



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

SECRETARIAT-GENERAL

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- English translation of the French version which is authentic -

Brussels, 9 March 2021

TEXTE EN

MINUTES

of the 2367th meeting of the Commission

held in Brussels

(Berlaymont)

on Wednesday 17 February 2021

(morning)

PV(2021) 2367 final

- English translation of the French version which is authentic -

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Single sitting: Wednesday 17 February 2021 (morning)

The sitting opened at 9.04 with Ms von der LEYEN, President, in the chair.

Present:

Ms von der LEYEN	President
Mr TIMMERMANS	Executive Vice-President
Ms VESTAGER	Executive Vice-President
Mr DOMBROVSKIS	Executive Vice-President
Mr BORRELL i FONTELLES	High Representative/ Vice-President
Mr ŠEFČOVIČ	Vice-President
Ms JOUROVÁ	Vice-President
Ms ŠUICA	Vice-President
Mr SCHINAS	Vice-President
Mr HAHN	Member
Mr SCHMIT	Member
Mr GENTILONI	Member
Mr WOJCIECHOWSKI	Member
Mr BRETON	Member
Ms FERREIRA	Member
Ms KYRIAKIDES	Member
Mr REYNDERS	Member
Ms DALLI	Member
Ms JOHANSSON	Member
Mr LENARČIČ	Member
Ms VÁLEAN	Member
Ms URPILAINEN	Member
Mr SINKEVIČIUS	Member
Ms McGUINNESS	Member

Attended by videoconference:

Ms GABRIEL Member

Absent:

Mr VÁRHELYI Member

Ms SIMSON Member

The following sat in to represent an absent Member of the Commission:

Mr HORVÁTH Expert in Mr VÁRHELYI's office

Mr GRASSI Chef de cabinet to Ms SIMSON

The following also sat in:

Mr SEIBERT

Mr CALLEJA CRESPO Director-General, Legal Service

Ms AHRENKILDE HANSEN Director-General, DG Communication

Mr MAMER

Head of the Spokesperson's Service and Chief Spokesperson of the Commission

Ms PETKOVA

**Director of Coordination and Administration in
the PRESIDENT's Office**

Mr FLOSDORFF Executive Adviser in the PRESIDENT's Office Item 10

Mr VANDENBERGHE Adviser in the PRESIDENT's Office Item 8

Ms SPINANT Deputy Chief Spokesperson of the Commission

Ms ALLOUIS-LE LOSTEC Head of Unit in the Secretariat-General

Secretary: Ms JUHANSONE, Secretary-General, assisted by Ms DEPREZ, Director in the Secretariat-General.

1. AGENDAS

(OJ(2021) 2367/FINAL; SEC(2021) 2367/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(2021) 2367)

The Commission considered the Secretary-General's report on the weekly meeting of Chefs de cabinet held on Monday 15 and Tuesday 16 February 2021.

3. APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES OF THE 2363RD, 2364TH, 2365TH AND 2366TH MEETINGS OF THE COMMISSION (19 AND 27 JANUARY, AND 3 AND 9 FEBRUARY 2021)

(PV(2021) 2363; PV(2021) 2364; PV(2021) 2364, 2ND PART)

The Commission approved the minutes of its 2363rd and 2364th meetings and decided to hold over approval of the minutes of its 2365th and 2366th meetings for a later meeting.

4. INTERINSTITUTIONAL RELATIONS

(RCC(2021) 62)

The Commission took note of the record of the meeting of the Interinstitutional Relations Group (IRG) held by videoconference on Friday 12 February 2021 (RCC(2021) 62).

It paid particular attention to the following points.

4.1. HORIZONTAL ITEMS

i) 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework – Council dossiers

(point 1.1.3 of the IRG record)

- Amendment of Decision No 1313/2013/EU on a Union Civil Protection Mechanism (Decision) – ANDROULAKIS report – 2020/0097 (COD)

The Commission approved the line set out in SI(2021) 46.

- Internal Security Fund (Regulation) – HOHLMEIER report – 2018/0250 (COD)

The Commission approved the line set out in SI(2021) 50.

4.2. LEGISLATIVE MATTERS

ii) Council dossiers

(point 3.3 of the IRG record)

- Amendment of Regulation (EU) No 216/2013 on the electronic publication of the Official Journal of the European Union – 2020/0126 (APP)

The Commission approved the line set out in SI(2021) 48/2.

- General Union Environment Action Programme to 2030 (Decision) – O’SULLIVAN report – 2020/0300 (COD)

The Commission took note of the information in SI(2021) 49/2.

- Amendment of Delegated Regulation (EU) 2019/1122 as regards the functioning of the Union Registry under Regulation (EU) 2018/841 of the European Parliament and of the Council (Delegated Regulation)

The Commission approved the line set out in SI(2021) 51/2.

4.3. RELATIONS WITH PARLIAMENT

iii) Action taken on the legislative opinions and non-legislative resolutions adopted by Parliament at its January 2021 part-session

(point 5.6.1 of the IRG record)

The Commission approved document SP(2021) 89/2 on the action taken on the legislative opinions and non-legislative resolutions adopted by Parliament at its January 2021 part-session, for transmission to Parliament.

iv) Results of Parliament's February 2021 part-session

(point 5.8.1 of the IRG record)

The Commission took note of the information on Parliament's part-session held from 8 to 11 February 2021 in Brussels, set out in SP(2021) 55.

