



European Commission - Speech [Check Against Delivery]



Speech by Vice-President Šefčovič on behalf of President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary debate ahead of the European Council of 25-26 March 2021

Brussels, 24 March 2021

Dear President,

Honourable Members,

It has now been over a year since Europe went into lockdown.

Overnight, our lives were turned upside down as we poured all our energies into fighting this terrible virus, which is causing so much suffering, in Europe and around the world.

A year of being limited in what we can do, where we can go and who we can see has understandably led to some pandemic fatigue.

But now is not the time to take our eye off the ball.

Despite some problems with vaccine procurement – AstraZeneca in particular continues to under-deliver – we have good reason to hope that the situation will improve in the second quarter.

We expect to receive 200 million doses of the Pfizer vaccine, 55 million doses of the single jab Johnson & Johnson vaccine, and 35 million doses of the Moderna vaccine by the end of Q2.

This is in addition to the 70 million doses of AstraZeneca currently foreseen – albeit far less than the contractually committed 180 million doses.

If these estimates prove accurate, we should achieve our target of having 70% of Europe's adult population fully vaccinated by the end of the summer.

This is all the more important when we see the worrying developments with new variants – *now representing close to 80% of infections in some countries* – and the spectre of a third wave approaching.

So, as underlined by President von der Leyen last week, we will use the EU's export authorisation scheme to bolster transparency and ensure reciprocity and proportionality in our vaccine-related dealings with third countries, especially those which manufacture vaccines themselves.

I would like to be clear: the mechanism is not an export ban.

In fact, so far 380 out of 381 requests for an export authorisation have been approved.

And with 43 million doses exported to 33 countries since the end of January, the EU is the world's biggest exporter of vaccines.

We will continue to act fairly and responsibly and fulfil our global leadership role.

That is also why exports to low- and middle-income countries, supplies through COVAX and exports to EU overseas countries and territories remain unconditionally exempted.

But we need to see fairness and the right balance when assessing the impact of planned exports.

This is what the two adjustments to the existing mechanism adopted today are about: to help us ensure timely access to vaccines for EU citizens.

As the President emphasised, this is an invitation to be open, because open roads run in both directions.

We also need to forge an effective and lasting path towards reopening and recovery, which fully upholds our fundamental principles of non-discrimination and data protection.

To this end, last week the Commission brought forward a proposal to create a Digital Green Certificate to facilitate safe free movement inside the EU during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It will be available, free of charge, in digital or paper format, and a QR code will help ensure its security and authenticity.

The Digital Green Certificate will work in three ways:

First, it will offer proof that a person has either been vaccinated, received a recent negative test result, or recovered from COVID-19, and thus has antibodies.

Second, it will make sure that this proof is recognised in every Member State.

And third, the Certificate will help Member States re-establish full freedom of movement in a safe, responsible and trusted manner.

The Commission will build a gateway to ensure all certificates can be verified across the EU, and will support Member States in the technical implementation of certificates.

We aim to have the system in place by June – and for this reason we have asked the Parliament to treat the file under the urgent procedure.

We are counting on you.

This is also an opportunity to influence global standards and lead by example based on our European values.

The Certificate is only part of our efforts towards a gradual, safe and lasting reopening.

Last week, we also adopted a Communication laying out what is needed to achieve this, including a common framework for response measures, and measures covering testing, treatments and vaccine sharing.

The Communication also covered support for the tourism and cultural sectors and continued support for global efforts to combat the pandemic, and announced a future EU Strategy on COVID-19 Therapeutics.

Finally, we will issue a “lessons learned” communication in June, as requested by the European Council.

Also last week, we adopted a Recommendation on the use of wastewater monitoring to track COVID-19 and its variants.

Wastewater monitoring has proven to be an effective, reliable and relatively cheap way to identify the presence of the virus, allowing for its early detection.

It is a useful complementary tool in deciding on when to impose or lift restrictions.

The Recommendation will help ensure that wastewater monitoring activities are included in national testing strategies more systematically, with guidance on the design and management of a wastewater surveillance network and rapid transmission of data to health authorities.

Away from COVID-19 matters, the Commission, together with the High Representative, prepared a report on the state of play of political, economic and trade relations between the EU and Turkey.

On this basis, leaders will give guidance on the way forward.

It is clear that we must resolve our differences through dialogue, and constructive, credible steps on the ground.

We therefore deeply regret Turkey's decision to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention and urge that this be reversed.

Finally, on 9 March the Commission set out its digital vision and goals for 2030.

We proposed a Digital Compass, setting out ambitious targets for digital skills, digital infrastructure, the digital transformation of businesses and the digitisation of public administration.

In addition, it will guide our international digital partnerships.

We will also accelerate our work on a regulatory framework to accompany the digital transition.

Later this year we will present further proposals on Artificial Intelligence, a European digital identity and the single market for data.

The fair taxation of digital economy is also a priority.

We remain committed to finding a global solution on the reform of the corporate taxation framework by mid-2021 with our partners in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation in Europe.

We are optimistic about this process.

But whatever its outcome, the Commission is committed to adopting a proposal on a digital levy by the end of this semester with a view to it becoming a new own resource.

I can assure you that we can, and we will, design a digital levy, which is compatible with the OECD process.

I will stop here, Honourable Members, and I look forward to your questions.

Thank you.

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