

Outcome of the European Council video-conference of 25 February 2021

For the tenth time since the outbreak of the coronavirus crisis, the European Council met by video-conference, however this time in two separate sessions. The first, on 25 February, dealing with the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and ways of increasing the EU's health resilience, is covered in this paper, while the second, the following morning, addressed security and defence as well as the southern neighbourhood, and is covered by a separate paper. Regarding the pandemic, EU leaders called for acceleration in the authorisation, production and distribution of vaccines, reiterated their solidarity with third countries, and acknowledged that non-essential travel still needed to be restricted while ensuring the unhindered flow of goods and services within the single market. To strengthen the EU's resilience to future health emergencies, EU leaders will seek to improve coordination to ensure better prevention, preparedness and response. However, further EU integration in health policy was excluded, with the conclusions stressing that these actions should be carried out 'in line with the Union competences under the Treaties'. EU leaders also called on the Commission to draw up a report on the lessons learned from this crisis, to take forward the work on the European health union, and underlined the need for a global approach, including an international treaty on pandemics.

Meeting format and video-conference conclusions

The [Leaders' Agenda for 2020-21](#) envisaged a physical European Council meeting in February 2021. However, due to the still serious health situation, it was replaced by video-conferences. Despite the informal nature of the meeting, the President of the European Parliament, David Sassoli, was invited to present Parliament's view, which is not the case for most video-conferences of the European Council. This was the 14th time the European Council has addressed the coronavirus crisis in a period of just under 12 months, underlining its role as [Covid-19 crisis manager](#). Nine of these exchanges took place by video-conference, but their results have taken different formats, notably, three 'President's conclusions', three 'President's remarks', one 'oral President's conclusions' and, for this meeting, two statements. While the meaning of these different labels is neither obvious nor explained, it suggests a distinction in nature to that of formal conclusions of a physical European Council meeting, which have been qualified as '[political orientations](#)'.

EU coordination efforts in response to the coronavirus pandemic

EU coordination efforts

Over the past year, the European Council has met regularly to take stock of the epidemiological situation and to coordinate efforts in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Recent challenges regarding the production and roll-out of vaccines across the EU, have led to [criticism](#) of the European Commission. On 10 February, in the European Parliament, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen [acknowledged](#) some mistakes in the handling of the vaccine acquisition process, but [remained](#) firm that ordering vaccines jointly and sharing them in a spirit of solidarity was the right decision. MEPs addressed some of the mistakes made, but also [stressed](#) that the overall strategy – to purchase vaccines jointly – was the right one. EU leaders emphasised their determination to continue working together and coordinate their actions to tackle the pandemic and its consequences, keeping the overall situation under close review.

Vaccine delivery

The European Council [agreed](#) on the need to accelerate the authorisation, production and distribution of vaccines, as well as the vaccination process. Ahead of the meeting, Charles Michel [stressed](#) that the 'main challenge is to speed up #COVID19 vaccine delivery to Member States so they can implement their vaccination campaigns'. EU leaders expressed their support for the Commission's 'on-going 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 of vaccines to protect against variants'. Prior to the meeting, Belgium, Denmark, Lithuania, Poland and Spain [called](#) for the strengthening of vaccine production in the EU. In order to boost production

capacity in Europe, the Commission has [set-up](#) a [task force](#) for industrial scale-up of Covid-19 vaccines, to facilitate a more integrated and strategic public-private partnership with industry. It will also provide operational support for addressing potential bottlenecks in production and supply of raw materials and other essential input required for vaccines manufacturing. Addressing the European Council, President Sassoli [stressed](#) 'it was forward-looking of our governments to give the Commission the mandate to procure vaccines to distribute among all 27 Member States'.

Coronavirus variants

Considering the possible resistance of future coronavirus variants to existing vaccines, EU leaders called for enhancement of the EU's surveillance and detection capacity to identify variants as early as possible. To anticipate such developments, the Commission [launched](#) a new bio-defence preparedness plan named HERA Incubator. The objective is 'to access and mobilise all means and resources necessary to prevent, mitigate and respond to the potential impact of [coronavirus] variants'. EU leaders stressed that 'companies must ensure predictability of their vaccine production and respect contractual delivery deadlines'. On 17 February, the Commission approved a second contract with the pharmaceutical company Moderna, providing an additional 300 million doses. This adds to the contracts already signed with [BioNTech/Pfizer](#), [AstraZeneca](#), [Sanofi-GSK](#), [Janssen Pharmaceutica NV](#), [Curevac](#) and [Moderna](#).

The movement of persons

Currently eight Member States (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Portugal and Spain) [have](#) set [temporary internal border controls](#) due to Covid-19. Seven of them introduced them despite the EU leaders' statement at their last [video-conference meeting](#), on 21 January 2021, that 'borders need to stay open to ensure the functioning of the single market, including the flow of essential goods and services. No indiscriminate travel bans should be imposed.' The latest European Council meeting took a more nuanced approach, acknowledging that 'for the time being, non-essential travel needs to be restricted', while stressing that 'the unhindered flow of goods and services in the single market must continue to be ensured'. It welcomed two new [Council recommendations](#) on travel within, and into, the EU, as well as the progress made on a common approach to vaccination certificates, calling for this work to continue.

Covid-19 and third countries

EU leaders [reaffirmed](#) their solidarity with third countries, and the aim of improving access to vaccines for priority groups in the neighbourhood and beyond, through [COVAX](#), a global vaccine procurement facility.

Strengthening the EU's resilience to health threats

EU leaders had a first exchange of views on ways of strengthening the EU's health resilience in the long term. The Commission was invited to present a report on the lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic ahead of the June European Council meeting, which would be followed up in the second half of 2021. Prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, health was a policy issue which received very [limited attention](#) from the European Council; and had not previously featured as a separate agenda point at a European Council meeting. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, health has become one of the main concerns for Europeans, as shown by recent Eurobarometer surveys. When asked what the EU should now prioritise in its response to the coronavirus outbreak, citizens [prioritised](#) 'developing financial means to find a treatment or vaccine'; 'establishing a strategy for facing a similar crisis in the future'; and 'developing a European health policy'. EP President Sassoli thus [underlined](#) that modifying the Treaties to incorporate clearly defined competences for the EU institutions 'can no longer be a taboo'.

European health union

EU leaders agreed 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'. Priority will be given to the development of safe and effective vaccines and medicines, early investment in production capacity and making best use of big data and digital technologies for medical research and healthcare. EU Heads of State or Government called for the work on the [European health union](#) to be taken forward.

Global multilateral cooperation on future health threats

EU leaders committed to advancing global health security, including by strengthening the World Health Organization, and supported President Michel's idea for an [international treaty on pandemics](#), which could be addressed during the 21 May 2021 [G20 Global Health Summit](#) in Rome.

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