

Outcome of the special European Council meeting, 1-2 October 2020

The European Council meeting of 1-2 October 2020 was largely dedicated to external relations. EU leaders discussed a wide range of foreign policy issues, including relations with China, Nagorno-Karabakh and the Navalny poisoning attempt. Particular attention was paid to the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean, with EU leaders extending an offer to cooperate with Turkey – provided the current path to dialogue was maintained – while envisaging all options otherwise. On Belarus, the leaders agreed on restrictive measures against officials responsible for repression and election falsification. Also on the agenda were the single market, industrial policy and digital transformation, notably in the context of EU strategic autonomy. There was also an in-depth discussion on coordination of the coronavirus pandemic response. Finally, the President presented the new Leaders' Agenda 2020-21, foreseeing the main topics for discussion up to June 2021.

1. European Council meeting: General aspects and new commitments

In accordance with Article 235(2) TFEU, the President of the European Parliament, David Sassoli, addressed the European Council at the start of its proceedings. He [referred](#) notably to three topics not formally on the European Council agenda: migration, the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and the Conference on the Future of Europe. On the first topic, he stressed that the EU 'must show the courage needed to reach agreement on a common immigration and asylum policy based on solidarity and responsibility'. On negotiations between co-legislators on the next MFF, President Sassoli stressed that the 'delays are due to a lack of counter-proposals from the Council. Parliament has made many concessions to the Council. If there is a will, a political agreement can be reached quickly'. At the opening press conference, Charles Michel, President of the European Council, had briefly [touched upon](#) the recovery fund and the MFF, stressing that it was crucial to implement EU leaders' decisions from July 2020 as soon as possible. Finally, on the planned Conference on the Future of Europe, Mr Sassoli invited EU Heads of State or Government 'to take a decision at the next European Council which enables us to start the Conference in Strasbourg as soon as possible'.

The European Council welcomed the new Prime Minister of Belgium, Alexander De Croo. Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven was unable to attend and was represented by the Finnish Prime Minister, Sanna Marrin.¹ The French President, Emmanuel Macron, had to leave the meeting after the first day and was then represented by the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel.

An important development regarding the work of the European Council was the presentation by Charles Michel of the Leaders' Agenda 2020-21. Designed as a work programme for the European Council, it outlines the main meetings of the EU Heads of State or Government up to June 2021 and the topics to be discussed (see EPRS publication [European Council Leaders' Agenda 2020-21](#)).

¹ The European Council's Rules of Procedure specify that only Members of the European Council can represent other Members of the European Council; Heads of State or Government cannot be replaced by foreign ministers, for example.

Table 1 – New European Council commitments and requests with a specific time schedule

Policy area	Action	Actor	Schedule
Coronavirus	Come back to this issue regularly	European Council	2020-21
Digital policy	Develop a digital compass, setting out the EU's digital ambitions for 2030	European Commission	March 2021
	Develop an EU-wide framework for secure public electronic identification (e-ID)	European Commission	Mid-2021
Single market, industrial policy and digital	Return to the topics	European Council	March 2021
External relations	Return to the Navalny case	European Council	15-16 October 2020
Eastern Mediterranean	Monitor developments and compliance closely and return to this issue	European Commission	December 2020

2. European Council meeting: Main agenda points

Coronavirus

The European Council held an in-depth discussion on the coordination of the response to the pandemic, and in its [conclusions](#) called on the Council and the Commission 'to further step up the overall coordination effort and the work on the development and distribution of a vaccine at the EU level'. Michel [stated](#) that Covid-19 vaccines should be considered as 'a common good'.

Main message of Parliament's President: David Sassoli [argued](#) that the coronavirus crisis had 'highlighted the need to give the EU a far greater role in the area of health, and to seek more innovative digital solutions in this area. This should translate into an increased budget for the EU4Health programme'.

Single market, industrial policy and digital transition

'Achieving strategic autonomy while preserving an open economy' was [set](#) as an objective for the Union, confirming the EU's willingness to address existing vulnerabilities, build a robust industrial base and continue to cooperate with partners. Increased convergence on the notion of 'strategic autonomy' could be [observed](#) since the coronavirus outbreak, although [sensitivities](#) may persist.

Single market and industrial policy

EU leaders stressed the need to return to a fully functional single market as soon as possible and to remove unjustified remaining barriers, with strict implementation of the single market enforcement action plan. The European Council also endorsed the Council [conclusions](#) of 21 September 2020 on a 'deepened single market for a strong recovery and a competitive, sustainable Europe'.

The European Council restated its commitment to updating the EU competition framework to meet the challenges of the twin digital and green transitions, and adapt it to the evolving global context. Possible rules on the role and responsibilities of online platforms should be explored as well as rules for all economic operators in the digital sector. The [Digital Services Act](#) expected before the end of the year will aim to define concrete measures on these issues.

Regarding trade matters, EU leaders reiterated their call for a reformed system of global economic governance based on a free trade agenda with the WTO at its core, while protecting the EU from unfair and abusive practices and ensuring reciprocity. They also called for more progress on ongoing legislative initiatives such as the [Enforcement Regulation](#) and the [International Procurement Instrument](#), while also developing [instruments](#) addressing the distortive effects of foreign subsidies.

At the same time, EU Heads of State or Government stressed the need to make European industry more sustainable, greener and more resilient so as to be able to compete in the global competition setting. To achieve this, the EU leaders called, more specifically, for action to ensure a level playing

field, the development of new industrial alliances, increased assistance to overcome market failures and enable breakthrough innovation, and EU autonomy in the space sector.

