

Outlook for the European Council meeting of 21-22 October 2021

The regular European Council meeting of 21-22 October 2021 will discuss the coronavirus pandemic, digital policy, migration, energy prices and external relations. Regarding the coronavirus pandemic, EU Heads of State or Government will focus on EU coordination, resilience and readiness in terms of health crises and the EU's future preparedness for the short and medium terms.

The discussions at the meeting on both digital policy and on migration are expected to be stock-taking exercises, assessing the implementation of previous European Council decisions and possibly adding further specifications to them. If the update of the Schengen Borders Code were to be addressed in the context of migration, this could generate a strong debate, since despite overall support for strong external EU borders, Member States have diverging views on how border protection should be assured. EU leaders could also debate energy prices at length, as the issue has become high profile in many Member States. Regarding external relations, discussions in the European Council will focus on preparations for forthcoming international events, notably the ASEM and the Eastern Partnership summits, and the COP26 climate conference. In addition, the Presidents of the European Council, Charles Michel, and the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, may brief EU Heads of State or Government on the recent EU-Ukraine Summit, held on 12 October 2021.

1. European Council agenda points

Most of the topics due to be discussed at this European Council meeting have been known for some time. Migration and energy prices have been added more recently.

The [indicative Leaders' Agenda 2021-22](#), adopted in June 2021, had already outlined a number of topics for the formal October meeting: coronavirus, digital, and preparations for the ASEM and Eastern Partnership Summits would all be on the agenda. While the European Council's President, Charles Michel, continues to use the Leaders' Agenda as a work-plan for the European Council to schedule meetings and their respective topics, he has dropped other elements of the original Leaders' Agenda [methodology](#), notably the holding of preparatory 'leaders' meetings', accompanied by 'leaders' notes', which were [designed](#) to engage 'more directly on politically sensitive issues'.

A topic that is not formally on the agenda but could be addressed by EU leaders is the recent [ruling](#) of Poland's Constitutional Tribunal, stating that some parts of the EU Treaties are incompatible with the Polish Constitution, and its possible implications for the EU's legal framework.

This will be the first [European Council meeting](#) for the new Chancellor of Austria, Alexander Schallenberg, as well as the expected last formal European Council meeting for the Swedish Prime Minister, Stefan Löfven, who has [announced](#) he will step down in early November 2021.

2. European Council meeting

Coronavirus pandemic

In a context of newly rising infection rates from the coronavirus (Delta variant) in certain central and eastern European Member States, the pandemic will be discussed by the European Council for the 19th time at this meeting. EU leaders will take stock of the Covid-19 situation across the EU and continue their discussion on future preparedness. In the coronavirus context, the European Council will also address international solidarity and global governance in the health field.

The coronavirus pandemic in Europe

EU leaders are expected to welcome the fact that the EU was able to reach its target of [fully vaccinating 70 % of adults](#) by the end of the summer and the subsequent removal of many restrictions. However, the overall rate of vaccination in the EU does hide big disparities between countries, despite vaccine doses being provided on a pro rata basis, as [agreed](#) by the European Council. Whilst in [Denmark 95.2% and in Ireland 91.5%](#) of the adult population are fully vaccinated, the share is only 23.2 % in Bulgaria and 34.1 % in Romania. This could generate discussion on differences in vaccine strategies and on the lessons to be learnt for the future.

Following the [EU leaders' discussion](#) on future preparedness at their [June 2021 meeting](#), the European Council is expected to address a number of aspects related to EU coordination, resilience and readiness in terms of health crises. EU leaders will most likely highlight successful aspects of EU coordination during the pandemic, such as vaccine procurement and the speedy introduction of the EU Digital Covid Certificate. The focus may then shift towards short- and medium-term future preparedness. In this context the European Council is expected to invite the co-legislators to conclude the [Health Union legislative package](#), call for the [Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority \(HERA\)](#) to be made operational quickly, and for work to be taken forward on the [draft Council Regulation](#) on a framework of EU-level measures in the event of a public health emergency.

The coronavirus pandemic and the rest of the world

The European Council is expected to reiterate its previous position and signal its support for international vaccine solidarity, highlighting the [donation](#) of vaccines by Member States, the [financial support](#) provided by the EU to initiatives such as [COVAX](#), the importance of vaccine production in the EU, and support for the development of [vaccine production facilities in Africa](#).

At their June 2021 meeting, EU leaders welcomed the organisation of a [special session of the World Health Assembly](#) to discuss a new international treaty on pandemics. This session is due to take place in November 2021; it is therefore expected that EU leaders will use their final meeting ahead of that special session to reiterate their support for the role of the World Health Organization in global health governance and for an [international treaty on pandemics](#).

Energy prices

The recent quadrupling of gas prices and the near doubling of [energy prices](#) led EU leaders to request an in-depth debate on energy prices, a first since [October 2014](#). A brief discussion took place during the [informal dinner of Heads of State or Government](#) held in Brdo pri Kranju, Slovenia, on 5 October 2021. In a [common statement](#), five Member States – Czechia, France, Greece, Romania and Spain – denounced the rise in prices and called for a common European approach, which should explore, inter alia, 'common guidelines on gas storage' and better correlation between 'the price paid by the consumers, and the average production cost of electricity in national production mixes'. The European Commission has presented a [communication on energy prices](#), which will provide a basis for this debate.

