

GSC NOTE TO COREPER

FOLLOW-UP TO LEADERS' VTC OF 25 FEBRUARY 2021 COVID-19 COORDINATION

1. Following the Leaders' VTC, during which COREPER was tasked to ensure follow-up on certain issues, delegations are invited to respond to the following questions in order to guide further work on the priorities set by the Leaders.

I. Establishing standardised and interoperable "COVID-19 status certificates"

2. During their VTC, Heads of State or Government discussed notably the issue of vaccination certificates and called for work on this issue to continue. In particular was raised the possibility of agreeing upon standardised and interoperable model forms of "COVID-19 status certificates", certifying whether its holder has tested negative, or has been fully vaccinated, or has recovered from COVID-19. Since then the Commission has announced its intention to adopt a legislative proposal for a "Digital Green Pass".

A. Finalising ongoing work on certificates

3. On all three issues, much has already been agreed:

(a) on certificates of negative test result: Member States have agreed in the Health Security Committee (HSC) a document (submitted to COREPER for information on 19 February 2021, see doc. 6277/21) on a common standardised set of data for test result certificates. This also includes a list of Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs) which are mutually recognised;

(b) on certificates of vaccination, Member States have agreed in the "e-Health Network" on 27 January 2021 guidelines on proof of vaccination for medical purposes, including a minimum dataset;

(c) on certificates of proof of recovery, the work currently underway on a common approach for an EU medical certificate needs to be finalised rapidly.

4. In order to have a system in place, there is a need for both technical work and a legal framework. As regards vaccination certificates, the Commission has been leading work with Member States on establishing a trust framework and a digital infrastructure that would facilitate the authentication of certificates (vaccination, tests and recovery from COVID-19). The President of the Commission stated at the Heads' informal VTC that the technical work underpinning such a platform could require three to four months.

5. In this respect it is important that Member States ensure already now that the agreed common datasets for test results and vaccinations, including the coding systems, be used by their laboratories and vaccinating entities.

B. Defining the purpose and use of "COVID-19 status certificates"

6. Another key issue is how such "COVID-19 status certificates" would be used. The ECDC should pursue its work on the scientific evidence underpinning the possible uses of such certificates and the relevant fora should continue to examine the policy implications of such evidence.

7. It could be argued that in line with the principle of subsidiarity, decisions on the possible uses of these certificates should be left to the national (or sub-national) level, but that when it comes to uses with cross-border implications such as travel, the EU-level would bring clear added-value. It would also be important to reflect on the implications for travel into the EU from third countries.

Q1. Do delegations agree with the approach set out above ? What specific issues should the Commission take into account in developing a legislative proposal for rapid adoption? What changes might be required in respect of Council Recommendation 2020/1475 on travel within the EU and to Council Recommendation 2020/912 on travel from third countries?

A1.

6. The Netherlands agrees that the work of the ECDC should be continued to learn more about transmission, immunisation and how mutations react towards vaccines and previous contaminations with the original virus.

7. The Netherlands agrees that the basis of the certificates for cross border travelling should indeed be discussed and agreed on an EU level, the national implementation of these certificates should be a national decision. We however would like to point out that further research about immunisation and transmission is necessary before certificates are used broader than for medical use.

Both Council decisions should be adapted in line with new agreements.

II. Preparing for a coordinated response to potential new variants of concern

8. The Commission's work on establishing a "HERA Incubator" will be essential in supporting Member States to set up many of the critical tools for identifying, managing and responding to variants. Putting measures in place to ramp up genome sequencing and testing for variants, and accelerate the development, production and authorisation of adapted vaccines will be crucial in terms of readiness to face the challenge of variants.

9. At the informal Heads' VTC the issue was raised of the need, in the short term, for the EU to prepare a coordinated response in the event that a new variant of the virus would spread across Europe, especially if it were a vaccine-resistant variant. It was argued that the EU should pre-agree on the range of emergency measures that may need to be taken in such a case, as regards testing, quarantine, etc. This in turn requires Member States to reflect whether, and how, the Council Recommendations on travel into, and within, the EU should be amended.

Q2. Bearing in mind the possible future deterioration of the epidemiological situation in Europe due to the spread of new variants, should further preparedness measures be taken? Should Council Recommendation 2020/1475 on intra-EU travel and Council Recommendation 2020/912 on travel into the EU be amended to cover more specifically the eventuality of tackling new variants?

A2.

The Netherlands believes that current preparedness measures should be further developed but on a national level it should always be possible to choose a different approach.

We believe there is no need to amend Council Recommendation 2020/1475 on intra-EU travel and Council Recommendation 2020/912 on travel into the EU because of new variants. We believe the existing measures are already appropriate.

III. Exploiting technological advances as regards testing

10. While vaccination will eventually lift Europe out of the COVID-19 crisis, testing will remain a crucial element, as was discussed at the Leaders' VTC. Over the past year, scientific knowledge has rapidly progressed, in particular as regards tests to detect whether a person is, or has been, infected with COVID-19. Such advances in particular led to the

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agreement on the Council Recommendation of 21 January 2021 on a common framework for the use and validation of rapid antigen tests and on the mutual recognition of test results.

11. Today, self COVID-19 tests are also being developed. These may have the potential to enhance the fight against the virus, but scientific guidance is needed, as regards their reliability, their use, and their implications for public health policies. At the Leaders' VTC the President of the Commission agreed to task the ECDC with developing guidelines on the use of such self-tests.

Q3. Building on the forthcoming advice from the ECDC, do delegations agree that the Commission and the Presidency should organise in the relevant fora exchanges of information between Member States on their experiences in the use of self-tests with a view to possibly, as was done for rapid antigen tests, agree on a list of recognised methods of self-test ?

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The Netherlands supports the organization of exchanges of information on the use of self-tests. A list of mutually recognized self-tests would be beneficial. The HSC could serve as a suitable platform to hosts these exchanges of information and work towards the establishment of a list.