Brussels, 26 February 2021
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Statement of the Members of the European Council

I. COVID-19

1. We are determined to continue to work together and coordinate our action to tackle the pandemic and its consequences. The epidemiological situation remains serious, and the new variants pose additional challenges. We must therefore uphold tight restrictions while stepping up efforts to accelerate the provision of vaccines.

2. For the time being, non-essential travel needs to be restricted. We welcome the adoption of the two Council recommendations on travel within, and into, the EU, according to which restrictions can be introduced in accordance with the principles of proportionality and non-discrimination and taking into account the specific situation of cross-border communities. The unhindered flow of goods and services within the Single Market must be ensured, including by making use of Green Lanes.

3. Vaccination has now begun in all our Member States and our vaccine strategy has ensured that all Member States have access to vaccines. Even so, we need to urgently accelerate the authorisation, production and distribution of vaccines, as well as vaccination. We also need to enhance our surveillance and detection capacity in order to identify variants as early as possible so as to control their spread, as set out in the Commission Communication on the '*HERA Incubator: Anticipating together the threat of COVID-19 variants'*. We support the additional efforts by the Commission to work with industry and Member States to increase the capacity of current vaccine production as well as to adjust vaccines to the new variants as necessary. We also support the Commission's ongoing efforts to accelerate the availability of raw materials, facilitate agreements between manufacturers across supply chains, scope existing facilities so as to help production scale-up in the EU and further the research and development efforts. Companies must ensure predictability of their vaccine production and respect contractual delivery deadlines. Transparency with regard to the overall efforts should be enhanced.

4. We call for work to continue on a common approach to vaccination certificates and will come back to this issue.

5. We reaffirm our solidarity with third countries and underline our determination to step up our global response to the pandemic. We remain committed to improving access to vaccines for priority groups in our neighbourhood and beyond, based on common principles, and to supporting a global approach through the COVAX Facility. We welcome COVAX's first plans to distribute vaccines to 92 low- and middle-income countries. We commit to contributing the EU's fair share to the funding of ACT-A.

6. We will continue to keep the overall situation under close review and take action as needed.

II. HEALTH

7. Although the COVID-19 crisis is not yet over, it is time to start strengthening our future health resilience now.

8. We will work to improve EU coordination, in line with the Union competences under the Treaties, to ensure better prevention, preparedness for and response to future health emergencies. As a matter of priority, work is needed to ensure that the EU will have the means to secure enough vaccines and critical supplies for all its Member States, to support the entire process of developing safe and effective vaccines and medicines including through early investment in production capacity, and to make best use of big data and digital technologies for medical research and healthcare. Work on the Health Union proposals and on the Pharmaceutical Strategy, including as regards access to medicines across Member States, should also be taken forward.

9. We invite the Commission to present a report by June 2021 on the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic so far. The report should also address information-sharing, coordination, communication and joint public procurement, as well as how to ensure adequate production capacity in the EU and build up strategic reserves while supporting the diversification and resilience of global medical supply chains. This work should be followed up in the second semester of 2021.

10. Global multilateral cooperation is essential to address current and future health threats. We are committed to advancing global health security, including by strengthening the World Health Organization and working towards an international treaty on pandemics within its framework. In this context, we look forward to the G20 Global Health Summit in Rome.

III. SECURITY AND DEFENCE

11. We remain committed to implementing the Strategic Agenda 2019-2024 by pursuing a more strategic course of action and increasing the EU's capacity to act autonomously. Specifically as regards security and defence, we want to promote the EU's interests and values as well as its resilience and preparedness to effectively tackle all security threats and challenges. We reaffirm that, in the face of increased global instability, the EU needs to take more responsibility for its security.

12. We are committed to cooperating closely with NATO, in full respect of the principles set out in the Treaties and those agreed by the European Council, and to strengthening our partnerships with the UN and key regional partners. We look forward to cooperating with the new United States administration on a strong and ambitious transatlantic agenda that includes a close dialogue on security and defence. This global cooperation will benefit from a stronger EU in the field of security and defence.

13. Significant steps have been taken to enhance the EU's security and defence policies, tools and instruments. With a view to further deepening security and defence cooperation amongst Member States, increasing defence investment and enhancing civilian and military capability development and operational readiness within the Union, we are committed to:

    - enhancing the Union's civil and military operational engagement, including through improved force generation, more efficient EU planning and command and a robust implementation of the European Peace Facility, which should be swiftly operationalised;

- encouraging Member States to make better use of the collaborative opportunities identified in the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) and full use of the Permanent Structured Co-operation (PESCO) to enhance investment, readiness and collaborative capability development;

- strengthening Europe's defence technological and industrial base, inter alia through the swift adoption, entry into force and operationalisation of the European Defence Fund, and by fostering synergies between civil, defence and space industries, including in the area of Artificial Intelligence and Disruptive Technologies, and the participation of SMEs. This should support our resilience in relation to critical technologies and strategic value chains. To this end, we invite the Commission to present a technology roadmap by October 2021 for boosting research, technology development and innovation and reducing our strategic dependencies in critical technologies and value chains;

- providing for secure European access to the global commons (including space, cyberspace and the high seas), as well as improved military mobility across the Union.

14. In light of the growing number and complexity of cyber threats, we aim to strengthen European cyber resilience and responsiveness and to improve the cybersecurity crisis management framework. Following the Cybersecurity Strategy presented in December 2020, we invite the Commission and the High Representative to report on implementation by June 2021. In addition, we invite the co-legislators to swiftly take work forward, particularly on the revised Directive on security of network and information systems (NIS 2 Directive). We also call for greater cooperation and coordination to prevent and respond to hybrid threats, including disinformation, inter alia by involving the private sector and relevant international actors.

15. The High Representative presented ongoing efforts towards an ambitious Strategic Compass to guide the further implementation of the EU level of ambition in security and defence. We invite the High Representative, together with Member States, to take forward work on the Strategic Compass, making use of the entire EU toolbox, with a view to its adoption by March 2022.

16. Security and defence will be kept under regular review by the European Council.

IV. SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

17. We discussed the political and strategic nature of the EU's partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood. We reaffirm the European Council conclusions of December 2020 and invite the Council to address the implementation of the Joint Communication from the Commission and High Representative on a renewed and reinforced partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood with a view to tackling common challenges and taking advantage of shared opportunities through strengthened cooperation.

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We strongly condemn the attack on a delegation travelling on a World Food Programme field visit in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo. We express our deepest sympathy to Italy and our condolences to the families of the victims.