



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

SECRETARIAT-GENERAL

PV(2020) 2330 final

- *English language version of the French text which is authentic* -

Brussels, 22 April 2020

TEXTE EN

MINUTES

**of the 2330th meeting of the Commission
held in Brussels
(Berlaymont)
on Wednesday 18 March 2020
(morning)**

PV(2020) 2330 final

- *English language version of the French text which is authentic* -

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Single sitting: Wednesday 18 March 2020 (morning)

The sitting opened at 9.02 with Ms von der LEYEN, President, in the chair.

Present:

Ms von der LEYEN	President
Mr BORRELL i FONTELLES	High Representative/ Vice-President
Mr BRETON	Member

The following members attended by videoconference or teleconference:

Mr TIMMERMANS	Executive Vice-President
Ms VESTAGER	Executive Vice-President
Mr DOMBROVSKIS	Executive Vice-President
Mr ŠEFČOVIČ	Vice-President
Ms JOUROVÁ	Vice-President
Ms ŠUICA	Vice-President
Mr SCHINAS	Vice-President
Mr HAHN	Member
Mr HOGAN	Member
Ms GABRIEL	Member
Mr SCHMIT	Member
Mr GENTILONI	Member
Mr WOJCIECHOWSKI	Member
Ms FERREIRA	Member
Ms KYRIAKIDES	Member
Mr REYNDEERS	Member
Ms DALLI	Member
Ms JOHANSSON	Member
Mr LENARČIČ	Member
Ms VÁLEAN	Member
Mr VÁRHELYI	Member

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Ms URPILAINEN

Member

Ms SIMSON

Member

Mr SINKEVIČIUS

Member

The following also sat in:

Mr SEIBERT	Chef de cabinet to the PRESIDENT
Mr MAMER	Head of the Spokesperson's Service and Chief Spokesperson of the Commission
Ms RISO	Deputy Chef de cabinet to the PRESIDENT
Mr FLOSDORFF	Executive Adviser in the PRESIDENT's Office
Ms ALLOUIS-LE LOSTEC	Secretariat-General
Mr HEMMELGARN	Secretariat-General
Ms SPINANT	Commission Spokesperson's Service

The following also sat in by videoconference or teleconference:

Mr ROMERO REQUENA	Director-General, Legal Service
Ms AHRENKILDE HANSEN	Director-General, DG Communication
Mr LEARDINI	Deputy Secretary-General
Ms PETKOVA	Director of Coordination and Administration in the PRESIDENT's Office
Ms VILA NUÑEZ	Policy Coordinator in the PRESIDENT's Office

Secretary: Ms JUHANSONE, Secretary-General, assisted by Mr AYET PUIGARNAU,
Director in the Secretariat-General.

1. AGENDAS

(OJ(2020) 2330/FINAL; SEC(2020) 2330/FINAL)

The Commission took note of that day's agenda and of the tentative agendas for forthcoming meetings.

2. WEEKLY MEETING OF CHEFS DE CABINET

(RCC(2020) 2330)

The Commission considered the Secretary-General's report on the weekly meeting of Chefs de cabinet held on Monday 16 March 2020.

3. APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES OF THE 2326TH, 2327TH, 2328TH AND 2329TH MEETINGS OF THE COMMISSION (19 AND 26 FEBRUARY, 4 AND 10 MARCH 2020)

The Commission approved the minutes of its 2327th meeting and decided to hold over approval of the minutes of its 2326th, 2328th and 2329th meetings until a later meeting.

4. INTERINSTITUTIONAL RELATIONS

(RCC(2020) 42)

The Commission took note of the record of the meeting of the Interinstitutional Relations Group (IRG) held on Thursday 12 March 2020 (RCC(2020) 42).

It paid particular attention to the following points.

4.1. HORIZONTAL ITEM

i) Draft agreement on the new partnership between the European Union and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

(point 1 of the IRG record)

The Commission took note that the draft agreement on the new partnership between the European Union and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland had been transmitted to the Member States on Thursday 12 March 2020, under the authority of the Commission's Chief Negotiator. The Commission also noted that a revised version of the draft had been sent to the British authorities on Wednesday 18 March 2020 and published the same day.

