the Parliament and Commission will further strengthen our role”, he added.

“Today’s challenge is about how to produce extremely complex products on a

scale that is absolutely unprecedented. This is an industrial challenge”, said Industry, Research and Energy Committee Chairman Cristian Buşoi (EPP, RO). “This hearing was an exercise in democratic accountability. We wanted to know where the production bottlenecks are and to have a clear picture about the industry’s commitments and obligations. But we also want to help the industry deliver the doses, because our priority is to get vaccination done”.

Background

Developing and distributing effective and safe vaccines against COVID-19 is the most effective response to the pandemic and is at the heart of the EU’s recovery strategy. Given the importance of increasing production and access to vaccines, this hearing aimed to establish the facts and to find solutions to improve the roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines in Europe.

Another objective was to have an open discussion with the CEOs of the pharmaceutical industry, the Commission and other stakeholders on how to overcome impediments to speedier commercialisation, manufacturing, distribution and equitable access to the COVID-19 vaccines.

Statement of the members of the European Council on COVID-19 and health, 25 February 2021



I. COVID 19

1. We are determined to continue to work together and coordinate our action to tackle the pandemic and its consequences. The epidemiological situation remains serious, and the new variants pose additional challenges. We must therefore uphold tight restrictions while stepping up efforts to accelerate the provision of vaccines.
2. For the time being, non-essential travel needs to be restricted. We welcome the adoption of the two Council recommendations on travel within, and into, the EU, according to which restrictions can be introduced in accordance with the principles of proportionality and non-discrimination and taking into account the specific situation of cross-border communities. The unhindered flow of goods and services within the Single Market must be ensured, including by making use of Green Lanes.
3. Vaccination has now begun in all our Member States and our vaccine strategy has ensured that all Member States have access to vaccines. Even so, we need to urgently accelerate the authorisation, production and distribution of vaccines, as well as vaccination. We also need to enhance our surveillance

and detection capacity in order to identify variants as early as possible so as to control their spread, as set out in the Commission Communication on the *'HERA Incubator: Anticipating together the threat of COVID-19 variants'*. We support the additional efforts by the Commission to work with industry and Member States to increase the capacity of current vaccine production as well as to adjust vaccines to the new variants as necessary. We also support the Commission's ongoing efforts to accelerate the availability of raw materials, facilitate agreements between manufacturers across supply chains, scope existing facilities so as to help production scale-up in the EU and further the research and development efforts. Companies must ensure predictability of their vaccine production and respect contractual delivery deadlines. Transparency with regard to the overall efforts should be enhanced.

4. We call for work to continue on a common approach to vaccination certificates and will come back to this issue.

5. We reaffirm our solidarity with third countries and underline our determination to step up our global response to the pandemic. We remain committed to improving access to vaccines for priority groups in our neighbourhood and beyond, based on common principles, and to supporting a global approach through the COVAX Facility. We welcome COVAX's first plans to distribute vaccines to 92 low- and middle-income countries. We commit to contributing the EU's fair share to the funding of ACT-A.

6. We will continue to keep the overall situation under close review and take action as needed.

II. HEALTH

7. Although the COVID-19 crisis is not yet over, it is time to start strengthening our future health resilience now.

8. We will work to improve EU coordination, in line with the Union competences under the Treaties, to ensure better prevention, preparedness for and response to future health emergencies. As a matter of priority, work is needed to ensure that the EU will have the means to secure enough vaccines and critical supplies for all its Member States, to support the entire process of developing safe and effective vaccines and medicines including through early investment in production capacity, and to make best use of big data and digital technologies for medical research and healthcare. Work on the Health Union proposals and on the Pharmaceutical Strategy, including as regards access to medicines across Member States, should also be taken forward.

9. We invite the Commission to present a report by June 2021 on the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic so far. The report should also address information-sharing, coordination, communication and joint public procurement, as well as how to ensure adequate production capacity in the EU and build up strategic reserves while supporting the diversification and resilience of global medical supply chains. This work should be followed up in the second semester of 2021.

10. Global multilateral cooperation is essential to address current and future health threats. We are committed to advancing global health security, including by strengthening the World Health Organization and working towards an international treaty on pandemics within its framework. In this context, we look forward to the G20 Global Health Summit in Rome.

We strongly condemn the attack on a delegation travelling on a World Food Programme field visit in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo. We express our deepest sympathy to Italy and our condolences to the families of the victims.

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President Charles Michel to visit Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine



President Michel will travel to Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine from Sunday 28 February to Wednesday 03 March.

In Chisinau, President Michel will meet with President Maia Sandu before flying to Georgia where he will meet President Salome Zourabichvili, Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili and Archil Talakvadze, the Chairperson of the Parliament of Georgia. He will also visit the administrative boundary line and meet representatives of the opposition.

In Ukraine, he will join President Zelenskyy in visiting eastern Ukraine before discussing EU-Ukraine relations in Kyiv and meeting with representatives of institutions fighting corruption.

In addition to bilateral relations and our common fight against Covid-19, the future of the Eastern Partnership will also feature high on the agenda of the visit.