

Joint Statement of the Members of the EEA Council



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The members of the EEA Council held a video conference on 28 May 2021 at the initiative of Mr Augusto Santos Silva, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Portugal.[1] The video conference was attended by Mr Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson, Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Development Cooperation of Iceland, Ms Ine Eriksen Søreide, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Norway and Ms Dominique Hasler, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Liechtenstein, as well as by representatives of the European Commission and the European External Action Service. The members of the EEA Council discussed the overall functioning of the Agreement on the European Economic Area (EEA Agreement) and held an orientation debate on Strategic Autonomy.

Following the videoconference, the members of the EEA Council adopted the following joint statement:

COVID-19

1. We acknowledge the far-reaching effects of the COVID-19 crisis and stress the need to meet this unprecedented challenge in a spirit of solidarity. We welcome the particularly close cooperation between the EU and the EEA EFTA States during the pandemic. This continues to prove essential in areas such as research, development, and procurement of vaccines, for the acquisition of medicines, medical and protective equipment, and for the ongoing response to the pandemic with exchange of data, experience and views in relevant fora. Reaffirming the central role of the EEA Agreement in closely linking our societies and economies, we stress the continued need to pursue such close cooperation and the importance of considering how to help alleviate the serious socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic through all available instruments. Ensuring the integrity of the Internal Market and the smooth functioning of the EEA Agreement remain essential priorities in this context. We welcome the participation of EEA EFTA States in the central distribution of vaccines through the EU procurement scheme and underline the importance of preserving the integrity of the Internal Market in the establishment of mechanisms for the production, supplies and deliveries of vaccines.
2. We emphasise the critical importance of a coordinated approach for the swift and effective roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines across the EEA. We note the initiative to establish a European Health Union aiming at strengthening the EU's health security response capacity and better equipping authorities at all levels to prevent and address future pandemics in a coordinated manner. We also note the launch of the EU4Health Programme, which will contribute to the availability and affordability of medicines and healthcare products.

Political dialogue

3. We recognise that the special partnership between the EU and the EEA EFTA States is the best guarantee of long-term shared prosperity and stability. It has contributed to a Europe based on peace, democracy, the rule of law and human rights. In this context, within the framework of the Political Dialogue, we held informal exchanges of views on current foreign policy matters of mutual interest. We underline the importance of continuing the practice of inviting officials from the EEA EFTA States to political dialogues held in conjunction with the EU Council working parties.

Cooperation in the EEA

4. We confirm our support for the EEA Agreement as a fundamental basis for future relations between the EU and the EEA EFTA States and stress the importance of the two-pillar structure of the Agreement. We recognise the positive contributions made by the EEA EFTA States to the decision-making process of EEA-relevant EU legislation and programmes through their participation in committees, expert groups, studies, and agencies, as well as through the submission of EEA EFTA Comments. Furthermore, we stress the positive contribution of the EFTA Surveillance Authority and of the European Commission in monitoring the compliance with the EEA Agreement in all its Member States. We underline the importance of inviting EEA EFTA Ministers to informal EU Ministerial meetings and Ministerial conferences, organised by the Presidency, relevant to EEA EFTA participation in the Internal Market and express our appreciation to the current Portuguese and incoming Slovenian Presidencies for the continuation of this practice.
5. We agree on the need to further strengthen communication efforts on the EEA Agreement and on its benefits for citizens and businesses. Emphasising that greater knowledge of the EEA Agreement throughout the EEA at all levels is in the interest of all Contracting Parties and the good functioning of the Internal Market, we urge the EU and the EEA EFTA States to ensure that information on the EEA Agreement is made readily and easily available.
6. We recognise the ongoing challenges in international trade at a time where global supply chains have been under strain due to the COVID-19 pandemic and reconfirm the commitment to open, fair and sustainable trade and rules-based trade relations.
7. Recognising the important role of parliamentary cooperation and cooperation between economic and social partners, we note the Resolution of the EEA Joint Parliamentary Committee adopted at its meeting on 28 April on the *Annual Report of the EEA Joint Committee on the Functioning of the EEA Agreement in 2020*.