4.2. RELATIONS WITH THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL AND THE COUNCIL

ii) Programming of Council business

(SI(2020) 94)

The Commission took note of the information in SI(2020) 94 on the Council meetings between 19 March and 1 April 2020.

5. COORDINATION OF EXTERNAL ACTION

(RCC(2020) 47)

The Commission took note of the operational conclusions in RCC(2020) 47 of the meeting of the Group for External Coordination (EXCO) held on Wednesday 11 March 2020.

6. MONITORING THE APPLICATION OF EUROPEAN UNION LAW

STATE AID AND OTHER COMPETITION RULES

The Commission's decision on this item is recorded in the special minutes.

7. WRITTEN PROCEDURES, EMPOWERMENT AND DELEGATION OF POWERS

7.1. WRITTEN PROCEDURES APPROVED

(SEC(2020) 107 ET SEQ.)

The Commission took note of the Secretariat-General's memoranda recording decisions adopted between 9 and 14 March 2020.

7.2. EMPOWERMENT

(SEC(2020) 108 ET SEQ.)

The Commission took note of the Secretariat-General's memoranda recording decisions adopted between 9 and 13 March 2020.

7.3. DELEGATION / SUBDELEGATION OF POWERS

(SEC(2020) 109 ET SEQ.)

The Commission took note of the Secretariat-General's memoranda recording decisions adopted under the delegation and subdelegation procedure between 9 and 15 March 2020 archived in Decide.

7.4. SIGNIFICANT WRITTEN PROCEDURES

(SEC(2020) 110)

The Commission took note of the significant written procedures for which the time limit expired between 16 and 20 March 2020.

**7.5. GRANTING OF A DELEGATION OF POWERS RELATING TO THE
ADOPTION OF CERTAIN MEASURES RELATING TO SECURITY IN
THE FIELD OF AIR TRANSPORT
(C(2020) 1703)**

The Commission adopted the decision in C(2020) 1703 and decided to grant a delegation to the Director-General of DG Mobility and Transport to adopt, on behalf of the Commission and under its responsibility, subject to the conditions set out in Articles 2 to 5 of the Decision, measures relating to security in the field of air transport.

**8. ADMINISTRATIVE AND BUDGETARY MATTERS
(SEC(2020) 111)**

**ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS
(PERS(2020) 14)**

**8.1. EXCHANGE OF LETTERS WITH THE EUROPEAN ANTI-FRAUD
OFFICE (OLAF) REGARDING DECENTRALISED AGENCIES
(SEC(2020) 120)**

On a proposal from Mr HAHN, in agreement with the PRESIDENT, the Commission decided to authorise the Secretary-General and the Director-General of DG Budget to sign, on its behalf, an exchange of letters with the Director-General of the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) regarding decentralised agencies, as set out in SEC(2020) 120.

This decision would take effect immediately.

**8.2. PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES OF A FORMER MEMBER OF THE
COMMISSION AFTER LEAVING OFFICE
(C(2020) 9008)**

The Commission adopted the Decision set out in C(2020) 9008.

The Commission specifically decided that the professional activities envisaged by Mr Karmenu VELLA after leaving office as a Member of the Commission were compatible with Article 245(2) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) and with the Code of Conduct for Commissioners, subject to certain specific conditions and obligations.

This decision would take effect immediately.

**9. LATEST DEVELOPMENTS CONCERNING THE CORONAVIRUS
(COVID-19) PANDEMIC AND THE EUROPEAN UNION'S RESPONSE**

The PRESIDENT gave an update on the situation caused by the COVID-19 outbreak and the response being organised by Europe, now the epicentre of the disease that the World Health Organization had declared a pandemic on 11 March.

She strongly reemphasised the vital importance of resolute, joint and coordinated action by the European Union on all fronts, in the spirit of solidarity that characterised the European project, in order to effectively contain the spread of the virus.

It was in this spirit that she had participated in an extraordinary meeting of the European Council held by videoconference the previous day, seeking to recreate the spirit of unity and solidarity that EU leaders had themselves advocated during the videoconference on 10 March 2020, but which had sadly soon been undermined by certain Member States taking unilateral measures, particularly to re-establish border checks at the internal borders of the Schengen area.

The Commission had drawn up and adopted recommendations, guidelines and other guidance in order to help ensure convergence between the measures taken by the Member States in certain areas; she praised the fact that this had been done in record time and by dint of considerable effort.