4.4. OTHER BUSINESS

v) Conclusion of the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement between Canada of the one part, and the European Union and its Member States, of the other part (Council Decision) – 2016/0205 (NLE) / Signing on behalf of the European Union of the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement between Canada of the one part, and the European Union and its Member States, of the other part – 2016/0206 (NLE)

(point 7.1 of the IRG record)

The Commission approved the line set out in SI(2021) 47.

5. COORDINATION OF EXTERNAL ACTION (RCC(2021) 15 AND /2)

The Commission took note of the operational conclusions in RCC(2021) 15/2 of the

meeting of the Group for External Coordination (EXCO) held by videoconference on Thursday 11 February 2021.

6. WRITTEN PROCEDURES, EMPOWERMENT AND DELEGATION OF POWERS

6.1. WRITTEN PROCEDURES APPROVED

(SEC(2021) 72 ET SEQ.)

The Commission took note of the Secretariat-General's memoranda recording decisions adopted between 8 and 12 February 2021.

6.2. EMPOWERMENT

(SEC(2021) 73 ET SEQ.)

The Commission took note of the Secretariat-General's memoranda recording decisions adopted between 8 and 12 February 2021.

6.3. DELEGATION / SUBDELEGATION OF POWERS

(SEC(2021) 74 ET SEQ.)

The Commission took note of the Secretariat-General's memoranda recording decisions adopted under the delegation and subdelegation procedure between 8 and 12 February 2021 archived in Decide.

6.4. SIGNIFICANT WRITTEN PROCEDURES

(SEC(2021) 75 AND /2)

The Commission took note of the significant written procedures for which the time limit expired between 15 and 19 February 2021 and of the finalisation written procedures initiated following the weekly meeting of Chefs de cabinet on Monday 15 and Tuesday 16 February 2021.

7. ADMINISTRATIVE AND BUDGETARY MATTERS

(SEC(2021) 76)

ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

(PERS(2021) 16)

7.1. DG INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS – INTERNAL AND INTERINSTITUTIONAL (AT GRADE AD14/15) AND EXTERNAL PUBLICATION (AT GRADE AD14) OF A VACANCY NOTICE FOR A DIRECTOR POST

(PERS(2021) 17)

On a proposal from Mr HAHN, in agreement with the PRESIDENT, and after consulting Ms URPILAINEN, the Commission decided to authorise the publication, under Article 29(1)(a)(i) and (iii), Article 29(1)(b) and Article 29(2) of the Staff Regulations, of the vacancy notice in PERS(2021) 17 for the post of Director of the ‘Middle East, Asia and Pacific’ Directorate in DG International Partnerships.

This decision would take effect immediately.

7.2. DG REGIONAL AND URBAN POLICY – INTERNAL AND INTERINSTITUTIONAL (AT GRADE AD14/15) AND EXTERNAL PUBLICATION (AT GRADE AD14) OF A VACANCY NOTICE FOR A PRINCIPAL ADVISER POST

(PERS(2021) 18)

On a proposal from Mr HAHN, in agreement with the PRESIDENT, and after consulting Ms FERREIRA, the Commission decided to authorise the publication, under Article 29(1)(a)(i) and (iii), Article 29(1)(b) and Article 29(2) of the Staff Regulations, of the vacancy notice in

PERS(2021) 18 for the post of Principal Adviser for International Relations in DG Regional and Urban Policy.

This decision would take effect immediately.

7.3. DG EDUCATION, YOUTH, SPORT AND CULTURE – SECONDMENT OF AN AD16 OFFICIAL IN THE INTERESTS OF THE SERVICE UNDER ARTICLES 37 AND 38 OF THE STAFF REGULATIONS

On a proposal from Mr HAHN, in agreement with the PRESIDENT, and after consulting Ms GABRIEL, the Commission decided to second, in the interests of the service under Articles 37 and 38 of the Staff Regulations, Mr Vladimír ŠUCHA, an AD16 official and currently Adviser hors classe in DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in Paris, for an initial duration of one year, which could be extended.

This decision would take effect on 1 March 2021.

7.4. DG REGIONAL AND URBAN POLICY – APPOINTMENT OF AN AD14 DIRECTOR

On a proposal from Mr HAHN, in agreement with the PRESIDENT and after consulting Mr BRETON and Ms FERREIRA, the Commission decided to fill the post of Director of the ‘European Territorial Cooperation, Macro-regions, Interreg and Programme Implementation I’ Directorate in DG Regional and Urban Policy by transferring in the interest of the service under Article 7 of the Staff Regulations Mr Slawomir TOKARSKI, an AD14 official and currently Director of the ‘Industrial Policy and Innovation’ Directorate in DG Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs.

This decision would take effect on 1 March 2021.

**7.5. DG BUDGET – ALLOCATION OF HUMAN RESOURCES AND
DECENTRALISED ADMINISTRATIVE APPROPRIATIONS FOR 2021
(SEC(2021) 93)**

The Commission approved the Communication in SEC(2021) 93.

**8. COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL AND THE COUNCIL – HERA
INCUBATOR – ANTICIPATING TOGETHER THE THREAT OF COVID-19
VARIANTS
(COM(2021) 78 TO /4; RCC(2021) 69)**

The PRESIDENT introduced the Communication entitled ‘HERA incubator: anticipating together the threat of COVID-19 variants’.

