

Dear Charles, dear Ursula,

Dear colleagues,

I thank you all for the excellent cooperation and support.

- This is our fifth and last gathering in this format during the Croatian Presidency, and I would like to take this opportunity to look back at an **exceptional semester, without precedent** in the long history of our Union.
- Before we took over the helm of the Council in January, we had prepared long and hard for our first ever Presidency.
- The motto of our Presidency is “A Strong Europe in a World of Challenges”, but no one could envisage many challenges we had to face and pandemic we have not seen in last 100 years.
- Very quickly we were thrust into an **unprecedented crisis situation**. Most of our plans had to be reshaped and reprioritised because of the **COVID-19** pandemic. From our Presidency's priority files we needed to quickly shift our focus to an overriding priority: the **safety of European citizens**.
- We also became the first EU Presidency ever whose capital Zagreb was hit, in the midst of the mandate, by a strong earthquake registered at 5,5 on the Richter scale. The damage inflicted on Zagreb is severe, it amounts to 11.5 billion euros. In that respect, we applied for the European Union Solidarity Fund on 10 June.

- In spite of everything we remained focused and we pressed ahead with all Presidency's tasks.

Let me look back at **our main achievements**:

Coronavirus pandemic response

- Our main task was the **coordination of our joint response to the COVID-19 crisis**. It is fair to say that the EU has achieved a lot in record time.
- After activating the IPCR mechanism (Integrated Political Crisis Response) in information sharing mode already at end of January, the Presidency decided to activate it in full **few weeks later**.
- The effective **cooperation of the Presidency with the Member States and the Commission** during the crisis was essential. And it continues in the same spirit now when we are trying to **restore the free movement** and return to a fully functioning **Schengen Area**, as well as to ensure our connection with third countries.
- The Council had to work under extraordinary circumstances. **Only COREPER**, whom I really want to thank, **continued meeting physically**, as well as a few key working parties. All the rest had to be done by video-conference.
- We agreed in record time on such crucial proposals, such as two packages of the **Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative** and **SURE**.

- We managed to **finalise other COVID-related files**, such as the temporary suspension of the airport slot requirements, the temporary flexibility for port services, or the relief measures for aviation and railways.
- The **Council activated the general escape clause of the EU fiscal framework**, ensuring the needed flexibility for Member States to protect their health systems and economies.
- We adopted the **amended EU budget for 2020**, agreeing to make available almost all the remaining money from this year's budget to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.
- We were engaged in **repatriation**, together with EEAS and other Member States, in joined consular efforts that were coordinated. Around **650 000 EU citizens** were repatriated safely back to their homes during the crisis.

Brexit/Future relations

- **The UK left the Union on 31 January 2020** and we are pleased it happened in an orderly manner.
- We adopted directives for the negotiation of a new partnership with the United Kingdom and negotiations began on **2 March**. I want to warmly thank our Chief Negotiator Michel Barnier for his handling of the process and an excellent cooperation with our Presidency.

Enlargement policy and the Western Balkans

- Here we are really happy that, contrary to the blockade in October 2019, the Council managed, on Croatia's initiative, to **open the accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania**. This decision was made possible due to the **new methodology** of accession negotiations, which we very much welcomed.
- We are really proud the Council committed towards this direction that was initiated at the beginning of the mandate of the new Commission.
- **I am particularly satisfied with the Zagreb Summit with Western Balkans**, which took place on 6 May, reaffirming once again the region's EU perspective and the added value of the enlargement process. The **Zagreb Declaration** remains the important reference for our future work in that regard.
- In May we also held **an economic and financial dialogue with Western Balkans and Turkey**, and adopted joint conclusions.
- The Council also adopted conclusions on **enhancing cooperation with Western Balkans partners in the field of migration and security**.
- We provided financial assistance to the Western Balkans partners to fight the COVID-19 pandemics and its consequences.