First, the PRESIDENT explained that the Commission had called on the European Council to take action to ensure that, on the one hand, the 22 Member States in the Schengen area and the four associate countries urgently imposed restrictions at the EU's external borders on inward flows of people making non-essential journeys in order to protect public health in their countries and, on the other hand, to ensure that they encouraged their citizens and residents to stay in their respective countries in order to prevent the spread of the virus.

She explained that this temporary restriction of movement would have to include an exemption for nationals of the States concerned and their family members who wished to return home. In addition, the EU was continuing to work tirelessly to repatriate as many of these people as possible living in third countries, should they so wish.

Second, the PRESIDENT reminded the College that the restrictions introduced unilaterally by certain Member States at the EU's external borders posed a serious risk to the functioning of the single market and, as a result, to the effectiveness of the pandemic response. She said that the discussions between EU leaders the previous day gave hope that the situation would improve.

Furthermore, EU leaders had welcomed the Commission's guidelines on border management measures to protect public health and guarantee the availability of goods and essential services. In particular, it was of utmost importance to establish 'green lanes' to ensure continuity of supply by giving priority to urgent goods transport services.

With regard to supplies of the medical equipment needed to fight the pandemic, it was now essential to temporarily introduce a requirement for authorisation to export

certain items of personal protective equipment outside the EU in order to guarantee sufficient supply in the EU, given that production levels and stocks in Europe were insufficient to meet the increasing vital demand.

Third, the PRESIDENT referred to the set of measures presented the previous week by the Commission to address the unprecedented socio-economic consequences of the major shock caused by the pandemic; the main purpose of the measures was to allow the Member States, which were responsible for the main budgetary response to the crisis, to act in a decisive and coordinated manner by using all of the existing room for manoeuvre with regard to State aid and the Stability and Growth Pact. She also referred to the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative proposed in response to the coronavirus outbreak, whereby the Commission was proposing to allocate 37 billion euros in cohesion policy funding to help fight the current crisis.

Lastly, she was pleased to note the very positive reaction of EU leaders to the draft proposal for a State aid Temporary Framework to support the economy.

Fourth, with regard to purely medical aspects, the PRESIDENT referred to the establishment the previous day of a European team of scientific experts to strengthen EU coordination and the medical response.

She also highlighted the fact that the innovative vaccination technology developed by the CureVac laboratory offered promising signs for the development of a COVID-19 vaccine. She explained that the Commission had proposed to grant this high-tech European company financial support in the form of an EU guarantee for a European Investment Bank loan of some 80 million euros in order to quickly intensify the development and production of this vaccine and to then make it available around the world.

In the course of the detailed and wide-ranging discussion that followed, the Commission raised the following main points:

Health aspects (particularly Ms KYRIAKIDES and Mr VÁRHELYI)

- the observation that the number of confirmed cases was rising exponentially in the EU and a reminder of the aim being pursued, in close and constant cooperation with the Member States, to slow the spread of the virus to prevent healthcare facilities from reaching saturation point, with five Member States having already reached a critical level in this regard;
- the monitoring, with the European Medicines Agency, of a potential risk of shortages of medicines which, as things stood, had not materialised;
- the announcement of recommendations on best practices for community public health measures and COVID-19 testing strategies, with the aim of ensuring a coordinated approach at EU level;
- with a view to ensuring that the draconian measures taken within the EU were effective, a call to include the Western Balkans in the EU's response strategy in order to see more rapid results and, in any case, to prevent their effectiveness from being undermined by different levels of response on different sides of borders - borders that the virus itself transcended;
- in particular, a call to allow a certain level of flexibility in the use of EU funding to stem the crisis and for this aspect to be taken into account when assessing requests to authorise exports of equipment to those countries;

***Mobility and the movement of persons at the Union's external borders
(particularly Mr BORRELL, Ms JOHANSSON and Ms VÁLEAN)***

- the particularly serious impact of the crisis on the transport sector as a whole and, at this stage, the airline industry in particular;
- current efforts to create practical arrangements to implement the restrictions on non-essential travel to the European Union, in conjunction with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex);