Digital policy

The European Council is expected once again to take stock of the EU's digital transition, and follow up on the debate held at the [25-26 March 2021](#) meeting. The regularity with which digital issues are on the agenda of European Council meetings shows not only the salience of establishing and maintaining Europe's digital sovereignty in an increasingly competitive global landscape, but also the role digitalisation plays in the recovery, growth, prosperity and competitiveness of the bloc. In this context, Heads of State or Government are likely to discuss the Commission's recently adopted Digital Compass, as well as ongoing legislative files and the EU's global aspirations in the field.

Digital Compass

The [Digital Compass](#), proposed by the Commission on 9 March 2021, aims at translating the EU's digital ambitions for 2030 into concrete targets for skills and infrastructure as well as regarding the transformation of businesses and public services. The European Council might explicitly endorse these targets during its forthcoming meeting.

Legislative priorities

The European Council is expected to take stock of the current legislative proposals and other initiatives in the pipeline. Among these files, there are in particular the [Digital Services Act \(DSA\)](#), the [Digital Markets Act \(DMA\)](#), the [Artificial Intelligence \(AI\) Act](#), and the [European Digital Identity Regulation](#), all currently under discussion between the co-legislators. As these files are crucial for the digital transformation of the economy and society, EU Heads of State or Government may encourage the co-legislators to reach agreement rapidly.

Global digital priorities

EU leaders may re-iterate their encouragement for the EU as well as the Member States to strengthen their efforts – both bilaterally and in the framework of multilateral fora – to promote EU digital standards and contribute to developing global digital norms. Work has already started with the United States (US) in the context of the EU-US Trade and Technology Council (TTC), which met on [28-29 September](#), where the EU and US reaffirmed their commitment to cooperate on key global technology issues and to base these policies on shared democratic values. Another important event was the ground-breaking global [tax deal](#) finalised in the OECD on 8 October 2021, which in the end [included](#) all EU Member States. It sets a minimum corporate tax rate of 15 % from 2023 and will ensure that multinationals, including large digital companies, are taxed where they operate and create profit; a development which was [welcomed](#) by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.

Migration

EU Heads of State or Government are expected to return to the issue of migration. As at the previous European Council meeting where migration was discussed, the debate is likely to focus solely on the external dimension of migration – and not to address the outstanding decisions on the asylum package. EU leaders will in particular assess the implementation of their conclusions of [24 June 2021](#), and notably progress on their commitment to intensify 'mutually beneficial partnerships and cooperation with countries of origin and transit'. They will also [evaluate](#) action aimed at tackling the root causes of migration, and eradicating smuggling and trafficking, as well as measures designed to reinforce border controls, address legal migration and ensure return and readmission. Likewise, the conclusions underlined the need for close cooperation with the UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration. Specific commitments were that

- the Commission and the High Representative put forward action plans for priority countries of origin and transit by the autumn of 2021;
- the Commission should use at least 10 % of the NDICI financial envelope for actions related to migration, and to report to the Council by November.

In the context of external migration, EU Heads of State or Government might also touch upon the protection of the EU's external borders, notably on the forthcoming Commission proposal for an update of the Schengen Borders Code, expected in [November 2021](#)

On that topic, on 7 October 2021, interior ministers from 12 Member States sent a [letter](#) to Margaritis Schinas, Vice-President of the European Commission, and Ylva Johansson, Commissioner for Home Affairs, asking 'to adapt the existing legal framework to the new realities'. They notably suggested that 'a physical barrier appears to be an effective border protection measure' and proposed that measures in this regard should be 'additionally and adequately funded from the EU budget as a matter of priority'.

Under the [Leaders' Agenda for 2020-21](#), the 24-25 June 2021 European Council meeting was supposed to discuss the future of Schengen, however the topic was taken off the agenda. As flagged in the [EPRS outcome briefing](#), EU leaders agreed at the informal European Council meeting of 5 October 2021 to discuss the issue of the border-free Schengen area in more detail after the European Commission has presented its proposals – due in November 2021.

External relations

EU leaders [are expected](#) to take stock of the preparations for the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and the Eastern Partnership summit. The ASEM summit, scheduled for 25-26 November 2021, is aimed at fostering political dialogue between Europe and Asia. Green recovery is likely to feature among the main topics for discussion as indicated by the recently published EU [strategy](#) for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. On 15 December 2021, the Eastern Partnership summit will focus on future cooperation priorities, drawing on the new vision for 'recovery, resilience and reform' [presented](#) by the European Commission and the High Representative, Josep Borrell, in July 2021.

EU leaders will use their October meeting to focus on climate diplomacy and prepare for the [UN Climate Change Conference](#) (COP26) to be held in Glasgow, UK, from 31 October to 12 November 2021. On 6 October 2021, the Council [set](#) its position for COP26, stressing the urgency of 'stepping up global climate action' and of addressing 'the climate emergency', whilst inviting all parties 'to come forward with ambitious Nationally Determined Contributions'. EU leaders might also take stock of the outcome of the [UN Biodiversity Conference](#) (COP15) held in Kunming, China, from 11 to 15 October 2021.

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