

# Outcome of the European Council video-conference of 29 October 2020

In the context of a major spike in coronavirus infections across all EU Member States, Heads of State or Government met by video-conference on 29 October 2020 in a bid to strengthen collective EU efforts to defeat the pandemic. Placing testing, tracing and vaccines at the centre of their strategy, EU leaders stressed the urgent need to ensure the mutual recognition of rapid testing – to support the free movement of people and keep the EU's internal borders open – as key to preserving a functioning internal market. The informal format of the meeting was conducive to information exchange and coordination and did not require binding decisions. EU leaders also adopted a joint declaration condemning the recent terrorist attacks in France and expressing full solidarity with France and the French people at this difficult time. They also raised the issue of the relationship with Turkey and condemned the mounting tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean.

## Video-conference of the members of the European Council

At their video-conference meeting on 29 October 2020, focusing on the fight against the coronavirus pandemic, EU leaders considered short-term containment measures with a view to stemming the second wave of coronavirus infections (such as for example, common recognition of rapid testing). They also discussed longer-term measures, notably economic recovery and the preservation of the single market. In line with past meetings, they stressed the importance of maintaining unity and of acting in a coordinated manner.

This was the seventh meeting of the European Council to be held by video-conference since March 2020. Six of these meetings have focused on tackling the coronavirus but this was the first such meeting since the beginning of the second wave of the pandemic. The European Council President [announced](#) that this meeting was one of a series, signalling that the European Council was re-entering the active [crisis monitoring](#) mode that had shaped its agenda during the spring of 2020. In this respect, the fact that the [new Leaders' Agenda](#) presented in early October did not mention the pandemic specifically among the topics to be addressed by the EU leaders in the coming months provides confirmation of its adaptability.

As the meeting was considered to be an informal one, European Council President Charles Michel sent no formal invitation to EU leaders, and no conclusions were issued. However, prior to the meeting, Michel used a recently [introduced](#) tool – a newsletter – to communicate on the pandemic. Although primarily addressed to EU citizens, when issued just days ahead of a meeting of the Heads of State or Government, the European Council President's newsletters appear to provide him with a means to set the agenda and steer the process. In his 27 October [newsletter](#), Michel outlined most of the points that were subsequently considered by the EU leaders; namely: testing and tracing, a common approach to quarantine, and vaccine distribution. The informal nature of the meeting also meant that the President of the European Parliament, David Sassoli, was not invited to present Parliament's view.

## Coronavirus pandemic second wave: state of play in the EU

In the weeks preceding the EU leaders' meeting, a number of Member States' intensive care capacities were approaching saturation, resulting in new national measures to counter the spread of the virus. Health policy is a national competence, however, in contrast with the situation this spring, containment measures are now being introduced in a relatively coordinated manner. As [stressed](#) by President Emmanuel Macron, EU leaders spoke to one another before the video-meeting and before setting measures at national level. However, the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, [pointed](#) to the 'failure of leaders to act quickly enough to stop the second wave of infections'.

National level containment measures range from the introduction of curfews to nationwide lockdowns. Notably, they include the closure of restaurants and/or non-essential shops in several countries, including [Belgium](#), France, [Germany](#) and [the Netherlands](#). Nevertheless, [analysts](#) point to distortions in competition resulting from the closure of small shops while major supermarket chains (which sell a mix of essential and non-essential goods) and on-line platforms are able to continue with their business. While education remains a national competence, the political will to preserve the economy and the single market is visible through decisions to maintain schools open in several Member States, including France, Germany and the Netherlands. Other Member States, given their specific epidemiological situations, have chosen to prolong the autumn holiday ([Belgium](#)), opted for a 'hybrid' system where full on-line learning can be triggered at any time if needed ([Romania](#)), or chosen to temporarily close schools ([Czech Republic](#)). It remains to be seen if these measures will be sufficient to tackle the second wave or if more robust measures, including school closures, might be needed to limit the spread of the virus.

Prior to the summit, Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen made an [assessment](#) of the medical situation, stressing its gravity and urging fellow EU citizens to wear masks, observe strict hand hygiene and avoid the 'three Cs': crowds, contacts and closed spaces with poor ventilation. She underlined the risk of fatigue and called for patience and determination.

### European Council's coronavirus crisis response

The European Council entered crisis mode in March 2020. A series of crisis meetings was held by video-conference in March 2020, allowing the European Council to formulate a short-term response to the crisis (see Figure 1). By 23 April 2020, EU leaders had articulated a long-term response based on two pillars: 1) the recovery roadmap and 2) the financial package linking the Next Generation EU (NGEU) to the upcoming multiannual financial framework (MFF). As for October 2020, the European Council has once again entered crisis management monitoring mode, focusing this time on both the short- and long-term responses to the crisis. Two main messages appear to be key, namely, the need to maintain unity and the need to coordinate responses at EU and national levels.

Figure 1 – Key topics in the European Council on the coronavirus pandemic



Source: EPRS.

