



Remarks by President von der Leyen at the joint press conference with Executive Vice-Presidents Vestager and Dombrovskis to present the economic response to the Coronavirus crisis

Brussels, 13 March 2020

Good morning to all of you,

The Coronavirus pandemic is testing us all – institutions, governments, health systems, economies – but the Coronavirus pandemic is most of all testing people. This is not only an unprecedented challenge for our health care systems, but also a major shock for our economies. I am convinced that the European Union can withstand this shock. But each Member State needs to live up to its full responsibility. And the European Union as a whole needs to be determined, coordinated and united.

In a pandemic, scientific-based guidance is essential to help plot the best course of action. Yesterday, together with Commissioner Stella Kyriakides, I launched a board of outstanding scientists – epidemiologists and virologists – to assess the ongoing situation and help us develop the most effective responses. Our goal is to develop guidelines and evidence-based strategies to deal with the spread of the virus.

We just are at the beginning of the crisis. Every Member State, even those which have very low numbers today, all of us, have to know and to understand that it is not possible to stop the virus, but it is possible and of utmost importance to slow down the spread of the virus. That is doable. And you have seen many measures like schools and universities being closed, events cancelled. We slow down the public life.

This should give our healthcare systems, our nurses and doctors and the intensive care units the time and the space they need to cope with the surge of new patients as the virus continues to spread. The Commission is also taking all necessary steps to ensure an adequate supply of protective equipment across Europe. Commissioner Breton is in close contact with the producers of such equipment. We assess the stocks and work on scaling up their capacity rapidly.

Here I want to be very clear: The Single Market has to function. It is not good when Member States take unilateral action. Because it always causes a domino effect. And that prevents the urgently needed equipment from reaching patients, from reaching hospitals and the medical personnel. Ultimately, it amounts to reintroducing internal borders at a time when solidarity between Member States is needed.

On this matter, I have been in very close contact with Germany, with France and with other Member States. I am happy to report, that they are willing to adapt their national measures as we requested. In the last few hours, we have seen travel bans and controls being put in place in a number of Member States. Of course, we all want to protect our citizens from the spread of the virus. So let us look together at how we can do that and how we can do that most effectively. Certain controls may be justified. But general travel bans are not seen as being the most effective by the World Health Organisation. Moreover, they have a strong social and economic impact. They disrupt people's lives and business across the borders. In other words, any measure that is taken must be proportionate.

What we can do, and we should do, is to carry out health screening measures. These can be taken at external or they can be taken at internal borders, as well as within the territory of Member States. This is why we propose to have EU guidelines for health screening at the borders. Commissioner Johansson will present these today to the Ministers at the Justice and Home Affairs Council.

Once again, in general, for any measures to be effective, they need to be coordinated at EU level. Member States, especially neighbouring ones, need to work very closely together. In this way – and it is the only way –, we can make sure that our citizens receive the health care that they need immediately, wherever they are at the moment. This was strongly the health part. I want to turn to the economic sector now.

We all know that the virus is not only dangerous for our health, but it is also hitting our economies. It is a major shock for the global and for the European economy. We have to take decisive and bold action now, and this is on all different levels. This shock is temporary, but we must work together to ensure that it is as short and as limited as possible. And that it does not create permanent damage to

our economies.

Therefore, Member States should be encouraged and they should feel comfortable to take all the necessary measures to support the most affected sectors – for example tourism, transport or retail, just to name some. And they should be encouraged and they should feel comfortable to take all the necessary measures they need to support people, for example through short-time work schemes or other effective measures. For this to happen, that is giving the Member States reassurance, we – at the European level – are providing maximum flexibility. Flexibility on state aid – and Executive Vice-President Margarethe Vestager will present this in detail – and flexibility within the Stability and Growth Pact. Executive Vice-President Valdis Dombrovskis will tell you more about this in a moment.

In this moment, flexible EU state aid rules enable Member States to take swift action to support companies and citizens. For example, yesterday the Commission approved within hours the first request, coming from Denmark, to compensate companies for cancellation of events with a large number of participants. The serious disturbance to the Italian economy created by the Coronavirus will lead the Commission to authorise wide ranges of state aid measures to remedy the situation.

Alongside these overarching macroeconomic measures, the Commission has also adopted today proposals to provide liquidity into our economy. We are setting up a EUR 37 billion Corona Response Investment Initiative to grant support to the healthcare sector, to the labour market and to support SMEs from all affected sectors.

Furthermore, the EU budget will deploy its existing instruments to support small and medium enterprises with liquidity, complementing thus the measures taken at national level. To give you some examples, the European Investment Fund will guarantee for example EUR 8 billion in loans for 100,000 SMEs and small mid-caps. Or you already know the Commission's proposal to enable airlines to keep their airport slots, even if they do not operate flights in those slots because of declining air traffic. This temporary measure will help both our aviation industry and the environment. It will help decrease emissions by avoiding so-called 'ghost flights' – when airlines fly almost empty planes, simply to keep their slots.

The measures announced today deal with the situation of today. This is an important economic package. But, we have to acknowledge that the situation is evolving very fast. We stand ready to do more as the situation evolves. We will do whatever is necessary to support the Europeans and the European economy.

Les mesures annoncées aujourd'hui correspondent à la situation d'aujourd'hui. Ceci est un paquet économique important mais nous devons reconnaître que la situation évolue très rapidement. Nous sommes prêts à faire plus. Nous ferons tout ce qui est nécessaire pour soutenir les Européens et l'économie européenne.

Die heutigen Maßnahmen sind auf die aktuelle Situation zugeschnitten. Das ist ein wichtiges Paket für unsere europäische Wirtschaft. Aber je nachdem wie die Lage sich verändert, stehen wir bereit, mehr zu tun. Wir werden alles Mögliche unternehmen, um die Europäer und die europäische Wirtschaft zu stützen.

Thank you.

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