She began by thanking the College as a whole and the Commission services for their remarkable efforts in an extremely narrow timeframe to adapt the European strategy to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and prepare this new European biodefence preparedness plan against coronavirus variants.

The Communication focused on COVID-19 virus variants, the recent appearance of which was a cause for concern throughout the world. Three main virus variants were now known: the British, South African and Brazilian variants. The first two had already reached Europe.

Firstly, she emphasised the need to carry out genomic sequencing of positive COVID-19 cases on a larger scale, without which there could be no tailored health responses. The HERA incubator initiative, a precursor of the future European Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority, which the Commission proposed should be set up at the end of the year, was aimed primarily at giving the EU the means to better understand the state of play with regard to variants. It was therefore proposed that 5% of positive COVID-19 cases should be sequenced in the

Member States to monitor virus mutations. The knowledge acquired should then above all be passed on swiftly to the scientific community so that existing vaccines could be adapted for efficacy against virus mutations. At the same time, data needed to flow faster to the European Medicines Agency and a European clinical trials network should be set up to ensure a standardised approach to vaccine safety. The legal framework applicable to the European Medicines Agency should also be examined in detail to determine whether, under certain circumstances, it would be possible to speed up the approval process for adaptations of the original vaccines, in parallel with the increase in production capacity in Europe.

The PRESIDENT asserted that the vaccination strategy developed by the Commission was a success, notably because it enabled each of the 27 Member States to access the vaccines. To date, 33 million vaccine doses had been delivered in the EU, 22 million of which had already been administered. These vaccines were European, moreover, and she was convinced that, over time, the validity of the European approach would be recognised, beyond the occasional difficulties.

She then asked Ms VESTAGER, Mr SCHINAS, Ms KYRIAKIDES, Mr BRETON and Ms GABRIEL to present the various aspects of this dossier.

Ms VESTAGER welcomed the fact that this Communication presented the support that the EU could provide to the pharmaceutical industry to enable it to ensure the mass production of vaccines. She highlighted the efforts made to establish positive cooperation between them, in the service of the public.

Mr SCHINAS saw the HERA incubator as the best way forward to anticipate events and adapt the EU's strategy to combat COVID-19 virus mutations, which no Member State could do alone, including financially.

However, expectations should not be raised too high in what could be a long battle.

Ms KYRIAKIDES reported that the epidemiological situation was beginning to improve in most Member States, but that this trend could be reversed with the new

variants present in Europe, as shown by the current increase in contamination due to the British variant.

To maintain its lead in this race against COVID-19, the EU had to take immediate action to address the danger posed by variants. The Commission was therefore proposing that day to launch the HERA incubator. This would work on three main complementary work streams, namely (i) strengthening detection mechanisms, (ii) promoting vaccine development and (iii) increasing production capacity.

As regards detection, EUR 75 million had been earmarked to develop specialised PCR tests in order to detect variants and help the Member States achieve the objective of genomic sequencing that covered 5% of positive COVID-19 tests. In practical terms, the EU would strengthen research and data exchange on variants by providing funding worth EUR 150 million and launch the VACCELERATE COVID-19 Clinical Trials Network, which now comprised 16 EU Member States and five associated countries – including Switzerland and Israel – to exchange data and gradually include children and young adults in clinical trials. Working with global partners such as the World Health Organization would remain vital in this context.

Ms KYRIAKIDES also stressed the need to speed up the approval process for new vaccines adapted to variants, as was the case with the annual flu vaccine.

Moreover, while the European Union, despite its economic power, had not yet managed to attract as many vaccine developers as other countries, the measures proposed under the HERA incubator initiative should remedy this.

The proposed simplified authorisation procedure would allow vaccine developers to submit smaller sets of additional data to the European Medicines Agency. The EU was also providing for the possible granting of emergency authorisations, with responsibility shared between the Member States, subject to European leaders approving this option during the European Council videoconference on 25 and 26 February. However, safety would still be the main criterion for authorisation and

the European Medicines Agency would retain its scientific independence in the process.

Ms KYRIAKIDES pointed out that the HERA incubator's ultimate goal was to guarantee access to safe vaccines that were effective against new variants. The EU would update existing advance purchase agreements accordingly or sign new ones with suppliers of these new vaccines. These agreements had made it possible to speed up the timetable for the development of vaccines, but production capacity was causing a bottleneck. Future agreements would therefore require detailed and credible plans demonstrating production capacity within a reliable timeframe. The EU could also consider securing sources of production in third countries, where appropriate.

She concluded her presentation by stressing that the future European Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority would build on the incubator presented that day and provide the EU with an urgently needed permanent structure for risk modelling, global monitoring, monitoring of production capacity, and research and development.

Mr BRETON drew attention to the fact that the EU was the world's leading supplier of vaccines. While it had won the scientific race by developing three effective vaccines, it now faced the challenge of mass production during the first and second quarters of 2021, against a backdrop of tensions in supply chains. It took at least three to four years to build a vaccine plant because of the complexity of the manufacturing process. There had been very constructive talks with pharmaceutical companies on these various aspects.

He welcomed the introduction of the transparency mechanism for exports of vaccines, which now provided the EU with an overview of available quantities and supplies. The United States also had an export authorisation scheme, but it applied to every link in the vaccine production chain, not just the final product.