- the need to maintain a minimum level of transport services to carry out repatriations and guarantee the supply of goods;
- the publication that day of interpretative guidelines to ensure consistent application of EU passenger rights throughout the Union in the current crisis, which had led certain States to restrict movement or reintroduce border controls;

Mobility issues within the single market (particularly Ms JOHANSSON and Ms VÁLEAN)

- doubts about the effectiveness of the unilateral measures taken by some Member States to reintroduce checks at the internal borders of the Schengen Area, given that COVID-19 was now present in all Member States;
- the problems caused by these unilateral measures, particularly in terms of health, if they actually led to groups of people without protective equipment congregating at certain borders, putting very severe pressure on neighbouring countries;
- connected with this, the specific case of HGV drivers who were being exposed to these risks and whose loads were also being held up, with the consequent risk of supply shortages;
- on the latter point, the vital importance of ensuring that green lanes were introduced to give priority to emergency transport services within the transport system, as recommended in the guidelines;
- hence the proposal to coordinate with the Member States on the list of green lanes and the creation of entry points;
- the need to temporarily relax the obligations on HGV drivers and to limit their risk of exposure to COVID-19, otherwise the beneficial impact of green lanes could be lost;

Supply issues in the single market (particularly Mr BRETON, Ms KYRIAKIDES and Mr REYNDERS)

- the work currently under way, with the support of the Joint Research Centre, to produce more accurate projections of possible infection peaks in each Member State in order to anticipate the scale of the demand for medical equipment;
- the battery of measures being prepared to avoid the severe shortages of essential equipment countries were facing, namely:
 - (i) an update on the state of the joint procurement procedures launched to purchase personal protective equipment, ventilators and testing kits, which should help to ensure greater security of supply, although a warning was issued about the low number of tenders for certain products;
 - (ii) the announcement of equipment being flown in from China, in a spirit of reciprocity following the aid it had received from the European Union at the start of the crisis in China;
 - (iii) the sustained efforts of manufacturing industry to increase its production capacity for equipment in Europe;
 - (iv) the promising prospects for converting some textile companies into companies producing personal protective equipment;
 - (v) the steps taken to ensure the availability of strategic stocks in the Union in preparation for an increase in the number of confirmed cases of infection;
- the danger of increase in the online sale of fraudulent products, including masks or substances that allegedly protected against or cured the virus;
- consequently, the announcement of coordinated EU-wide measures to combat these practices and ensure that consumers were not cheated by fraudsters exploiting their legitimate distress;

Measures taken by the Commission in its capacity as an employer (particularly Mr HAHN)

- the need to scrupulously comply with the measures taken by the host country;
- the Commission was preparing the plan on how to apply the lockdown measures announced by the Belgian authorities the previous day to the Commission's operations and its buildings and departments in Belgium;

Repatriation of EU nationals from third countries (particularly Mr BORRELL, Mr HAHN and Mr LENARČIČ)

- the suggestion that 100,000 EU nationals, including also Commission staff, wanted to return to their Member State of residence or origin, which would mean organising airlifts from a large number of third countries nearby or further afield;
- the need for better coordination, under the responsibility of the Commission, between the contact points of the civil protection mechanism in order to gather information concerning the persons to be repatriated;
- the organisation of repatriations using the aviation capacities of the Member States, which the Member States must consequently coordinate; possible use of the Member States' military aircraft; the co-financing that the EU could grant for commercial flights used for such repatriations;
- the pooling of the EU's diplomatic levers to reach out to the third countries in which those nationals were in order to ask them to authorise their return home;
- the difficulty of assuring those repatriated, once they have arrived on EU soil, that they would be able to return to their place of residence in view of border closures and transport problems in general;
- the scale of the problems to be resolved if the scramble to return from Africa and Southeast Asia escalated;

- the suggestion to include citizens of the western Balkans in the European repatriations as a sign of solidarity;
- the considerable financial burden of these emergency repatriations, seen against the four to six months needed for the adoption of a draft amending budget; hence the usefulness of examining the possibilities for redeploying current allocations and allowing considerable flexibility in transfers between spending programmes;

Macroeconomic and budgetary impact of the pandemic (particularly Ms VESTAGER, Mr DOMBROVSKIS, Ms ŠUICA, Mr HAHN, Mr HOGAN, Mr SCHMIT, Mr GENTILONI and Ms FERREIRA)

