

Outcome of the European Council meeting of 15-16 October 2020

Without reaching any new decisions, the European Council meeting of 15-16 October 2020 addressed a series of important issues, including the coronavirus pandemic, EU-United Kingdom relations and climate change. It also discussed numerous external relations issues, notably relations with Africa, the EU's southern neighbourhood, Belarus and Turkey. In the context of rising Covid-19 infections across all Member States, the European Council expressed its very serious concern about the developing pandemic situation and agreed to intensify overall coordination at EU level and between Member States. Regarding the negotiations on future EU-UK relations, EU leaders expressed their concern about the lack of progress and called on the UK to make the necessary moves. They stressed that the Withdrawal Agreement and its Protocols needed to be implemented in a full and timely manner. As regards the fight against climate change, whilst agreeing to increase the EU's ambition for the coming decade and to update its climate and energy policy framework, the discussion did not lead to any concrete results and was mainly a preparatory stage before their meeting in December. Finally, following European Parliament President David Sassoli's address reiterating Parliament's demands on the 2021-2027 long-term budget, EU leaders raised the issue, but categorically refused to re-open discussion on the package agreed in July.

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. Although negotiations on the multiannual financial framework (MFF) were not on the agenda for the European Council, he insisted on the urgency of achieving an outcome. [Recalling](#) Parliament's key demands, President Sassoli [stressed](#) that Parliament was not obstructing the negotiations, but that 'it is up to the EU leaders to unlock the negotiations on the new EU budget', thus concluding that 'the negotiating mandate issued to the German Presidency needs to be updated'. After the meeting, Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel [reported](#) on the exchange of views with President Sassoli, stressing the European Council's willingness to negotiate, indicating the existence of some leeway and underlining the need for an agreement on the MFF within the coming weeks, yet categorically refusing to reopen the package agreed in July 2020. As President-in-Office of the Council, Angela Merkel provided an overview of the progress made in implementing previous European Council conclusions.

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 | 2020-2021 |
| Climate change | Return to the topics | European Council | December 2020 |

Due to the fact that the Polish Prime Minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, was [self-isolating](#) after being in contact with a coronavirus-infected person, Poland was represented by the Prime Minister of Czechia, Andrej Babiš. For similar [reasons](#), both the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and Sanna Marin, [Prime Minister of Finland](#), had to leave the meeting early. The latter was thereafter represented by the Swedish Prime Minister, Stefan Löfven. The increasing

number of EU leaders who are unable to attend, or have to leave, European Council meetings, highlights the worsening Covid-19 situation and raises the question as to whether upcoming physical meetings will take place as planned. President Charles Michel reported on a discussion between EU leaders on this issue and [indicated](#) that decisions on the format of EU leaders' meetings would need to be taken on a case-by-case basis. The informal summit on China in Berlin, [planned](#) for November 2020, has already been [cancelled](#).

2. European Council agenda points

Coronavirus pandemic

President Charles Michel [reported](#) on a 'long and intense debate on Covid-19' between EU Heads of State or Government. As flagged by the EPRS [outlook](#), EU leaders assessed the current epidemiological situation and welcomed the progress achieved so far on overall coordination at EU level, including the recommendation on a coordinated approach to the restriction of free movement. This recommendation, [adopted](#) by the General Affairs Council on 13 October 2020, includes common criteria to collect data across the Member States so that the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) can provide a common map of Europe highlighting the degree of infection with green (low infection rate), orange (medium infection rate) or red (high infection rate) zones. Moreover EU Heads of State or Government called on the Council, the European Commission and the Member States to continue overall coordination regarding quarantine regulations, cross-border contact tracing, testing strategies, joint assessment of testing methods and temporary restrictions on non-essential travel into the EU.

The European Council also welcomed the work at EU level on the development and distribution of vaccines. It reiterated the need for a robust authorisation and monitoring process, the building of vaccination capacity in the EU, and fair and affordable access to vaccines. EU Heads of State or Government also encouraged further cooperation at global level. Chancellor Merkel [indicated](#) that EU leaders will regularly exchange information on the situation by video-conference.

EU-UK relations

Asked to put aside all mobile devices for this session, EU leaders [took stock](#) of the negotiations with the UK, noting insufficient progress on matters of importance for the EU. The Heads of State or Government called on the UK to take the necessary steps, in full respect of European Council guidelines, statements and declarations, in particular regarding the level playing field, governance and fisheries. Regarding the UK's Internal Market Bill, the European Council underlined the need for the Withdrawal Agreement and its Protocols to be implemented in a full and timely manner.

President Michel [emphasised](#) EU leaders' support for the work of EU Chief Negotiator Michel Barnier. The latter recalled the EU's determination to reach a fair deal with the UK, but not at any cost. He underlined that principles had been clear from the outset: if access to the single market were to be granted, a level playing field is an essential prerequisite. He stressed that there was 'good will' on agreeing 'fair play rules' that would open the door for UK goods to the EU's market, tariff and quota free. Regarding fisheries, Michel Barnier noted that all 27 EU Member States were united, underlining that eight countries were heavily dependent on fishing quotas in UK waters. He stressed the need for a sustainable, lasting agreement, with stable and reciprocal access to fisheries and a fair distribution of quotas. Michel Barnier acknowledged the UK's desire for regulatory divergence. However, the EU requires guarantees that this divergence would not only be reasonable, regulated, and transparent, but also embedded in a dispute-settlement system that would ensure enforcement. Should infringement occur in the area of competition policy, the EU would thus be able to take unilateral measures to avail itself of its rights. The two negotiation teams are expected to discuss the outstanding issues during the week of 19 October 2020. The European Council has called upon Member States, Union institutions and all stakeholders to accelerate work at all levels – and for all outcomes – and invited the Commission to give timely consideration to unilateral and time-limited contingency measures that are in the EU's interest.