Ms GABRIEL announced that around EUR 30 million would be mobilised under Horizon 2020 and around EUR 120 million under Horizon Europe to finance three major projects: the Data Portal, the Emerging Infectious Disease Observatory (VEO) and the Clinical Trials Network (VACCELERATE).

Above all, it was important to have access to larger datasets so that science and research could deal more effectively with variants.

In the course of the discussion that followed, the Commission raised the following main points:

- the need to reiterate the importance of having implemented a common European strategy on vaccines in order to avoid competition between Member States that would have caused deep divisions within the EU;
- the importance of considering vaccines as a common good rather than the object of harmful competition between different countries and regions of the world;
- the temptation for some regional authorities to buy batches of vaccines directly without consulting national and European authorities;
- the benefits of pursuing current efforts to prevent the outbreak of new pandemics, by placing particular emphasis on research and innovation;
- the case for considering a shorter procedure for approving the marketing authorisation of new vaccines by the European Medicines Agency, while being fully transparent about the reasons for such a choice;
- the need for immediate action to tackle the emergence of a black market in vaccines, in close cooperation with the Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF);
- in the context of the vaccination campaigns, the benefits of limiting the economic and social damage caused by the pandemic by developing, before

summer, rapid virus testing capacities and a single certification system for the purposes of individual mobility;

- on this last point, an appeal not to consider such a system until a high enough proportion of the population had been vaccinated and all EU citizens had been given access to vaccines;
- the concerns of Member States and the public pending the supply of vaccines, which was the only viable way of ending the pandemic;
- the need to present in a positive light the EU's overall action on the pandemic and its many successes, including the Recovery and Resilience Facility, which should make it possible to return to economic growth and create jobs, while speeding up the twin green and digital transitions;
- the urgent need to offer future prospects, especially to young people, who were often isolated and deprived of the freedom to travel, to work in order to finance their studies, or simply to socialise;
- the case for considering targeted measures to help young people emerge from the pandemic, for example by offering them rapid screening tests or free train tickets;
- the need to give particular support to the tourism industry, which had been severely penalised by the protection measures introduced during the pandemic and which should be given help to start up again as soon as possible before summer;
- the risk of repeating the errors of the past, in particular the re-introduction of controls at internal EU borders, as was now the case in nine Member States, against all the recommendations they themselves had adopted;
- the merits of the initiative taken by some Members of the Commission in reminding the Member States of the principles set out in those

recommendations, which were designed to prevent any ban on crossing an EU internal border and to guarantee the smooth operation of the single market;

- the need to consider how to return to normal mobility as soon as the epidemiological situation allowed;
- the importance of all the Member States, without exception, contributing to the health information systems put in place to centralise data at EU level;
- the need to monitor vaccine production and supply chains and to adapt the organisation of supply when two doses had to be administered.

In response to certain comments made during the discussion, Ms KYRIAKIDES said that the future European Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA) – which the Commission was proposing should be set up by the end of 2021 – would have the task of combating the threat of epidemics in the short and medium term.

Consideration would also be given to the possibility of speeding up the regulatory process for the marketing authorisation of new vaccines in the event of health emergencies. She stressed the importance of clear and transparent information to the public on this point.

In general, there was little point in comparing the figures in the various vaccination campaigns under way across the world, given the many different parameters to be taken into account.

Nevertheless, she mentioned the vaccination campaign under way in the United Kingdom, which was often compared to that in the EU, stressing the different strategies being followed. The UK government had taken the decision to administer the first dose of the vaccine to as many people as possible without being sure that it would be able to give the second dose within the required time. For its part, the European Medicines Agency had chosen to follow the scientific recommendations

regarding administration of the two doses of vaccines and the results of the two approaches should be analysed progressively as the vaccination campaigns were rolled out.

She noted that the Russian vaccine could not be marketed in the EU until the European Medicines Agency had the data it needed to evaluate it and approve its marketing authorisation.

She too cautioned against raising public expectations too high regarding the time it would take to exit the pandemic, yet without taking a pessimistic view of the matter.

Mr BRETON said that, in this context, there had been a considerable increase in capacity in the EU for producing the rapid antigen detection tests from South Korea, the aim being to provide them at a modest price, which could be particularly useful for restarting the tourism industry.

The PRESIDENT noted that the Portuguese Council Presidency intended to take stock of the movement of persons within the EU at the forthcoming European Council on 25 and 26 February and that these discussions would have to be prepared carefully, in particular at the videoconference of European Affairs Ministers on 23 February.

On the question of vaccination certificates, it would be difficult to give priority to people who had been vaccinated until all EU citizens had had access to the vaccine. She therefore advised caution on this point as well as a realistic view of the next summer season, especially as it had not yet been demonstrated that vaccination prevented transmission of the virus.

Finally, the PRESIDENT noted that, although the UK vaccination programme appeared to be further advanced than the EU's, only half a million people had so far received both doses of the main vaccine chosen, as the United Kingdom was concentrating on administering the first dose to as many people as possible. However, there was a risk that this strategy would be ineffective if the second dose

were not administered in time. To date, 5% of the EU population had been vaccinated and the vaccination campaign would be ramped up in the coming weeks.