- the rapid deterioration in the macroeconomic situation of the Member States;
- the reminder, however, that if the pandemic was contained in the EU at the same rate at which it had been contained in the case of China and South Korea, the severity of the macroeconomic impact might also be contained;
- the assurance that all steps have been taken to mobilise all the instruments available to the EU to tackle the many dimensions of the current crisis; the highly responsive and dynamic role played by the Commission in this context;
- the pertinence and speed of the measures proposed by the Commission on 13 March 2020 to allow the Member States to use all the room for manoeuvre provided by the Stability and Growth Pact and to put in place an ad hoc framework for State aids;
- the need to build a consensus with the Member States around those measures to allow them to be adopted and deployed very rapidly;
- the reminder of the conclusions of the Eurogroup meeting of 16 March 2020, which conveyed a strong message of support for the Member States, in particular with budgetary measures representing 1% of the gross domestic

product of the EU for 2020 and the commitment to grant liquidity facilities of around 10% of the same gross domestic product through public guarantee mechanisms and deferred tax payments;

- in the context of those exceptional provisions, reference to the unusual events clause of the Stability and Growth Pact for the funding of measures to manage the health crisis;
- the possibilities of mobilising credit lines of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) to support the euro area Member States in the ordeal, while stressing that capacities were not unlimited and that decisions of the ESM required unanimity in the Board of Governors;
- the need to speed up ongoing work in collaboration with the European Central Bank (ECB); the reminder of the monetary policy measures taken by the ECB and the political consensus necessary for new initiatives in the field of bonds;
- the need for a parallel mechanism for the Member States which are not part of the euro area; the advantage of introducing, as one of the precautionary measures, a facility to support balances of payment;
- the complementarity of the coordination work carried out in connection with the investment initiative proposed by the Commission on 13 March 2020 in response to the health crisis with the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the Member States to examine ways of channelling the liquidity provided by the European Central Bank towards the real economy;
- the pressing need to ensure that the facilities granted to the Member States to get through the current period of crisis resulted in support to help, individually, EU businesses to survive, even if they experienced a relative mothballing for some weeks or months;

- the need, beyond the Member States’ measures to support those businesses and the compensation that was needed as quickly as possible for the damage caused, to preserve the internal market;
- the extensive room for manoeuvre that the State aid framework allowed the Member States for supporting any given sector; the announcement of the Commission’s proposal in this regard, which would be adopted in the following few hours by written procedure;
- the recommendation to prepare rules specifically for the aviation sector for State aid to prevent insolvencies;
- the need to consider measures for the fisheries sector, since the rules in force could not, for obvious reasons, be applied during this time of crisis;
- the options for reprogramming the European funds that were available to that sector;
- the importance of starting to think now about the post-crisis situation to support the European economy and to have an agreement on the next Multiannual Financial Framework as soon as possible;
- the scale of the social consequences of the COVID-19 crisis and in particular the efforts to be made to prevent mass unemployment in the Union;
- the considerable cost of the preventive measures financed in part from the (insufficient) resources of the European Social Fund;
- the announcement of the next videoconferences with the employment ministers and also with the European social partners;
- for the future, the value of thinking about the resilience of the Union’s strategic value chains to better protect it from disruption on the markets for goods and capital;

Aspects linked to education and research (Ms VESTAGER and Ms GABRIEL)

- the excellent message sent by the German research laboratory *CureVac* that it would maintain its activity in the Union and work on a vaccine that would be made available to the whole world once it had been developed;
- the announcement of 17 projects underway under Horizon 2020 for work on research into a vaccine and treatments for COVID-19;
- the initiative launched by the Commission to European start-ups to propose innovative ideas around the COVID-19 crisis, the interest it had sparked and the announcement of the outcome of the operation later that day;
- the very positive exchange of good practices that the Member States would hold that day on the subject of distance learning;
- the urgent need to launch the Digital Education Action Plan and to give new impetus to the actions planned by the Commission with regard to digital skills;
- the announcement of the extension of certain programmes such as Erasmus and the European Solidarity Corps;
- the call to consider, in the Union's response to the health crisis, the culture and creative arts sector, which largely consisted of small enterprises and self-employed workers, who were particularly vulnerable;

