

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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