Following these presentations, the Commission approved the Communication in COM(2021) 78/4 for transmission to Parliament, the European Council and the Council and, for information, to the national parliaments.

**9. JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL ON STRENGTHENING THE EU'S CONTRIBUTION TO RULES-BASED MULTILATERALISM
(JOIN(2021) 3 TO /3; RCC(2021) 67)**

The PRESIDENT opened the discussion on the Joint Communication from the Commission and the European External Action Service submitted to the College for approval that day with the aim of strengthening the EU's contribution to rules-based multilateralism.

Mr BORRELL stressed that at present world affairs took place within a system that was more multipolar than multilateral; one in which recourse to the veto outweighed cooperation. This state of affairs had not only brought about deadlock within the Security Council of the United Nations, but also limited the effectiveness of the work of the G20, the World Trade Organization and the World Health Organization.

He noted that there was general agreement on this diagnosis, but he argued that the EU had to consider what it expected of a multilateral system and what the best means of attaining its objectives and operating more effectively within the system were. The main reply, in his view, was that the EU had to take greater advantage of its strengths, while seeking to preserve the parts of the multilateral architecture that worked.

The EU had to focus on the COVID-19 pandemic and contribute, *inter alia*, towards strengthening the World Health Organization. It also needed to devote more

attention to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which had been somewhat overlooked because of the health situation worldwide.

He also referred to the leading position held by the EU in the environmental protection and digital spheres, in particular in terms of artificial intelligence and new technologies. He went on to emphasise the necessity of winning the international battle on rules and of addressing a number of challenges on security, including the peaceful use of outer space.

Mr BORRELL then turned to the priorities that the EU needed to address, namely the reform of the World Trade Organization and the World Health Organization, and more generally that of the United Nations System initiated by the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres.

The EU should step up its cooperation with other global players. In particular, it should bolster its traditional alliances, with, for example, the United States, as well as establishing closer ties with regional organisations, in particular with the Asian, African and Latin American countries. In this respect, he suggested holding regular summits with the leaders of the regional organisations concerned, for example, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

To conclude, Mr BORRELL pointed out that the EU had to work with all the players in the multilateral system, and not just those that shared its world view.

Ms URPILAINEN stressed that the tectonic plates of multilateral relations were in constant movement and the challenges that the EU faced on the world stage had changed. The COVID-19 pandemic continued to affect all the regions of the world and flagged up an increasing need for cooperation worldwide and for reforming multilateralism.

All too often the EU was portrayed as punching below its weight on the international stage, given that, together with its Member States, it was a significant financial contributor to the multilateral system. The EU and its Member States

funded one third of the UN system's budget, over 25% of that of the World Bank and more than 30% of its various trust funds. It was therefore essential for the EU to go from being a payer to a player.

In this respect, the efforts to help the global recovery and exit the current crisis offered an opportunity to rebuild the international order based on multilateralism and guided by the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. To this end, the EU should base itself firmly on its values – democracy, human rights and the rule of law – and on the results of its cooperation with international partners such as the African Union and the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States. It had to use these partnerships not only to advance its own priorities, but also to put forward sustainable common solutions to global challenges.

Ms URPILAINEN pointed to three new elements in the approach set out in the Communication. First, the reforms of international organisations under consideration had to make them more accountable, more transparent and more results-oriented. Second, the EU had to act as Team Europe in the multilateral system, for example, through greater coordination with the Member States represented on the boards of international financial institutions. Third, the EU was calling for a more inclusive multilateralism, closer to citizens and civil society.

To conclude, she suggested a meeting of the Commissioners with the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres.

The PRESIDENT approved the idea of a forthcoming meeting between the Commission and the UN Secretary-General and suggested that it take place by videoconference, in view of the current epidemiological situation.

She also welcomed the '*Team Europe*' approach that had been taken in the discussion on the COVAX (*COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access*) initiative.

She stressed that the EU had to be active in the reform of international organisations, including the World Health Organization.

The PRESIDENT wound up the discussion by saying that the EU had to play its vital role as an actor in world affairs in defining rules. She referred in this respect to the unprecedented rules that the EU was putting into place with the issue of green bonds and the taxonomy, rules that would have wide-ranging implications worldwide.

Following these presentations, the Commission approved the Joint Communication in JOIN(2021) 3/3 for transmission to Parliament and the Council and, for information, to the national parliaments.

10. COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS – TRADE POLICY REVIEW – AN OPEN, SUSTAINABLE AND ASSERTIVE TRADE POLICY

(COM(2021) 66 TO /3; RCC(2021) 66)

Following the same approach as the Joint Communication setting out the EU's vision and expectations regarding the multilateral system, the PRESIDENT asked Mr DOMBROVSKIS to present that day's Communication, which, taking stock of the current situation, proposed an open, sustainable and assertive trade policy in line with the EU's priorities and geopolitical ambitions.

Mr DOMBROVSKIS began by setting out the grounds for adapting the EU's trade policy. Aside from the fact that it was important to take account of the current challenges, trade policy was a tool that could encourage growth and job creation without burdening the EU budget, whilst contributing to promoting European values and principles. It was therefore a particularly valuable asset to support the economic recovery in response to the profound crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

He went on to describe the main priorities set out in the strategy to breathe new life into the EU's trade policy in the medium term by adopting a European approach based on the concept of open strategic autonomy.