General matters (Mr BORRELL, Mr ŠEFČOVIČ, Ms JOUROVÁ, Mr SCHINAS and Mr REYNDEERS)

- regret that Europe was not speaking with one voice and the call to channel communication through a single person or structure acting as spokesperson, for example daily, in order to provide reliable and clear information in the Member States about the Union's action, thereby addressing the problem of citizens who did not understand the current differences in the measures taken by the Member States;

- the increase in false information and disinformation activities; in this context, the agreement reached with platforms such as Facebook to highlight information originating from key institutions such as the World Health Organisation;
- the attention that should be given to the Union's political message in the current crisis and the warning against the growing rhetoric whereby Europe was presented as navel-gazing and selfish, closing its borders while China had started to help the countries most seriously affected by the pandemic;
- the opportunity to send the public a sensitive and empathetic message from the Union's institutions and to call on the Union's common values, starting with solidarity, which alone could enable all Member States to come out of the current crisis stronger;
- the European Parliament and the Council's desire to approve as quickly as possible the proposals the Commission had submitted the previous week in the context of the health crisis.

The PRESIDENT closed the discussion by returning to each of the aspects of the crisis that had been covered and asking the Members of the Commission to monitor certain issues closely.

With regard to the **repatriation of EU nationals**, she asked Mr LENARČIČ to coordinate this work with the Member States together with Mr BORRELL. She also highlighted the dramatic situation that could ensue if the refugees at the EU's borders were to be infected with the COVID-19 virus. She asked for everything to be done to prepare for that eventuality.

She went on to ask Ms JOHANSSON and Ms VĂLEAN to monitor the implementation of the guidelines on the **border management** measures aimed at protecting public health and to guarantee the availability of goods and essential services. Stressing how important it was to ensure the proper functioning of the Single Market and to put in place green lanes, she asked for the greatest transparency in the implementation of the guidelines to ensure informed public

opinion. She recommended that Ms JOHANSSON monitored the temporary restriction on non-essential travel to the European Union requested from the Member States that belong to the Schengen area and the four associated countries.

She also proposed that Mr BRETON, Ms KYRIAKIDES and Mr LENARČIČ continue their efforts for the **supply of medical equipment**.

In terms of the **macroeconomic repercussions**, she emphasised that these were becoming more acute with each passing day and that this unprecedented crisis had to be contained using every means available to the EU institutions and the Member States. At the special meeting of the European Council on 17 March, the Heads of State or Government had discussed the issue of triggering the general escape clause and the tools which could be mobilised under the European Stability Mechanism. She added that they had agreed to mandate the Commission to work on this, which to her mind meant defining a clear way forward in order to obtain the unanimous agreement of the Member States. She asked Mr DOMBROVSKIS and Mr GENTILONI to continue their efforts on the macroeconomic front and Ms VESTAGER to continue her efforts on State aid.

In terms of the likely rise in unemployment as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, she noted that the unemployment reinsurance scheme proposed by the Commission would be extremely useful over the forthcoming period and recommended taking the opportunity to relaunch it as a matter of urgency, particularly as the Member States were now very much in favour of this. She also called for the greatest possible flexibility in the redeployment of European funds that could be used to safeguard jobs in the EU. She asked Mr SCHMIT to closely monitor social developments.

The PRESIDENT also asked Ms GABRIEL to continue efforts to encourage **research** and to contact EU culture ministers to draw their attention to support for the cultural sector.

She asked Mr VÁRHELYI to pay very close attention to the situation in the **Western Balkans** so that the Commission could take the necessary additional measures in good time if the situation warranted it.

In view of the financial impact of the measures presented, she asked Mr HAHN to prepare a draft amending **budget** and also keep the College informed of the measures taken to ensure that the Commission, whose main seat was in Belgium, strictly complied with the containment measures adopted by the Belgian authorities from midday that same day up to and including 5 April 2020.

On the matter of the **Multiannual Financial Framework**, the PRESIDENT stated her intention to sound the alarm once again very soon regarding the need for an interinstitutional agreement on the next framework, as the current one would expire at a time when the European economy would be in most need of support. She called for the avoidance of an institutional crisis on top of a multidimensional crisis, which was already bad enough.

