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NOTE

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 6 March 2020
COVID-19
- 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 6 March 2020 and questions to facilitate the exchange of views.

Council (EPSCO), 6 March 2020**COVID-19*****Presidency discussion paper***

The first cases of COVID-19 were reported in Wuhan in the Hubei province in China at the end of December 2019. The outbreak has rapidly evolved affecting other parts of China and many other countries.

The first cases of COVID-19 were identified in the EU on 24 January 2020. In response, the Presidency organised an extraordinary meeting of the Council Working Party: Friends of the Presidency on 27 January 2020.

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

On the same day, the President of the Commission activated the second phase of the crisis coordination system (ARGUS) and France requested assistance through the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) to provide consular support for repatriation of EU citizens from Wuhan. Denmark also activated the UCPM for repatriation from Wuhan on 9 February. Further activations of the UCPM by Italy and the United Kingdom allowed repatriation on 21 February of EU and UK citizens from the cruise ship Diamond Princess docked in Yokohama in Japan. In total, repatriation of 515 EU citizens back to Europe was co-financed from the Union budget through the UCPM.

In efforts to address COVID-19, the UCPM has also been used by some Member States for coordination and co-financing of emergency medical supplies to third countries, as well as to communicate their needs for additional medical supplies.

On 30 January 2020, WHO declared the COVID-19 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.

In the EU, the Health Security Committee (HSC)¹ in liaison with the Commission coordinates the risk and crisis communication and responses of the Member States to serious cross-border threats to health. Until 2 March 2020, ten meetings of HSC have been convened in response to COVID-19.

The Presidency convened a High-level videoconference on 7 February 2020, where the Member States, along with the 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 concerning the COVID-19 outbreak. Member States exchanged information on measures and activities undertaken. Also, they shared and compared experiences concerning the activation of national systems for responding to public health emergencies. The exchange of views showed that the level of activation of national systems differed between Member States, depending on the epidemiological situation.

On 13 February 2020, the Croatian Presidency convened an extraordinary Council (EPSCO) meeting, where Health Ministers exchanged views on measures taken and discussed the means and possibilities for a coordinated approach for protecting public health in EU. Ministers also reflected on the impacts of unexpected situations in third countries on the supply of medicinal products and medical devices in the EU and agreed that a comprehensive analysis of the situation is necessary.

¹ Established by Decision (EU) 1082/2013 on cross-border health threats.

At that meeting the Council adopted Conclusions on COVID-19², welcoming the EU's effective response to the challenges arising from the outbreak of COVID-19, and urging Member States to take the necessary measures to enhance their cooperation. They also called upon the Commission to examine ways of facilitating Member States' access to personal protective equipment and to evaluate the consequences of global health threats for the availability of medicinal products within the EU and the security of supply chains.

Since 21 February 2020, a significant increase of COVID-19 cases was registered in Italy, and also other Member States started to register increases in cases that indicate that the disease now is transmitted within the EU and not as previously limited to "imported cases". Furthermore, COVID-19 resulted in fatalities in EU in the past 10 days.

Despite efforts put into dealing with challenges brought by COVID-19, there are still significant uncertainties concerning this novel type of communicable disease. The fact that in many Member States the vast majority of cases is caused by transmission in the country itself means that the means to fight the disease are now changing. As the epidemiological situation of the COVID-19 infection worsens, it is necessary to further reflect on how containment and prevention measures can have the highest effect, as well as to assess the level of preparedness and need for a coordinated response on EU level.

In line with the above, the Presidency has decided to upgrade the IPCR to full activation mode and to convene another extraordinary Council (EPSCO) meeting on 6 March 2020, where Health Ministers will have the opportunity to take stock of the current situation and measures already taken, in order to find the best approach for coordinated response to the current spread of COVID-19 in EU.

In order to structure the discussion, the Presidency has prepared questions that Member States' delegations are invited to respond to at the extraordinary Council meeting.

² OJ C 57, 20.2.2020, p. 4-7.

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE THE DISCUSSION:

- 1) How do you assess existing mechanisms at EU level in view of the challenges posed by the spread of COVID-19 in Europe? Could you suggest additional activities that would be helpful to further improve communication and information sharing?

 - 2) Bearing in mind the current pace of the spread of COVID-19 in the EU, how would you assess the effectiveness of measures currently in place in your country? Do you expect to focus less on prevention and preparedness measures in order to concentrate on treatment if the epidemiologic situation deteriorates?

 - 3) Would you assess measures already put in place by the Commission to give sufficient assistance to Member States if, despite measures undertaken, the spread of COVID-19 continues? Could you suggest additional activities that would be useful in helping your country in such situation?
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