Incorporation of EEA-relevant EU acts

8. Noting the Progress Report of the EEA Joint Committee, we express our appreciation for the work of the Joint Committee in ensuring the continued successful operation and good functioning of the EEA Agreement.

9. We recognise the ongoing work to reduce the number of EU acts awaiting incorporation into the EEA Agreement and that important progress had been made in 2021. These efforts are the result of the joint efforts of the EU Institutions and the EEA EFTA States. We however note that the backlog remains high and stress the need to make the necessary resources available to increase the speed and volume of incorporation of EU legal acts and thereby continue to ensure legal certainty and homogeneity in the EEA.

The withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU and the EEA Agreement

10. We welcome the dialogue between the EU and the EEA EFTA States on issues related to the implication of the UK's withdrawal from the European Union and the new relationship between the EU and the UK that are relevant for the EEA Agreement and encourage the continuation of this dialogue. In this context, we underline the importance of ensuring the continuation of a well-functioning, homogenous EEA and of preserving the integrity of the Internal Market.

The development of the Internal Market and Digital Transformation

11. We emphasise the importance of a well-functioning Internal Market, including the Digital Single Market, which will be essential to sustain economic recovery across the EEA. While it proves necessary to temporarily adapt certain rules, such as on state aid, due to the COVID-19 crisis, we underline the indivisibility of the four freedoms and the importance of common rules and equal conditions in the Internal Market making significant progress. The high average rate of youth unemployment in Europe and the prospect of its increase due to COVID-19 crisis remain an important challenge for the Internal Market.
12. We reiterate the importance of the close involvement of the EEA EFTA States in the design and development of Internal Market policies and initiatives. We encourage active cooperation on initiatives for better enforcement and implementation of Internal Market rules and welcome the EEA EFTA States' participation in the Single Market Enforcement Task Force (SMET).
13. We welcome the proposals of the European Commission for the Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act as a means to provide for a safe, fair and rules-based internal market for digital services, addressing safety concerns and illegal content online, whilst preserving the innovative potential of the digital economy. The importance of the EU and the EEA EFTA States working closely together on these issues is underlined.
14. We furthermore note the proposals for a revised Directive on Security of Network and Information Systems (NIS) and the Data Governance Act. Achieving a high common level of cybersecurity and circulation of data in line with European values across the EEA will be essential priorities for the Digital Single Market.

The European Green Deal

15. High ambitions, collective effort and urgent action are needed to speed

up the transition to a sustainable, climate neutral and environmentally friendly future. We further note the preparatory work on the important 'Fit-for-55' package which will amend several key EEA-wide policy instruments. We recognise the importance of sustainable finance including as a means of channelling private investment into green growth.

16. We express our full commitment to stepping up global efforts to tackle climate change, pursuing sustainable energy transition, and protecting the environment. We emphasise the importance of continued close cooperation between the EU and the EEA EFTA States on these issues, including on renewable energy, hydrogen and carbon capture and storage and mineralisation (CCSM). We furthermore agree that it is essential to put these issues and the loss of biodiversity at the heart of a renewed ambition to achieve sustainability. We note that cooperation towards a cleaner Europe and a toxic-free environment will continue, related to the key actions of the European Commission on the new Circular Economy Action Plan and on the Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability. We further note the European Commission Strategy on offshore renewable energy.
17. We stress the importance of the EU and the EEA EFTA States working together in decarbonising the transport sector, by speeding up the green transition in all modes of transport and developing a sustainable, intelligent, and more resilient transport industry. We welcome the European Strategy for Sustainable and Smart Mobility and the related EEA EFTA Comment, which stresses the need for innovative solutions while ensuring a level playing field for Europe with the objective to take the global lead to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from transport. In light of current circumstances, we recognise the need for increased cooperation for the recovery of the transport sector in the EEA and welcome the good cooperation on the Green Lanes network.
18. We note the European Commission Communication on the Farm to Fork Strategy for a fair, healthy, and environmentally-friendly food system. We welcome the EEA EFTA comment which stresses the importance of joining forces in promoting the global transition to sustainable food systems in international standardisation bodies and relevant multilateral fora, inter alia to promote safe food and healthy diets, reduced carbon and environmental footprints, animal welfare and the fight against antimicrobial resistance.
19. Recognising that climate change is a global problem, we reiterate our full commitment to implement the UN 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement as the essential multilateral frameworks governing global action against climate change. We underline the continued importance of increased ambition under the Paris Agreement, and that all Parties should submit enhanced National Determined Contributions as soon as possible.

