
Europe's choice of solidarity and cohesion: "We're all on the same boat"

"We are in the same boat": this time these words were not spoken by Pope Francis but by **Charles Michel**, President of the European Council, in the closing remarks of the videoconference of 27 EU leaders. Michel drew inspiration from the Pope's words during last March's lockdown not to invoke other widespread closures - currently kept at bay - but to invite European countries and all citizens to stand together in the face of a "severe crisis" given that "our hospitals and health workers are again under pressure." Michel uses military vocabulary as he speaks of the "battle against the coronavirus." **Overall agreement.** In a very collaborative atmosphere, the Heads of State and Government, convened in an urgent and extraordinary videoconference, agreed on the whole package proposed on October 28th by the EU Commission: *Coordinated response, testing, tracing, vaccines, preventive measures, movement of goods, restriction on non-essential travel, research and funding for the health crisis*. In addition, solidarity and increase cross-border patient care where ICU capacity is lacking. Last but not least: accelerate the Recovery Plan to mitigate the fallout from the economic recession affecting workers and families. **Take care of ourselves and of each other.** "The key political message I want to send is this: we are united, because we are in the same boat. It's a tough fight. It's a major crisis," said Charles Michel at a press conference at the end of the summit. The tone is serious, that of the difficult moments, since "the numbers are increasing everywhere in Europe. Our hospitals and health workers are again under pressure" and that's why "many leaders have announced lockdowns and restrictions. In such hard times, cohesion and solidarity matter more than ever. We call on all Europeans to take care of themselves and of each other." **Healthcare and Recovery Fund.** The meeting, that opened with a message of solidarity to France for the attack in Nice, focused on testing and tracing, "essential to limit the spread of the virus." Emphasis was placed on a "common approach to mutual recognition of test results, dissemination and use of rapid tests. This would reduce the negative impact on free movement and allow the proper functioning of the Single Market which must absolutely be safeguarded." The President of the European Council clarified: "We also had the opportunity to tackle an important topic, the economic recovery. We hope that it will be possible in the very short term to decide on the implementation of the package that we agreed in July." *At the moment a deadlock is being recorded in the negotiations between the Council and the Euro-parliament, that together form EU budgetary authority.* MEPs are asking for more funds, Member States are reluctant to loosen purse strings. But the Recovery Fund requires a preliminary agreement on the multi-annual budget 2021-2027: any hesitation risks delaying the delivery of funds to the countries in greatest need, primarily Italy.

Ursula von der Leyen commented on the outcome of the online meeting. “Numbers of cases are rising, numbers of hospitalisations are rising, numbers of deaths are rising – not as fast fortunately, because we understand better today how to treat COVID-19-patients and how to deal with the disease. But the spread of the virus will overwhelm our healthcare systems if we do not act urgently. And it is important to act coherently across the European Union”, said the President of the European Commission. Europe takes on the countenance of solidarity, maybe because there is no other option, perhaps the pandemic succeeded where the financial crisis of 2008 and the migratory crisis (evidenced by the tragic events in Nice) had failed. Europe is closing ranks. **Exchange of information and scientific knowledge.** President Von der Leyen made five proposals to EU-27 leaders to be put into effect. The first concerns data sharing: “We have to share comprehensive and accurate data in real time. This is of utmost importance and it is in everyone's interest, because it helps us to know what is going on, to act coherently, to know better about the actual situation. And it helps us to coordinate.” For example, Von der Leyen said, *“if we have more data sharing on ICU capacity and where capacity is lacking, we can increase the cross-border patient care and it can be organised early enough.”* The Commission is thus making EUR 220 million available “to finance a safe cross-border transfer of patients where it is needed.” The second topic: “We will launch a platform to bring together the specialists that are advising each national government, and the experts that are advising the European Union. It were national science advisors who asked us to do this in order to share best practice and to align science advice to governments across the Union. We are learning by the day, and also science is learning how to deal with this disease. And therefore, this exchange of scientific knowledge on the highest level is of utmost importance.”



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. The third topic: testing. Keeping the virus in check requires massive testing with quick validation at EU level of the rapid antigen tests. The fourth topic is tracing, which goes hand-in-hand with testing. The Commission created a European gateway for interoperability between the Member States, with three apps connected since Monday, while “during the months of November, 19 other ones will join this European gateway.” At the moment, we have approximately 50 million download concerning smartphone holders, but for the experts this is not enough. Finally, the fifth point “indeed is vaccines and vaccination” with three priorities: ensuring validation of vaccines speedily; ensuring the fair distribution of vaccines to Member States (based on the national share of EU population) and ensuring that the whole infrastructure for vaccination is ready. **“We will overcome the virus.”** To conclude, with a “touch of humanity”, Von der Leyen declared: “I understand how tired and worried everyone is. We are all wondering when we will come out of this crisis. But now is the time for patience, for determination and for discipline from all of us. From governments right down to each of us individually. All the public policies I have described are important. But the most important thing is to adopt and maintain the right safety habits for ourselves, for our loved-ones, for our friends, and for our colleagues. Wear a mask, avoid crowds, avoid close contacts, and avoid closed spaces with poor ventilation – that is key. Simply doing this will enormously help in our efforts. And that way, all together, we will overcome the virus.”

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