

Committee on Foreign Affairs
Committee on Development
Committee on Budget

The Chairs

Ref.: D(2020)10983

To:

D 304371 24.03.2020

Josep Borrell, Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

Jutta Urpilainen, Commissioner for International Partnerships

Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement

Janez Lenarčič, Commissioner for Crisis Management

Johannes Hahn, Commissioner for Budget and Administration

Dear Vice-President, dear Commissioners,

First and foremost, we would like to express our support to the Commission's efforts to address the unprecedented crisis at all levels of society caused by the spread of the coronavirus/COVID-19. This threat calls for a strong action-orientated response from the European Union, including by allocating as many resources as possible to fight COVID-19, removing all unnecessary bureaucratic red tape in order to increase freedom of action.

Secondly, we would like to emphasise the importance of showing solidarity with the affected third countries, particularly those in the EU's immediate neighbourhood. International cooperation is crucial to overcome this global crisis. The EU should take the lead in the global efforts to contain the pandemic and mitigate its impact. In that regard, we urge you to ensure that the potential effects of any measures taken by the EU and its Member States on third countries, and particularly the countries in the EU's immediate neighbourhood, are duly taken into consideration. Any measures that could negatively affect those countries' capacities to cope with the crisis and mitigate its effects must be avoided. Ultimately, such measures would not only be to the detriment of the third countries concerned, but also risk undermining the health and safety of EU citizens and the EU's standing in the world. The recently introduced mandatory authorisation procedure for the export of medical devices such as respiratory masks is a case in point. In line with the ambition of a "geopolitical Commission", we ask you to ensure that the interests of our neighbours and other third countries are taken into account to the maximum extent possible in all measures to combat the COVID-10 crisis.

Thirdly, we would also like to request information on the envisaged additional financial measures targeting the spread of COVID-19 in relation to countries in the EU's immediate

neighbourhood and other third countries, notably measures aimed at building up capacities of public health systems, mitigating the overall socio-economic impact of this crisis, any other stabilisation measures, and the provision of humanitarian aid to the affected countries and populations.

The Commission and the European External Action Service should use all available resources and look at ways to increase the impact of its response, including through a dedicated Task Force dealing with the virus. This response should be based on a strategic assessment on how to go forward and respond in an action-oriented, flexible, coordinated manner that also allows to tailor the response to specific country contexts in consultation with medical experts.

We are aware of some initiatives that have been announced already, including assistance to Western Balkans countries under the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA II), or under other Union programmes in which they participate. We also welcome the announced support to the World Health Organisation (WHO) to boost public health emergency preparedness and response work in countries with weak health systems and limited resilience, as well as the use of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism both inside the EU and in third countries (e.g., repatriation flights of EU citizens), and the repatriation of participants in the EU Aid Volunteers initiative as precautionary measure.

As Chairs of our respective committees, we support the initiative to extend the application of the European Union Solidarity Fund to major health emergencies; nevertheless, we are convinced that its application should not be limited to the countries negotiating EU accession, but should be extended further. Our priority areas of action are first and foremost our immediate neighbourhood: all the beneficiaries of IPA funds and the countries benefitting from European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) funding. This is the moment to step up our solidarity and to help contain and mitigate the impact of COVID-19 at the doorstep of the EU.

The further mobilisation of these and other instruments, such as the Humanitarian Aid instrument for life-saving assistance, the ENI, the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) for adopting rapid response measures, or the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI) and European Development Fund (EDF) to support developing countries would be welcome. Particular attention should be paid to the provision of essential support to vulnerable groups and those in precarious situations, notably populations already dependent on humanitarian aid, or without the necessary access to healthcare systems, such as displaced and migrant populations in regions adjacent to Europe and beyond to the extent possible..

In addition, we request that any new measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic be financed primarily, until its exhaustion, from the margin of Heading 4 rather than re-directing existing funds. This new challenge requires new resources, in the form of fresh and unallocated funds, so as not to affect the EU's capacity to support partner countries in other key areas, such as poverty reduction and the strengthening of democratic institutions.

As the EU's budgetary authority and co-legislator, we request that the Commission provides us with a comprehensive overview of all measures already adopted, or being planned, in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic in third countries under the existing external financing

instruments or other Union programmes, as envisaged by the relevant legislation. We request also that this information is provided in writing, and it is regularly updated to take into account the rapidly changing situation. In particular, we would like to ask you to inform us at an early stage about any planned financial measures requiring the EP's approval.

Yours sincerely,



David McALLISTER

Tomas TOBÉ

Johan VAN OVERTVELDT

Chair of the Committee
on Foreign Affairs

Chair of the Committee
on Development

Chair of the Committee
on Budgets

Copy: Younous OMARJEE, Chair of the Committee on Regional Development