Main message of Parliament's President: David Sassoli conveyed Parliament's support for an agreement with 'free and fair competition at its core, a long-term, balanced solution on fisheries, and a robust mechanism to ensure that the rules are observed'. Parliament urges the UK to honour its commitments with respect to the implementation of the Withdrawal Agreement and, as such, to remove the controversial provisions from the UK Internal Market Bill.

Climate change

As [announced](#) by President Michel, the European Council held an 'orientation debate' on the fight against climate change. Concrete decisions were postponed to December 2020, as a political consensus on the EU's level of ambition for 2030 is still in the making. President Michel [indicated](#) that there was 'more and more support' for an increased level of ambition for 2030. Prior to the summit, 11 Member States had [expressed](#) clear support for a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55 % by 2030, in line with the target date set in the Commission's communication on '[Stepping up Europe's 2030 climate ambition](#)'. President von der Leyen [stressed](#) that the minimum 55 % reduction target is an ambitious and achievable goal. The European Council underlined that an increase in the level of ambition for 2030 was needed to meet 'the objective of a climate-neutral EU by 2050', an objective to which all except one Member State – Poland – [committed](#) in December 2019. Nevertheless, at this meeting, EU leaders seem to have changed course: Achieving climate-neutrality by 2050 would now be a 'collective EU commitment', rather than a commitment undertaken by each Member State. This new approach would allow for all Member States to participate and their national situations to be taken into account, as it would provide them with flexibility; however, it would also lower individual levels of ambition as expressed in the nationally determined contributions (NDCs), which Member States have to submit by the end of the year to the UNFCCC. Over the medium to long term, this could hamper the EU's climate diplomacy efforts and the bloc's ability to act as a leader on climate change.

Main messages of the EP President: President Sassoli [underlined](#) that the proposed European Climate Law represents a cornerstone of the Green Deal, by making the objective of 2050 climate neutrality legally binding and by setting a higher target for greenhouse gas (GHG) emission reductions of 60 % by 2030. He expressed Parliament's attachment to this more ambitious GHG reduction target and stressed that the EU 'must act decisively now' to protect the environment and create new jobs. He also reminded EU leaders of the commitment to implement the Paris Agreement and stressed that the EU 'must act more resolutely at global level' on fighting climate change.

External relations

Relations with Africa

President Michel [spoke](#) of a 'strategic debate' on relations with Africa aimed at preparing the 'strategic meeting' with the African Union (AU) on 9 December 2020. The European Council [stressed](#) its attachment to a strengthened partnership with the AU, based on 'mutual interests and shared responsibility'. It recalled that 'Africa is a natural partner' for the EU and that it is important to further deepen cooperation 'in all fields'. It added that, in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, it was crucial to strengthen health systems in Africa, whilst developing and distributing vaccines. EU leaders expressed their commitment 'to furthering international debt relief efforts for African countries' and tasked the Council with preparing a 'common approach' by end-November 2020.

EU leaders identified five sectors as key for cooperation with Africa: 1) digital and knowledge economy; 2) renewable energy; 3) transport; 4) health; and 5) agri-food systems. In addition, they recalled the EU's commitment to human rights, non-discrimination, good governance and the rule of law. They stressed EU support for peace and security efforts undertaken by African counterparts and for economic integration at both regional and continental level. Engaging with African partners on migration, both legal and illegal, was one of the points most discussed by the EU leaders, underlining that the guiding principles for cooperation on migration should be 'solidarity, partnership and shared responsibility'.

Main messages of the EP President: President Sassoli stressed that Africa and Europe were 'united by a shared future' and should step up their cooperation on climate change, digital economy and health, and welcomed the [EU humanitarian air bridge](#) set in place following the coronavirus outbreak. He stressed that, once in force, the new post-Cotonou agreement would foster parliamentary cooperation and respond to the aspirations of citizens.

Southern neighbourhood

EU leaders marked the 25th anniversary of the [Barcelona process](#) and announced their intention to hold a 'strategic discussion' on the southern neighbourhood in December 2020. The last such discussion was scheduled in October 2015. Leaders then focused primarily on the [crises](#) in Syria and Libya, leaving consideration of the neighbourhood policy proper to the Council.

Belarus

Belarus has featured constantly on the agenda of the European Council since 19 August 2020, when EU leaders first [discussed](#) the situation in the country. EU leaders expressed solidarity with Lithuania and Poland, which are facing [retaliatory measures](#) from Belarus; condemned violence; and endorsed the Foreign Affairs Council's [conclusions](#) of 12 October 2020.

Turkey

A last-minute addition to the European Council [agenda](#), conclusions on Turkey were not initially envisaged, but were adopted at the request of Greece. EU leaders [reaffirmed](#) the position [expressed](#) earlier in the month, and deplored Turkey's renewal of [exploratory activity](#) in the eastern Mediterranean. They stressed the importance of the status of the Varosha area, reaffirmed the EU's solidarity with Greece and Cyprus, and confirmed that it remained 'seized of the matter'.

Main messages of the EP President: President Sassoli [called](#) on Member States to speak with one voice and to support German-led mediation efforts in support of the de-escalation of tensions. He called on Turkey to refrain from further provocation and to comply with international law.

Flight MH17

On several occasions ([August 2014](#), [October 2015](#), [June 2018](#), [June 2019](#)) the European Council has called on Russia to support efforts to establish the truth as regards the downing of flight MH17 and to continue negotiations with Australia and the Netherlands. It stressed that 'after more than six years since this tragic event the 298 victims and their next of kin deserve justice'. The other Russia-related item – sanctions following the attempt to poison Alexei Navalny – was not discussed, as [sanctions](#) had already been adopted by the Council prior to the European Council meeting.

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