First, Mr DOMBROVSKIS stressed the need for open, rules-based trade. The EU wished to preserve trade's important place in its economy and in the lives of its citizens, while remaining faithful to its intrinsic values regarding openness.

To this end, the EU intended to contribute to directing the efforts made on a global scale to reform the rules governing international trade, and to bring about a favourable framework for a level playing field and for meeting environmental and digital challenges.

The Communication also set out the EU's position on the priorities for reforming the World Trade Organization (WTO), moving towards a sustainable and effective multilateral trade system. The recent appointment of Ms Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala as the Director-General of the WTO and the fact that the new US government was taking office could augur well for bringing about these reforms.

Second, Mr DOMBROVSKIS reported that sustainable and fair development were at the heart of the proposed trade strategy, in response to one of the greatest challenges of the moment, that of meeting the expectations of European citizens and supporting the transformation of the EU economy to a climate-neutral one.

In particular, he drew attention to the fact that the EU would propose that compliance with the Paris Agreement should be considered an essential part of future trade and investment agreements.

He added that promoting sustainable and responsible trade also meant combatting forced labour; consideration was currently being given within the Commission to ways of preventing the use of forced labour in the value chains of EU's businesses.

Third, Mr DOMBROVSKIS emphasised the role that the new trade strategy was to play in supporting the digital transition, by removing unwarranted obstacles to trade

in the digital economy in order to benefit from that sector's technological advantages in trade.

From this perspective, the Trade and Cooperation Agreement signed with the United Kingdom in December was the first example of the aims of the strategy and its high level of ambition regarding data flows, avoiding digital protectionism but maintaining the standards of the General Data Protection Regulation.

Fourth, Mr DOMBROVSKIS highlighted the new strategy's goal of extracting maximum value from trade agreements already signed.

He stressed that it was important to ensure that the EU's partners complied with their obligations under trade agreements, to prevent protectionist tendencies and combat distortions of competition, a task to which the Chief Trade Enforcement Officer, the first to be appointed to the role in July 2020, would make a vital contribution.

Furthermore, the reform of the World Trade Organization would address matters such as competitive neutrality, subsidies and state-owned enterprises.

The Commission was also proposing in the Communication that the EU be able to defend itself when confronted with unfair trading practices.

The guiding principles of the new course set by the Communication for the EU's trade policy in the medium term were those already underlying the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment, the new Transatlantic Cooperation Programme, the revision of the Regulation on the enforcement of international trade rules, and the launch of the *Access2Markets* online portal to assist small and medium-sized enterprises to trade beyond the EU's borders.

He considered that the trade strategy presented that day was such as to position the EU as a strong and trustworthy partner, and to help it to achieve its geopolitical ambitions by diversifying its partnerships with different regions of the world, beginning with Africa and the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods.

In addition, he welcomed the fact that the EU was reasserting its determination to support in this way the green transition, the digital transformation, and the economic recovery. The EU would make its own choices and contribute to shaping the world around it by taking a leading role, guided by its strategic interests and values, in responding to the current global challenges.

In the course of the discussion that followed, the Commission raised the following main points:

- the College’s support for a welcome – and in reality indispensable – reconsideration, in order to adapt the EU’s trade policy to a rapidly changing world, in which the stakes had fundamentally changed since 2015, when the last revision of the EU’s trade strategy was carried out;
- the further example that the COVID-19 pandemic had provided of the need to strengthen the EU’s strategic autonomy and therefore its resilience, an objective pursued by the revisited trade strategy;
- the desirability of presenting in parallel the Communication on renewed multilateralism and the strategic adaptation of the EU’s trade policy, with its annex on reform of the World Trade Organization, bringing robustness, coherence and credibility to the EU’s contribution;
- the primary importance for the EU of maintaining the driving force of its trade strategy, and the need for it to garner support amongst its international partners for the validity of its priorities, standards and values for addressing the global challenges of today;
- the turning point that the proposed strategy represented for creating more sustainable and fairer globalisation, commensurate with the EU’s ambitions in the environmental, digital and geopolitical fields and in relation to fairness and human rights;

- the need to continue and deepen the debate on European trade policy within the College, certain aspects of the policy being politically sensitive;
- the importance that the framework for discussion offered by that day's Communication should reassert with confidence and determination the EU's commitment to openness to the world, failing which it would find it difficult to maintain its trade surplus and EU food production and agriculture in particular would be exposed to significant risks;
- in terms of geographical priorities, besides the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods and Africa, on which the EU should focus primarily, a reference to Eurostat statistics showing that European companies had invested more in Latin America than in China, India, Japan and Russia combined; this reinforced the need to encourage the conclusion of the three trade agreements pending with Chile, Mexico and Mercosur;
- the need to maintain consistency between the internal and external dimensions of the EU's policies and the important role that a cross-cutting tool such as European trade policy could play to this end;
- a call to maintain a level playing field for European economic actors and to monitor this aspect while fulfilling the EU's obligations under WTO rules;
- a reference to the risk to the EU should its undertakings face massive competition from external production subject to less severe constraints than within the EU;
- hence the need, on the one hand, to seize the opportunity to promote the green and digital transitions, social rights, human rights and fundamental values as part of trade negotiations;
- on the other hand, the importance of taking full advantage of the opportunities provided by the implementation of the existing trade agreements; in this context,

the observation that the EU would use all the available mechanisms, including, if necessary, the flexibilities inherent in the agreements themselves, to ensure that these agreements were able to produce the expected results and respond to the new environmental and digital issues;

