

The EU Response to Covid-19

Gerard Kiely, Head of the European Commission Representation in Ireland

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Mr Chairman, Honourable Members,

Many thanks for your kind invitation to discuss the European Union's response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

1. Introduction.

During her State of the Union 2020 speech last month President von der Leyen devoted her first words to pay tribute to all the care givers, nurses, doctors and front line workers in Europe, who have pulled us through this crisis to date and who continue to be our first line of response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The President said – and I agree - that we are inspired by their empathy, bravery and sense of duty.

She also said their stories reveal a lot about the state of our world and the state of our Union. A virus a thousand times smaller than a grain of sand exposed how delicate life can be. It laid bare the strains on our health systems and the limits of a model that values wealth above wellbeing. But people want to move out of this corona world, -she said - out of this fragility, out of uncertainty. They are ready for change and they are ready to move on. She concluded that therefore this is the moment for Europe.

For a long time health care in the EU Member States has been a national competence, where until recently the EU had very limited input. This was also the case when the virus struck us. Our nurses,

caregivers, doctors and frontline workers were first and foremost national heroes. However, this also influenced how we could react. The initial response in EU Member States showed that we still have 27 sovereign Member States that might share many areas of responsibility within the framework of our Union, but which also maintain multiple areas of competence covered by their own decisions. And health is one of them.

So when Covid-19 hit us, this became the moment for Europe. And one, in my view, where we have risen to the occasion. EU Member States' health systems immediately went into overdrive to counter the contagion and support those affected. However, Member States also started closing borders, limiting the flow of essential goods. Some started to compete with each other for the procurement of limited supplies of PPE and medication. In addition, the economic effects of lockdowns had to be met by national social security systems and national financial support to businesses and workers.

In recent months, we have rediscovered the value of what we hold in common. As individuals, we have all sacrificed a piece of our personal liberty for the safety of others. And as a Union, we all shared a part of our sovereignty for the common good. We showed what is possible when we trust each other and trust our European institutions.

Working within its competences, and sometimes moving beyond into innovative areas, the EU has given a massive response to Covid-19. I have provided a separate summary overview of that response, which I will not repeat in detail here. However, I would like to highlight a number of important elements.

2. EU response measures.

Firstly, to respond to Covid-19 the EU has undertaken **Economic Measures**:

- A massive recovery package of €1.8 trillion that combines the EU budget for 2021-27 and NextGenerationEU. Under the agreement the Commission will be able to borrow up to €750 billion on the markets. A first successful EU bond issue of €17 billion has just been oversubscribed over 13 times.
- Economic measures that complement the European Central Bank's €1.35 trillion Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme in addition to the €120 billion programme decided earlier.
- Temporary relaxing of state aid rules so governments can provide liquidity to the economy.
- Triggering the 'escape clause' that allows maximum flexibility to our budgetary rules.
- The Commission's Temporary Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE), designed to help people keep their jobs during the crisis.
- Financial support for hard-hit small and medium businesses.
- The Commission tabled an investment initiative to provide Member States with immediate liquidity. It consists of unspent cohesion policy funds.
- To support farmers and the agriculture sector, the Commission has launched exceptional measures to support and stabilise agricultural markets.

Secondly, to respond to Covid-19 the EU has set up support for **research for treatment, diagnostics and vaccines**:

- The Coronavirus Global Response pledging marathon raised €16 billion in funds for universal access to treatments, tests and vaccines, of which €1.4 billion from the Commission.
- The Commission has mobilised more than €660 million under Horizon 2020 to develop vaccines, new treatments, diagnostic tests and medical systems.
- The Commission's **Vaccines Strategy** was designed to accelerate the development and availability of vaccines. It aims to secure the production of vaccines within the EU; ensure sufficient supplies for its Member States through Advance Purchase Agreements with vaccine producers; adapt the EU's regulatory framework to the current emergency; use the flexibility of our rules to speed up the development, authorisation and availability of vaccines.
- So far, the Commission has concluded agreements on behalf of all EU Member States with:
 - **AstraZeneca** for the purchase of 300 million doses of the vaccine, with an option to purchase 100 million more;
 - **Sanofi-GSK** for the purchase of 300 million doses;
 - **Johnson and Johnson** for the initial purchase of 200 million doses, and could further purchase up to an additional 200 million vaccine doses.
- Also we're in exploratory talks with **CureVac**, with **Moderna**, and with **BioNTech-Pfizer** for millions more doses.
- Separate from this the Commission also presented a **Vaccination Strategy** to help identify vulnerable groups, which should benefit from vaccination. The Strategy also deals with vaccination services and infrastructure, vaccines deployment, as well as the

availability and affordability of vaccines, and communication to ensure public confidence.

Thirdly, to respond to Covid-19 the EU has provided support to the **Public Health** sector:

- The Commission has allocated €3 billion from the EU budget, matched by €3 billion from Member States, to fund the Emergency Support Instrument and the RescEU's common stockpile of equipment.
- To aid the production and availability of personal protective equipment (PPE), the Commission is working closely with Member States to assess the available stock of PPE in the EU, the production capacity and anticipated needs. It is ensuring conformity assessment and market surveillance to increase the supply of PPE without compromising health and safety standards. It is discussing with industry how to convert production lines to supply more PPE and providing manufacturers with guidance to increase production of PPE, hand sanitisers and disinfectants.

Fourthly, to respond to Covid-19 the EU has addressed the issue of **borders and mobility including**:

- guidelines for border management measures to protect health and ensure availability of goods and essential services, creating so-called "green lanes";
- temporary restrictions on non-essential travel to the EU;
- guidance to ensure the free movement of workers, especially in the health care and food sectors.

Finally, to respond to Covid-19 the EU has engaged in activities to **fight disinformation**:

The Commission is in close contact with social media platforms regarding measures to promote authoritative content and to take down misleading, illegal and harmful content.

So far, more than 300 disinformation narratives on the coronavirus have been exposed, published and updated on www.EUvsDisinfo.eu. The Commission's fighting coronavirus-disinformation page also provides materials for myth busting and fact checking.

The Commission and the European External Action Service are working closely with other EU institutions and Member States, including through the Rapid Alert System set up in March 2019, as well as with international partners from the G7 and NATO.

3. Moving forward together.

Honourable Members,

Much work is still ongoing, we are not finished yet. Many of these initiatives are being implemented. Many of them are available to Ireland in support of the efforts of the Irish Government and Irish authorities to counter the pandemic, but also to deal with its economic impact.

The pandemic is not over, nor is a vaccine available yet. National competences and EU policies continue as they are, but given the range of responses from the EU to date and working closely together with all EU Member States, we hope to meet the challenge and protect our citizens.

In the last six months, our health systems and workers have produced miracles. Every country has worked to do its best for its citizens.

Europe has done more together than ever before, and we achieved this without having full competences.

As President von der Leyen has said, it is crystal clear we need to build a stronger European Health Union.

The Commission wants to strengthen our crisis preparedness and management of cross-border health threats.

The Commission will propose to reinforce and empower the European Medicines Agency and ECDC – our centre for disease prevention and control.

The Commission also wants to establish a European agency for biomedical advanced research and development.

We need strategic stockpiling to address supply chain dependencies, notably for pharmaceutical products.

In conclusion, it is clearer than ever before that we must discuss the question of health competences.

The Commission thinks this is a suitable task for the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Thank you. I'm happy to answer questions.