## Maintaining unity

In contrast to the situation in March 2020, when the European Council first worked to achieve unity and overcome Member States' individualism, this time around, EU leaders have shown a more united front in tackling both the health and the economic dimensions of the coronavirus crisis. At the press conference following the meeting, Charles Michel [stressed](#) that the EU was united in fighting the common challenge of the pandemic but also spoke of a 'severe crisis', pointing to the battle facing citizens and EU Member States currently confronted by a massive second wave of infections.

## Coordinating responses

Faced with a shortage of protective medical equipment back in spring 2020, Member States were [tempted](#) to look for individual solutions, but rapidly realised that the challenges posed by the pandemic could only be tackled through solidarity and cooperation. This led to increased coordination and cooperation efforts at EU level, for instance with the creation of the European reserve of emergency medical equipment ([rescEU stockpile](#)). It is now [expected](#) that the role of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) will be expanded. While the lockdowns of spring 2020 were largely uncoordinated, there was greater coordination on lockdown-exiting strategies, although Ursula Von der Leyen has [stressed](#) that 'measures were relaxed too soon'.

Health policy is a national prerogative, but Member States seem to have learned from the first wave that a coordinated response is key. The reflex to coordinate action has gradually gained traction since the spring, as expressed at the European Council meetings of 1-2 October, 15-16 October and 29 October, and as reflected at national level in the close bilateral and multilateral coordination of the new lockdowns. Following the recent meeting, the Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Mark Rutte, [stressed](#) that, for as much as health policy is a national competence, 'exchange of knowledge, distribution of medicines and vaccines' are areas where coordination and cooperation are needed.

## Main results of the EU leaders' video-conference

The meeting featured an exchange of views on ways to limit the spread of the virus, vaccines and economic recovery, but given its informal nature, no binding decisions were taken.

### Limiting the spread of the virus

As shown in Figure 1, limiting the spread of the virus was a central concern in the European Council discussions both on 29 October and during the first wave of the pandemic in the spring of 2020. This time, EU leaders discussed a series of measures, including data sharing and common recognition of testing and tracing, as part of their strategy to limit the spread of the virus.

### Data and knowledge sharing

The Commission President [stressed](#) the crucial importance of sharing data on the epidemic 'in real time' with the ECDC platform, not only to secure accurate situation awareness, but also to provide indicators for anticipation and coordinated responses, including the planning of patient transfers between Member States. The Commission has unblocked €220 million for the specific purpose of cross-border medical assistance, while a network of national government health advisors and EU health advisors is to be established to facilitate knowledge sharing among Member States.

### Test and trace policies

Limiting the spread of the virus relies in part on extensive testing. There was agreement on the need for common recognition of existing polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests and their results, and for validation of the new rapid antigen tests. These tests are complementary, both to ascertain the spread of the virus and to preserve the internal market. The [tracing strategy](#), meanwhile, relies on two pillars: 1) interactive apps connected through the [European Interoperability Gateway](#); and 2) a passenger locator form. Twenty-two Member States have developed tracing apps, downloaded by

50 million European citizens. The European Interoperability Gateway is designed to facilitate interoperability between the different national apps. The Commission aims to have the passenger locator form in place by the end of 2020. Nine Member States have already developed their own passenger locator forms, collecting differing data, hence the need for harmonisation.

## Vaccines

Ursula von der Leyen [stressed](#) the need for 'accuracy and speed' in the validation of vaccines. She underlined that, exceptionally, the European Medicines Agency would proceed on a 'rolling basis' to evaluate incoming data. Vaccines would be distributed fairly and simultaneously among the EU Member States, in proportion to their share of the EU's population, as soon as one or more became available. Coordination would still be needed on three points: 1) defining priority target groups (who would receive the vaccine first, in particular the elderly, the chronically ill, medical staff); 2) the logistical preparation of the vaccination campaign, tackling all aspects linked to the transport, storage and conservation of vaccines at an early stage; and 3) communication campaigns aimed at raising EU citizens' awareness of the vaccination process. In this respect, EU leaders agreed on the need to coordinate communication on future vaccination campaigns and to counter disinformation.

## Economic recovery

EU leaders stressed the importance of preserving the internal market and of enabling economic recovery, including by keeping borders open and refraining from the national reflexes that had led to the closure of borders during the spring of 2020. Furthermore, Charles Michel stressed the urgency of reaching an agreement between Council and Parliament on the financial package – NGEU and the MFF – agreed by the EU leaders in [July 2020](#).

## Other items

### Terrorist attacks in France

EU leaders adopted a [joint declaration](#) condemning the terrorist attacks recently perpetrated in France and calling on other international leaders to promote dialogue, not division. Charles Michel [expressed](#) solidarity with France and condolences for the victims' families. He emphasised that 'we stand together: the European family united for our democratic values and freedoms'. Von der Leyen stressed that Europe stood 'united and determined against fanaticism'.

### Turkey

As [confirmed by](#) Charles Michel, EU leaders discussed the relationship with Turkey, asking 'to be respected' and condemning the multiplication of provocations in the Eastern Mediterranean. He recalled the European Council's [offer](#) to Turkey proposing to work jointly on a positive agenda, and confirmed the intention of EU leaders' to return to this topic in December 2020, when, depending on developments, both a positive agenda and a less bright scenario could be examined.

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