

1ST SESSION OF VISIOCONFERENCE OF THE MEMBERS OF EUROPEAN COUNCIL 25-26 FEB 21

FULL REMARKS BY PDT CHARLES MICHEL

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USPA NEWS - Charles Michel, President of the European Council, held a visioconference of the members, at the end of the 1st day of the 25-26th February Extraordinary European Council, on 25 February. We publish his full statement : « Today we focused on five critical areas in our fight against COVID-19: vaccinations; new variants; travel restrictions; vaccine certificates and international solidarity. We also discussed the lessons learned from this crisis “” to strengthen our health systems and improve our EU coordination. » Charles Michel said as an introduction of his statement, as he then unveiled the European Union's strategy over the vaccination to protect against the COVID-19, and how to tackle the variant" issue, among the different strains of the COVID-19.

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VACCINATIONS : Our top priority now is speeding up the production and delivery of vaccines, and vaccinations, across the EU. That's why we support the Commission's efforts to work with industry “” to identify bottlenecks, guarantee supply chains, and scale up production. And we want more predictability and transparency “” to ensure that pharmaceutical companies comply with their commitments.

VARIANTS-----

We face new variants, so we need to adapt our strategy. We must continue to identify mutations as early as possible. That's why enhancing our sequencing capacity is key to these efforts. And we need to continue to invest in vaccine research to update our vaccines.

TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS-----

When it comes to travel, we need to respect the common approach we agreed:-----

- Non-essential travel may still need to be restricted but measures should be proportionate.
 - And we must ensure the flow of goods and services in the single market, by making use of the Green Lanes.
- I trust the Commission to make sure that these principles are respected.

CERTIFICATES-----

We also discussed vaccination certificates. We agreed to continue our work on a common approach. More work needs to be done - on digitalisation and on cooperation with the World Health Organisation. But tonight we felt more and more convergence among us on this important topic. The European Council will revert to this matter.

SOLIDARITY-----

This pandemic is global. We won't be safe until everyone is safe. So we reaffirmed our solidarity with third countries “” through COVAX and the sharing of vaccines with our neighbourhood, and beyond. For instance, just yesterday, 600.000 doses of COVAX vaccines were sent to Ghana “” the first to be shipped and delivered. With more than 2,2 billion euro already donated by the EU and Member States, we are a leading contributor to COVAX. And we agreed to continue working on a way to share vaccines. And especially health workers should be among the first protected. Our help should go to all those in need, including in Africa, Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership and Latin America.-----

We also started discussions on the lessons learned from this crisis. And how to make our health systems stronger and more resilient for the future. Multilateral cooperation is key, not only to tackling COVID-19, but all future health threats. We are committed to improving global health security “” through a strengthened World Health Organisation. I proposed an international treaty on pandemics. And we are getting more and more support for this idea not only in Europe, but also outside Europe.-----

(In French) I would now like to make a few comments on the situation in which we find ourselves in the fight against COVID-19.-----

I think we have to use a language of truth. The current situation is indeed difficult. There is very strong pressure in all of our Member States, there is a very great expectation from all of our citizens to be able to regain the capacity to live in an open society, with more interactions and with a economic and social impact.-----

We know that the next few weeks will remain difficult in the field of vaccination. But at the same time I also want to give a message of hope and a message of optimism because we have seen it clearly today in the debate, we have the means, we have the resources, we

have the capacities to succeed in the coming months in ensuring that the European Union plays a key role, not only for Europe, but also internationally, to ensure that we emerge from this crisis in which we have now found ourselves more than a year.

Indeed, we are a year after the first videoconference that was called to understand this crisis. Over the past year, we have had success. We have also experienced difficulties. We have also known more difficult times, but it is certain that a year later, we have a greater knowledge of this virus, of the variants, of the mutations. A year later, we started producing vaccines globally and with an extremely large production volume at European level, which should increase over the coming months. It is therefore this message both of truth, but also this message of hope that I want to send today.-----

Finally one word on Russia: we will have a strategic debate in March on our relationship with Russia. And I would like to repeat: we condemn the treatment of Alexei Navalny and we demand his immediate release. On Monday, Foreign Ministers reached a political agreement to impose restrictive measures against those responsible for his arrest and sentencing. The decision will be formalised next week, in the framework of the new EU's Global Human Rights sanctions regime.

We also strongly condemn the attack on a delegation travelling on a World Food Programme field visit, in the Democratic Republic of Congo. We express our deepest sympathy to Italy and our condolences to the families of the victims. » Charles Michel, President of the European Council concluded (Source: European Council)

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