- with this in view, the idea of reviewing the existing trade agreements and analysing them from this perspective, while ensuring that the EU remained a stable, reliable and predictable partner;
- moreover, the importance for the EU to equip itself with the right tools in order to react when partners did not respect the rules binding them;
- a mention of the fact that the ongoing review of the EU's industrial policy and the trade strategy presented that day would be mutually reinforcing in enhancing the EU's resilience, based on the mapping of its strategic dependencies, and supporting the competitiveness of European companies that were beginning their green and digital transitions;
- on this last point, a call for vigilance with regard to the use of data, particularly industrial data;
- the vital need to allow data flows to and from third countries to facilitate trade; nevertheless, the need to stand firm in this area through an approach based on European values and interests, in accordance with the principles of the General Data Protection Regulation;
- the fact that this approach had been embodied for the first time in the Trade and Cooperation Agreement concluded in December 2020 with the UK;
- the announcement of two decisions on the adequacy of data protection in the UK; these were currently at the stage of internal consultation and evaluation within the Commission, which would adopt them unilaterally by the end of June 2021;

- the important observation that these two decisions would give the EU the necessary means to react should the UK in the future expose the data transferred to it to serious risks by distancing itself from the principles of the General Data Protection Regulation, which it had adopted for the time being;
- the recommendation to pay attention, in communication activities relating to the revisited European trade strategy, to the fact that certain concepts could have sensitive connotations in certain countries.

Replying to this exchange of views, Mr DOMBROVSKIS pointed out that openness was not just a basic tenet of the EU, displayed by it in many areas, but was also an essential condition for promoting its values on the international stage. He called for this principle to be defended and clarified with assurance.

He also drew attention to the increasingly strong interlinkage between trade policy and other EU policies, referring for example to the impact of international trade on the agricultural sector.

With regard to levelling the playing field internationally to prevent requirements linked to social standards, security considerations or the green transition creating regrettable imbalances in future or current trade agreements, he pointed out that the EU was bound by WTO rules and must comply with them until the reform on which the Commission intended to work was implemented.

He thanked the College for this fruitful and constructive exchange.

In conclusion, the PRESIDENT noted that the COVID-19 pandemic, by showing the effects of the loss of biodiversity, in this case through the emergence of zoonotic diseases, demonstrated the extent to which including sustainable development in trade agreements was justified.

She thanked Mr DOMBROVSKIS for his excellent work and the Members of the Commission for this extensive debate.

Following this presentation, the Commission, on a proposal from the PRESIDENT, confirmed the approval of the Communication in COM(2021) 66/3 by the finalisation written procedure, the deadline for which was set at 10.00 on Thursday 18 February 2021 (PE/2021/940).

11. COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS - ACTION PLAN ON SYNERGIES BETWEEN CIVIL, DEFENCE AND SPACE INDUSTRIES

(COM(2021) 70 TO /3 ; RCC(2021) 68)

The PRESIDENT invited Ms VESTAGER and Mr BRETON to present the Action Plan on Synergies between Civil, Defence and Space Industries.

Ms VESTAGER explained that this initiative, the first of its kind, took stock of existing EU-level resources and those that could be put in place to encourage synergies between these three key industrial areas and reap the benefits as soon as possible in the form of innovation, given that the EU would receive significant funding from the brand new European Defence Fund.

To illustrate these synergies, for instance between the defence industry and civil industry, she used the example of a mechanical engineer who, drawing inspiration from his work designing ejector seats in fighter jets for a European aeronautics company, a few years later, while working for a car manufacturer, developed the three-point seat belt now found in vehicles worldwide.

She observed that the Action Plan responded to three objectives to improve the links between space, defence and security.

Firstly, the complementarity between the EU's programmes and instruments would need to be strengthened in order to increase the effectiveness of investments and

results. The Action Plan encouraged the use of increased funding under the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework to strengthen investment in technologies for defence or civil use, for example in areas such as security, mobility, health, information management, digital and space, promoting synergies between European programmes and instruments.

Secondly, the Action Plan sought to ensure that EU research and development funding, including in the fields of defence and space, had economic and technological benefits for citizens. EU research and development spending had a significant multiplier effect and could respond to the needs of increased security, technological development, economic resilience and growth.

Thirdly, the objective was to facilitate the use of civil industry research and innovation findings in European defence cooperation projects. Cross-fertilisation between the civil, defence and space industries must contribute to growth in Europe, the development of the Single Market and greater security for EU citizens. She underlined that innovation often emerged from start-ups, SMEs and Research and Technology Organisations (RTO). Targeted measures would be provided for to allow these entities better access to EU programmes and funding and facilitate their entry into the defence, security and space markets.

Ms VESTAGER pointed out that the Action Plan did not change the governance of EU programmes and instruments and did not involve any additional budgetary allocations, but rather proposed a new methodology. Thus, a common list of critical technologies would be established at EU level, namely, technologies important for its strategic autonomy in key areas. She added that the Commission would establish roadmaps to stimulate innovation in these critical technologies. She also referred to three flagship initiatives that would be promoted, on which Mr BRETON would give further details.