Digital policy

EU leaders stressed that the coronavirus crisis had made digital transition even more pertinent and urgent, highlighting the political will to build a truly digital single market and make the EU digitally sovereign. They agreed to earmark at least 20% of the recovery and resilience facility under the recovery package for digital transition, including for SMEs. EU leaders also took stock of recent developments and action with regard to the data economy, cloud services, 5G deployment and the building of a framework for secure, trustworthy and ethical artificial intelligence systems.

External relations

Eastern Mediterranean

Noting the EU's strategic interest in a stable and secure environment in the eastern Mediterranean, EU leaders devoted much attention to the situation in the region, bringing to the table an offer of dialogue and cooperation with Turkey. While welcoming the recent de-escalation efforts and the renewal of dialogue between Greece and Turkey, the European Council [reiterated](#) its solidarity with Greece and Cyprus, stressing that their 'sovereign rights' needed to be respected. It also called for a swift resumption of talks under the auspices of the UN for the settlement of the Cyprus issue.

When it came to relations with Turkey, provided the latter pursued dialogue, EU leaders committed to 'launch a positive political EU-Turkey agenda' focused on 'modernisation of the Customs Union', trade, and cooperation in the field of migration on the basis of the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement. The Presidents of the European Council and Commission, Charles Michel and Ursula von der Leyen, supported by the High Representative/Vice-President, Josep Borrell, were tasked with developing a proposal for a renewed EU-Turkey agenda. However, as underlined by the European Council, were the situation in the eastern Mediterranean to deteriorate again, the EU would use all available instruments, including restrictive measures (sanctions) and the reduction or interruption of economic relations and financial aid, in accordance with [Article 215 TFEU](#). EU leaders also proposed to organise a multilateral conference on the eastern Mediterranean, but its framework and timetable have still to be determined.

Turkey has increasingly been using its key geo-strategic position in an assertive way, through active involvement in conflicts in its neighbourhood. This is currently the case in [Libya](#), [Syria](#) and [Nagorno-Karabakh](#). French President Emmanuel Macron [stressed](#) that the EU needed a neighbourhood policy able to address the challenges posed by both Turkey and Russia, and that EU leaders should continue to discuss and shape the EU's strategic vision.

Main message of the Parliament's President: David Sassoli [expressed](#) the Parliament's solidarity with Greece and Cyprus and stressed that the 'EU must uphold their sovereign rights'. He underlined that a 'lasting settlement' in the eastern Mediterranean could only be reached through dialogue.

EU-China relations

The debate on Turkey overshadowed the debate on China completely, reducing it to a stock-taking exercise. EU leaders were informed of the outcome of the 14 September 2020 [quadrilateral meeting](#) with China. Conclusions were, as [confirmed](#) by Mr Michel, adopted without debate. The European Council 'welcomed' the signing of the agreement on geographical indications and reaffirmed the goal of finalising negotiations on 'an ambitious EU-China comprehensive investment agreement' by the end of 2020, provided [pending](#) issues are overcome. EU leaders called on China to engage in 'negotiations on industrial subsidies at the WTO' and to support global efforts to respond to the pandemic. When it came to the fight against climate change, an area where the EU and China can cooperate closely, EU leaders 'welcomed' China's commitment to increase its level of ambition so as to achieve climate neutrality by 2060. The conclusions stressed however that human rights abuses in China and the situation in Hong Kong remained a matter of serious concern. They also confirmed

the EU's attachment to the joint communication, 'EU-China: A Strategic Outlook', not formally [endorsed](#) by the EU leaders when first presented in [March 2019](#). Recognising this communication as a common working tool is a first significant step towards a common approach on China, as called for by several EU leaders, including Emmanuel Macron, and the Prime Minister of Estonia, [Jüri Ratas](#).

Main message of the Parliament's President: David Sassoli expressed concern on human rights abuses and called for 'a level playing-field for free and fair trade'.

Belarus

EU leaders once again [converged](#) in their assessment of the situation in Belarus and invited the Commission to prepare 'a comprehensive plan of economic support for democratic Belarus'. They gave the green light to restrictive measures against 40 individuals who have contributed to electoral fraud and post-election repression; the Council subsequently [adopted](#) the list by written procedure. The list does not yet include Alexander Lukashenko. French President Emmanuel Macron [spoke](#) of an 'assumed choice', which could open the path to mediation under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

Main message of the Parliament's President: David Sassoli urged the EU leaders to stand by EU values and to place sanctions on those responsible for electoral fraud and repression in Belarus.

Nagorno-Karabakh

EU leaders discussed the recent escalation of violence in Nagorno-Karabakh, inviting parties to cease hostilities and to work towards 'the peaceful settlement of the conflict'. They expressed their support for the OSCE Minsk Group – comprising France, Russia and the US – which earlier in the day had [called](#) on Armenia and Azerbaijan to resume negotiations 'in good faith'.

Main message of Parliament's President: David Sassoli conveyed his condolences to the families of victims and called for the cessation of hostilities.

Alexei Navalny

The European Council condemned the attempt made to assassinate Alexei Navalny, as well as the [use](#) to that end of 'a military chemical nerve agent from the "Novichok" group'. It pointed out that the use of chemical weapons constituted a breach of international law and called on Russia to cooperate fully with the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. EU leaders agreed to return to the Navalny case at their upcoming summit on 15 and 16 October.

Main message of the Parliament's President: David Sassoli called for 'impartial international investigation' into Russia's violations of the international chemical weapons regime.

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