In terms of **general aspects**, she felt that the Commission should use all available communication channels to explain its actions to mitigate the effects of the health crisis and effectively manage all of its various repercussions, highlighting human aspects, the spirit of solidarity and messages sensitive to what Europeans were experiencing in the present circumstances. In this connection, she asked Ms JOUROVÁ and Mr REYNDEERS to launch a debate, which would necessarily be creative, in order to provide the Member States with guidelines that would allow them to combat disinformation more effectively on a coordinated basis.

The PRESIDENT reiterated the absolute need for determined and coordinated action at EU level to ensure that the response was effective. She called on the Members of the Commission to prepare, if they felt it necessary, guidelines in the areas covered by their responsibilities. She pointed out that it could be useful to draw up such guidelines for the Member States with regard to the fisheries sector.

She closed the discussion by emphasising that the unprecedented situation currently facing the Union meant that the strain on the Commission would be very high for several weeks. She asked all the Vice-Presidents and Commissioners to be ready for action around the clock. She hoped that the Commission would be fully mobilised.

She therefore finished by recommending that everyone – Members of the Commission, members of cabinets and critical staff in the departments, whom she thanked wholeheartedly for the huge amount of work already put in – should look after themselves by ensuring that they got enough sleep, spent at least 30 minutes a day in the daylight and took at least some exercise.

The Commission took note of this information.

10. JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE, AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS – EASTERN PARTNERSHIP POLICY BEYOND 2020 – REINFORCING RESILIENCE – AN EASTERN PARTNERSHIP THAT DELIVERS FOR ALL (JOIN(2020) 7 TO /3; SWD(2020) 56 TO /3; RCC(2020) 43)

The PRESIDENT pointed out that the development of relations with the EU's neighbourhood and partnership countries remained one of its strategic priorities, as was the case with the six countries of the Eastern Partnership – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The aim of the Communication submitted to the College for approval that day was to provide a basis for the discussions at the next Eastern Partnership summit between the EU and these six countries, to be held in June 2020. This Communication took the context of the COVID-19 pandemic into account in the section on cooperation in the area of public health.

Mr BORRELL presented to the College this joint contribution, the purpose of which was to update the strategic relationship between the EU and the six partners while

giving it a new dynamic. He explained that the approach followed was based on the achievements since 2009, when the partnership was launched, and consisted of adapting the partnership's priorities in line with the political guidelines of the current Commission and the initiatives already taken since the start of its term of office.

He stressed that if Europe wished to become stronger in the world, it must begin by strengthening its links with the countries of its immediate neighbourhood that shared its values and vision. The Eastern Partners must have the opportunity and the necessary support to join the Union in achieving its objectives in areas such as protection of the climate and the environment, the digital transition or safeguarding the rule of law.

The Communication set out five policy objectives, namely (i) the development of resilient, sustainable and integrated economies, (ii) institutions politically accountable for their actions, rule of law and security, (iii) environmental and climate resilience, (iv) the digital transformation, and (v) resilient, equitable and inclusive societies.

Mr BORRELL noted that these objectives corresponded to the expectations of the Union's Eastern Partners as much as to those of its Member States and the stakeholders directly associated in developing cooperation and implementing the partnership policy.

Mr VÁRHELY took the floor and said that the Eastern Partnership had reached a pivotal point in that it now had to incorporate the EU's new priorities and be given new momentum, while adopting a differentiated approach which took account of the different structures in each of the partner countries and the relations that each of them had with the Union.

He pointed out that the Communication took into account the results of a wide-ranging consultation which had confirmed both the importance of the partnership and the wish of its members to strengthen their cooperation.

Resilience was the guiding principle of the Communication in all the policy areas on the basis of five jointly identified objectives that broadly reflected the Union's strategic priorities, in particular the European Green Deal, the digital transition and sustainable job creation. The current coronavirus pandemic, in particular, demonstrated the validity of this overarching objective of resilience in all its aspects.

He ended by highlighting the key role of education in enabling the Eastern Partnership countries to pursue common goals with the Union and develop knowledge-based societies.

Following these presentations, the Commission approved the Joint Communication in JOIN(2020) 7/3 for transmission to Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions and, for information, to the national parliaments, together with the staff working document distributed as SWD(2020) 56/3, the contents of which were noted.

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The Commission's other discussions on certain agenda items are recorded in the special minutes.

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The meeting closed at 11.47.