Strategic Agenda implementation and other priorities

- We have made an impressive progress on the **Strategic Guidelines** in the justice and home affairs area and are now very close to an agreement as 26 Member States support it. We have a well-balanced text, which does not prejudge any future discussions on our new migration Pact. We are hopeful that in the coming days, at the first occasion at the Leader's level, we shall all be able to endorse these important operational guidelines.
- We made **progress on climate** – the Council adopted the EU's long-term emission strategy for submission to the UNFCCC. Work has also progressed substantially on the Just Transition Fund.
- Transport ministers adopted the **Opatija Declaration** which provides guidelines for the development of the EU **maritime policy by 2030**.
- We adopted three sets of conclusions in the **area of employment and social affairs**, including upskilling and reskilling and **demographic challenges**, which was one of the key topics and priorities of our Presidency.
- The Council adopted three sets of conclusions in the area of **culture and audio-visual; European teachers and trainers for the future, as well as a Resolution on education and training in the European Semester.**

- With the **United States**, we have continued our cooperation in a wide range of **justice and security related issues**.

External policy

- The Eastern Partnership summit took place yesterday. This was a strong signal. This was also on Croatian Presidency agenda and I thank Charles for his support in organizing it.
- Earlier, the Council adopted **conclusions on the Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020**, reaffirming its strategic importance and the joint commitment to building a common area of shared democracy, prosperity and stability.
- The Council adopted the decision to **launch a military crisis management operation in the Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR MED IRINI)**, tasked to contribute to the stabilization of the situation in Libya in all its aspects.
- We held an informal videoconference with the European Economic Area ministers and adopted a joint statement.
- The Council adopted Conclusions on **EU External Action on Preventing and Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism**.

- We also prepared and adopted **five sets of conclusions in the area of development cooperation, including on youth and “Team Europe”**.

More extraordinary circumstances – crises management Presidency

Two extraordinary Council meetings were held before the COVID-19 lockdowns:

- The Presidency convened an **extraordinary Justice and Home Affairs Council** to address the situation at Greece's and Bulgaria's borders with Turkey. In its conclusions, the Council expressed its solidarity with Greece, Bulgaria and Cyprus and other Member States that could face a similar situation.
- The Presidency **facilitated organization of the extraordinary Foreign Affairs Council in Zagreb** on 6 March, alongside the Gymnich. The Ministers adopted a statement on the crisis in Idlib and the situation at the EU external borders with Turkey.

“Digital Presidency”

- Ours was also partly a “digital Presidency”.
- The first **digital trilogue was held** during the Croatian Presidency (on Smart-TEN-T).

- I am also pleased that on 9 May we adopted **Council conclusions on shaping Europe's digital future**, setting out the framework for our swift progress on issues ranging from Artificial Intelligence to connectivity.
- **Prior to 13 March, seven high-level events were organized in Croatia, two parliamentary events and 21 working and expert-level meetings.**
- After the lockdowns across Europe, **we continued with informal ministerial meetings via video-conferences** and discussed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on economy, health systems, borders, education, culture, employment, mobility etc. Until today, **more than 60 high-level (heads of state and governments and ministerials) video-conferences have taken place**, covering different policy areas and measures in nearly all sectors of life. **Basically, all Council formations met virtually, and some of them several times.**

MFF and Recovery Plan

I would like to thank Ursula and the Commission for producing such a strong and bold plan for recovery and the work they have done updating the MFF proposal.

The work ahead on MFF is challenging, and that is a discussion about recovery after the pandemic, and our future MFF, adapted to new reality.

I will tackle this issue in more detail under second item on today's agenda.

Thank you, dear colleagues, for your support and trust in these unprecedented circumstances.

I would have much preferred if you were able to come here, to Zagreb, to join me in this big conference hall that was built for the Presidency.

We hand over the Council helm with an immense sense of achievement, proud that we have laid down good foundations for the EU's recovery.

Thank you also for your solidarity after the earthquake that struck Zagreb in March.

A final aim is to agree next week on a mandate on the **Conference on the Future of Europe on the level of the Council**, as we managed after 4 months to clear from the table some reservations that certain Member States had.

I think it will be important that we secure an agreement with the European Parliament and the European Commission so that we can launch, especially after this COVID pandemic, the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Our **citizens expect it**.

Finally, I would like to extend my **most sincere best wishes to the German Presidency**, and **especially to Angela**. With her leadership

and experience we are about to conclude **many important dossiers** before the end of this year.

I extend my thanks once again to you Charles and Ursula, and all of you, for your support and excellent cooperation.