She concluded with a remark about space, underlining that what happened there was of significance for the daily lives of EU citizens and citizens throughout the world.

Mr BRETON explained that the moment chosen to present the Action Plan was no coincidence, since the programming of funding under the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework had been finalised and the new European Defence Fund would be allocated just over a billion euros each year.

He pointed out that this Fund supplemented the efforts undertaken in the framework of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the Strategic Compass.

He stressed that the EU was a major provider of funding for technological development, whether through research, the EU Space Programme, civil security or the digital sphere. It therefore had to ensure the coherence of its decisions in all these areas and the synergy of all its resources to ensure its technological sovereignty.

He observed that it was precisely by connecting the three sectors – civil, space and defence – that the Action Plan could achieve the political ambition of European technological sovereignty.

Of the 11 specific actions he described, Mr BRETON highlighted five in particular, involving: (i) building on capability needs, including civil security elements, in order to finance the most suitable projects, as was already the case in defence and space, (ii) encouraging innovation, particularly disruptive innovation, by ensuring coherence between the various support instruments – the European Innovation Council, the CASSINI Space Entrepreneurship Initiative, and the European Defence Fund, 8% of the appropriations of which were spent on disruptive innovation, (iii) fostering a strategic approach to standards, (iv) monitoring critical technologies with a view to reducing the EU's dependencies through an EU Observatory of Critical Technologies and, finally, (v) focusing on flagship projects that highlighted possible synergies and investment in critical technologies.

Mr BRETON mentioned three of these flagship projects. The first concerned drones and would explore ways to integrate military know-how into civil drone technology. The second concerned space traffic management, which was a key element to

ensuring autonomous access to space for the EU. The third was a satellite connectivity project with several components, namely, connectivity for all, resilience of terrestrial networks, quantum communications security and a geostrategic dimension in the form of connectivity with Africa.

In the course of the discussion that followed, the Commission raised the following main points:

- the relevance of this initiative for efforts to develop the EU's open strategic autonomy;
- the quality and relevance of the Action Plan, which included a forward-looking dimension and built on best practices in governance;
- the strategic importance of the space, defence and security industries for the EU; the utility of exploiting the potential synergies between the industries and taking advantage of the numerous technological benefits that could flow from one to another;
- the suggestion that the EU strengthen research and innovation, particularly in the field of security;
- the recognition of the barriers to entry into defence-related industries for small businesses and the need for a truly European, rather than intergovernmental, approach to this issue;
- the ethical questions that arose when setting standards in areas in which the technologies used were related to defence;
- the communication of certain information of interest in the area of foresight;
- thus, to take the example of space traffic management, a reminder that more than 80 countries were already present in space and that more and more private entities had programmes in this area; the need, consequently, for the EU to

assert its interests and cooperate with the United States in particular in drawing up common rules;

- the mention of innovative energy applications which the EU should consider;
- the value of equipping the European Earth Observation Programme with modelling capabilities appropriate to its forecasting activities.

The PRESIDENT thanked Ms VESTAGER and Mr BRETON for this excellent Communication.

Following these presentations, the Commission, on a proposal from the PRESIDENT, confirmed the approval of the Communication in COM(2021) 70/3 by the finalisation written procedure, the deadline for which was set at 10.00 on Monday 22 February 2021 (PE/2021/983).

12. OTHER BUSINESS

LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN EXTERNAL RELATIONS

The PRESIDENT asked Mr BORRELL to brief the College on the latest developments in external relations.

By way of introduction, Mr BORRELL referred to the efforts undertaken in collaboration with the Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN), António Guterres, to relaunch the talks between the two Cypriot communities. He pointed out that the European Council would discuss the EU's relations with Turkey at its meeting on 25 and 26 March 2021.

He also mentioned the aftermath of the coup in Myanmar and the EU's contacts with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) with regard to this issue.

Mr BORRELL then highlighted the main items that would be on the agenda of the Foreign Affairs Council meeting on 22 February.

He said that the EU ministers would have a meeting by videoconference with the US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, which reflected the importance afforded by the new US government to transatlantic relations.

He said that the discussions would then focus on relations with Russia, a few days after the detention of the opposition leader, Alexei Navalny, and the follow-up to Mr BORRELL's visit to Moscow in preparation for the March European Council discussions. The question of the adoption of additional sanctions against the country would be raised on that occasion.

In addition, the Foreign Affairs Council would discuss the situation in Hong Kong, where the democratic space and the independence of the judiciary were undermined, and the EU's position in this regard.

He also said that the Finnish Foreign Minister would report on his recent visit to Ethiopia and Sudan. Mr BORRELL referred to the unusually violent acts perpetrated in the Tigray region and the tragic situation of the local population. He pointed out that the EU had called on the Ethiopian authorities to allow humanitarian aid access to the region. He did not rule out the question of sanctions against the Ethiopian government being raised if the situation continued to deteriorate.

Finally, he reported that the EU foreign ministers had wished to have a first discussion on the analysis of the threats made under the Strategic Compass, which was normally discussed in the Defence Ministers Council.

A brief discussion followed, during which a Member of the Commission highlighted the electoral context in Cyprus, which was not conducive to a relaunch of talks between the two communities on the island, and underlined the importance of

giving strong support to the Greek government in its efforts to relaunch relations with Turkey.

The Commission took note of this information.

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The meeting closed at 12.28.