

Outcome of the video-conference call of EU Heads of State or Government on 17 March 2020

'The EU is facing a serious and exceptional crisis, in terms of magnitude and nature'. This was the main message from the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, after EU leaders held a three-hour-long video-conference to discuss the COVID-19 outbreak. The EU Heads of State or Government followed up on the four lines of action to contain the spread of the disease agreed at their video-meeting on 10 March, and discussed in more depth the EU's external and internal border management. Charles Michel stressed that the absolute priority for the EU was to mobilise its efforts to protect the health of EU citizens and tackle the crisis, including the economic and social consequences. EU leaders will be discussing developments regularly via video-conference.

Video-conference of EU Heads of State or Government on 17 March

On 17 March, the members of the European Council held a [video-conference](#) on the measures taken to fight the COVID-19 outbreak. European leaders underlined the need for a coordinated approach, as individual Member States have unilaterally introduced a variety of measures, including the reintroduction of border checks and, in some cases, the closure of borders with other Member States.

This meeting was the second video-conference on the COVID-19 outbreak held by the members of the European Council within a week, following the [first on 10 March](#). At that meeting, the following four priorities were identified: 1) limiting the spread of the virus; 2) providing medical equipment; 3) promoting research, including the development of a vaccine; and 4) tackling the socio-economic consequences of the outbreak. Other participants in the discussion on 17 March were the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Central Bank, Christine Lagarde, the President of the Eurogroup, Mário Centeno, and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP), Josep Borrell. The President of the European Parliament, David Sassoli, was not invited to be heard by the EU Heads of State or Government at the opening of the video-conference meeting in accordance with Article 235(2) TFEU, as the meeting was considered to be an informal one.

Conclusions by the President of the European Council

Similarly, as a video-conference is not technically a formal meeting, the [conclusions](#) were those of the President of the European Council and not, as they would normally be, the conclusions of the European Council. The Heads of State or Government followed up on the four previously identified priorities, and raised a fifth issue, which is help for EU citizens stranded in third countries.

1. Limiting the spread of the virus

Following the three-hour video call, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, reported that the aim was to slow down and push back the threat of the virus. Therefore, EU leaders discussed internal and external aspects of EU border management.

Concerning the EU's internal borders, over the previous week, many Member States had already temporarily reintroduced border controls to stop the spread of the Coronavirus (COVID-19). Some were able to use border controls previously introduced for other reasons to the same effect (see Table 1).

Table 1 – EU Member States having reintroduced temporary border controls

Country	Period	Official reason	Borders
Austria	11-21 March 2020	COVID-19	Land border with Italy
	14-24 March 2020		Land borders with Switzerland and Liechtenstein
Czechia	14 March – 4 April 2020	COVID-19	Land borders with Austria and Germany, air borders
Denmark	12 November 2019 - 12 May 2020	Terrorist threats, organised criminality from Sweden	All internal borders
Estonia	17-27 March 2020	COVID-19	Land borders with Latvia, air borders, sea borders
France	31 October 2019 - 30 April 2020	Persistent terrorist threat, upcoming high profile political event in Paris, secondary movements	All internal borders
Germany	16-26 March 2020	COVID-19	Land borders with Denmark, Luxembourg, France, Switzerland and Austria
	12 November 2019 - 12 May 2020	Secondary movements, situation at the external borders	Land border with Austria
Hungary	12-22 March 2020	COVID-19	Land borders with Austria and Slovenia
Lithuania	14-24 March 2020	COVID-19	All internal borders
Poland	15-24 March 2020	COVID-19	Land borders with Czechia, Slovakia, Germany, Lithuania, sea borders, air borders
Sweden	12 November 2019 - 12 May 2020	Terrorist threats, shortcomings at the external borders	To be determined but may concern all internal borders

Source: EPRS based on information from the [European Commission](#).

The [Schengen Borders Code](#) specifies the conditions under which Member States can introduce temporary checks at their internal borders (see EPRS [Temporary border controls in the Schengen area](#)). A Member State can reintroduce exceptional border controls at all or specific parts of its internal borders if there is a serious threat to public policy or internal security, but must notify the Commission and the other Member States immediately, providing information about the reasons, scope and duration of the measures.

Given that one consequence of the border closures and renewed border controls was that many people were stranded in the European Union and were having problems getting home, Ursula von der Leyen [stressed](#) that it was 'absolutely essential to unblock the situation'. EU leaders agreed on the need to 'ensure the passage of medicines, food and goods' and to enable citizens to travel to their home countries. Adequate solutions for cross-border workers would also have to be found.

Regarding the external dimension, EU Heads of State or Government endorsed the [guidelines](#) proposed by the Commission on border management and agreed to 'reinforce the external borders by applying a coordinated temporary restriction of non-essential travel to the EU for a period of 30 days'. At its meeting on 13 March 2020, the [Justice and Home Affairs Council](#) noted that decisions taken at Member States' borders were national decisions, and the competence of the respective Member State. Consequently, all the European Council could do was offer political support to proposed measures by endorsing them. President von der Leyen [stressed](#) that it was now up to the Member States to implement those measures.