The Social Dimension

20. We recognise that the EEA Agreement has an important social dimension, covering issues related to labour law, health and safety at work and gender equality. The social impact of the COVID-19 crisis was partly cushioned by unprecedented support measures, but a robust recovery would be essential to overcome further adverse developments.

21. In this context, we note the launch of the Action Plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights and the outcome of the Porto Social Summit in May. We note the new social rules in the Mobility Package to enhance traffic safety and better social rights for drivers and highlighted the need to focus further efforts on enforcement and exchange of information.

EU programmes

22. Acknowledging the contribution made by EU programmes to building a greener, more digital, and resilient Europe, we recall the significance of the participation and financial contributions of the EEA EFTA States in EEA-relevant programmes under the recent Multiannual Financial Framework for 2014-2020. We welcome the EEA EFTA States' intention to participate in several programmes foreseen under the new 2021-2027 period and underline that such participation remained based on the relevant provisions of the EEA Agreement.
23. We welcome that the foreseen participation will strengthen cooperation in areas like research and innovation, education, civil protection, health and digital matters. It is recognised that this cooperation will represent a substantial financial commitment from the EEA EFTA States towards a green, digital, inclusive, and resilient society.
24. We look forward to the incorporation of the new generation of EU programmes into the EEA Agreement and invited both sides to speedily process the relevant acts. In the meantime, we stress the importance of ensuring that EEA EFTA entities are eligible and able to participate in the preparatory stages and activities from the very start of programmes with foreseen participation of the EEA EFTA States.

Financial Mechanisms

25. We commend the positive contribution made by the EEA and Norway Financial Mechanisms in reducing social and economic disparities throughout the EEA and in supporting a free and vibrant civil society, as this contributes to a well-functioning Internal Market. We look forward to the conclusion of the review under Article 11 of Protocol 38C of the EEA Agreement in the EEA Joint Committee in June.
26. Regarding the agreements on EEA and Norwegian Financial Mechanisms for the 2014-2021 period, we welcome the conclusion of Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) with all 15 beneficiary States and the signing of most of the agreements on programmes. We recall the importance of maintaining a close cooperation between the beneficiary States and the EEA EFTA States, in the spirit of equal partnership between the Contracting Parties to the EEA Agreement.
27. We note that in the face of the COVID-19 crisis, the EEA EFTA States has, in cooperation with the beneficiary States, put in place a number of flexibilities to mitigate risks for the timely realisation of the programmes and for the achievement of best results in the implementation of the EEA and Norway Financial Mechanisms 2014-2021. Some beneficiary states consider that COVID-19 might have an impact on the achievement of some of the results.

Agricultural trade

28. We recall the commitment of the Contracting Parties in accordance with Article 19 of the EEA Agreement and call on the parties to pursue the dialogue with a view to reviewing the conditions of trade in agricultural products. We note Contracting Parties' intention of conducting a new review of the trade regime for processed agricultural products within the framework of Article 2(2) and Article 6 of Protocol 3 to the EEA Agreement, in order to further promote trade in this area.

[1] The members of the EEA Council met informally through videoconference on 25 May 2020 and on 18 November 2020.

[Visit the meeting page](#)