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From: General Secretariat of the Council
To: Permanent Representatives Committee/Council

Subject: Preparation of the **Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council session** on 13 February 2020
Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV)
- Exchange of views

Delegations will find a discussion paper prepared by the Presidency in the Annex to this Note. This discussion paper contains background information for the exchange of views intended to take place at the meeting of the Council (EPSCO) on 13 February 2020 and questions to facilitate the exchange of views.

Council (EPSCO), 13 February 2020
NOVEL CORONAVIRUS (2019-nCoV)
Presidency discussion paper

Following the first reports of cases of acute respiratory syndrome in Wuhan in the Hubei province in China at the end of December 2019, the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention identified a novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) as being the causative agent. The outbreak has evolved rapidly, affecting other parts of China and several countries in Asia, Europe and North America as well as Australia.

Coronaviruses were identified in the mid-1960s and are known to infect humans and a variety of animals (including birds and mammals). In humans this family of viruses causes illness ranging from the common cold to the more severe, or even fatal, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). The 2019-nCoV is a new strain of coronavirus that has not previously been identified in humans. Outbreaks of novel virus infections in humans are always a public health concern, particularly when there is little knowledge of the characteristics of the virus, how it spreads between people, how severe the resulting infections are or what the treatment is.

Following the identification of the first three cases in the EU on 24 January 2020, an extraordinary meeting of the Friends of the Presidency Group was held on the 27 January 2020.

On 28 January 2020, the Croatian Presidency of the Council of the EU decided to activate the Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR) in its information sharing mode. IPCR is the EU framework for coordinating cross-sectoral crisis response at the highest political level. It involves the Presidency, the Commission, the EEAS, relevant agencies, the Cabinet of the President of the European Council, and experts from Member States and relevant international organisations. The ICPR information sharing takes place via a dedicated web-platform that includes the Integrated Situational Awareness and Analysis (ISAA) reports, situation maps and stakeholder contributions.

On the same day, France requested assistance from the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) to provide consular support for the repatriation of EU citizens from Wuhan.

On 30 January 2020, WHO declared the novel coronavirus outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). It advised all countries to be prepared for containment, including active surveillance, early detection, isolation and case management, contact tracing and prevention of onward spread of the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV).

In the EU, the Health Security Committee¹ (HSC) in liaison with the Commission coordinates the risk and crisis communication and responses of the Member States to serious cross-border threats to health. By 7 February 2020, six meetings of the HSC had been convened.

The Presidency convened a high-level video conference on 7 February 2020, where the Member States delegations, along with representatives of the Commission and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) had the opportunity to review the state of play and discuss matters of importance from a public health perspective arising from the 2019-nCoV outbreak. Member States exchanged information on measures and activities undertaken. Also, they shared and compared experiences with regard to the activation of national systems for responding to public health emergencies. The exchange of views showed that the level of activation in the national systems differed depending on the epidemiological situation within each Member State, but also that the level of preparedness to handle the 2019-nCoV outbreak is high both in Member States authorities and in the EU bodies.

Member States also noted with concern that unexpected situations in third countries might have a negative impact on the supply chains for pharmaceuticals and medical equipment in the EU. In this specific situation, supply systems are vulnerable to interruptions of manufacturing in China since many products that are critical for the efficient mitigation of threats to public health, such as personal protective equipment and active ingredients, are imported from China. Many Member States called for this issue to be considered further.

¹ Article 17(2)(c) of Decision No 1082/2013/EU on serious cross-border threats to health.

Having considered the nature and severity of the issues outlined above, the Presidency has decided to convene a Council meeting. At this meeting Ministers will have the opportunity to exchange views in order to ensure that political guidance is available for an efficient and coordinated approach to protecting public health in the EU against the threats resulting from the ongoing 2019-nCoV outbreak.

In order to structure the discussion, delegations are invited to respond to the questions set out below.

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE THE DISCUSSION:

1. How can cooperation between Member States be strengthened in cases where an aligned approach to preventive and preparatory measures is necessary to protect public health? How do you see the role of the Commission in terms of providing support to Member States?
2. Bearing in mind that disease outbreak and other severe events in third countries can affect the European market for pharmaceuticals and medical equipment, what steps should be jointly undertaken in order to ensure a sustainable supply for the internal market? Which would be the most appropriate tools for achieving this goal?