Main messages from the European Parliament President:

In a video statement released following the European Council meeting, the President of the European Parliament, David Sassoli, [stated](#) that 'Europe is correcting the selfishness and lack of coordination between national governments in the face of the COVID-19 crisis'. He added that 'finally, we are showing a real sense of solidarity: preferential lanes for the passage of medical equipment, defending the free movement of goods in the EU, and the first important economic support for our families and businesses'. He stressed that Parliament was 'ready to do its part to protect the lives and livelihoods of all our people. We will not give up living as Europeans'.

2. Providing medical equipment

EU leaders 'welcomed the decision taken by the Commission to adopt a prior authorisation for export of medical equipment'. On 14 March, the European Commission published an [implementing regulation](#) to this effect, which prohibits all exports of personal protective equipment, notably without an export authorisation. EU Heads of State or Government also backed the Commission's efforts to engage with industry, run joint public procurements to provide sufficient protective equipment, and to purchase protective equipment through the civil protection [framework](#).

3. Promoting research

EU leaders welcomed the efforts being made to support research, including the Advisory Group on COVID-19. They underlined that developing a vaccine and offering it to all those in need was very important, and that research information should be shared to fight the virus. European companies had an essential role to play in this work, and the EU leaders said that they would support them in their efforts. In response to the previous week's controversy over the issue of vaccines following [press reports](#) that the Trump administration had tried to secure exclusive access to a vaccine currently being developed by the German company CureVac, on 16 March, the Commission [offered](#) the company up to €80 million in funding to help with the vaccine's development and production.

4. Tackling socio-economic consequences

Given the speed at which the situation is evolving, it is currently hard to predict precisely the socio-economic consequences of COVID-19; a number of countries are in lockdown and many companies have had to limit their operations or even halt them completely. Moreover, it is not yet known how long it will take for the situation to get back to normal. The Heads of State or Government endorsed the Eurogroup [statement](#) of 16 March and asked finance ministers to keep monitoring the situation, while taking appropriate action without delay. EU leaders also voiced support for the [measures](#) the Commission had already taken to counter the economic impact of the coronavirus, such as adapting the State aid rules to the ongoing situation and using the flexibility offered by the stability and growth pact.

The Eurogroup held a video-conference meeting on 16 March in an inclusive format (with all EU Member States) to discuss the challenges to EU economies posed by COVID-19. In its statement, the Eurogroup welcomed the measures already taken by the Member States and the Commission, and agreed on the need for 'an immediate, ambitious and coordinated policy response'. The EU finance ministers put together [a set](#) of national and European measures, and decided on fiscal measures amounting to about 1 % of GDP and committed to liquidity facilities of at least 10 % of GDP.

On 13 March, the European Commission set out a [coordinated response](#) at EU level, envisaging: more flexible application of [EU State aid rules](#) to allow EU Member States to take measures to support businesses facing economic difficulties; the use of specific clauses in the stability and growth pact to allow for exceptional expenditures; the redirection of €1 billion from the EU budget as a guarantee for the European Investment Fund to incentivise banks to provide businesses with liquidity; and action to alleviate the impact on employment, in particular by accelerating the procedure on the proposal for the European unemployment reinsurance scheme. The Commission also announced that it would release €37 billion in liquidity under the [Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative](#), an increase from the initial planned envelope (€25 billion). On 18 March, EU ambassadors [agreed](#) the Council's position on two legislative proposals in this respect. The next step will be for Parliament to finalise its position.

5. Helping citizens stranded in third countries

In addition to the previously agreed four lines of action to contain the spread of the disease, EU leaders discussed ways of helping citizens stranded in third countries. They undertook to coordinate action between the EU's and Member States' diplomatic networks in third countries so as to ensure the orderly repatriation of EU citizens. They agreed that the [Union civil protection mechanism](#), first activated in the context of the COVID-19 crisis on 28 January 2020 at the request of [France](#), was key in enabling the swift repatriation of EU citizens. Civil protection had already been discussed by the [Justice and Home Affairs Council on 13 March](#), with specific emphasis on:

- lessons learned thus far in tackling the COVID-19 outbreak;
- possible additional preparedness and response measures for the EU civil protection mechanism;
- increased information-sharing, using the integrated political crisis response (IPCR) [toolbox](#); and,
- additional support from Member States.

The HR/VP, Josep Borrell, and the European External Action Service (EEAS) would support these coordination efforts. Following the meeting, the HR/VP [announced](#) that the EEAS would help Member States to coordinate consular assistance for the repatriation of thousands of EU citizens currently in third countries and wishing to return home. He also [stressed](#) that the forthcoming Foreign Affairs Council on 23 March in video-conference format would consider the geopolitical implications of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Next steps

The EU Heads of State or Government agreed that the Member States and institutions would follow up on the decisions made at all levels immediately. They agreed to revisit the measures being taken in the fight against the COVID-19 outbreak at another video-conference the following week. The regular European Council meeting scheduled for 26-27 March would be postponed until a later date.

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