EUROPEAN COMMISSION

SECRETARIAT-GENERAL

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- English translation of the French version which is authentic -

Brussels, 17 November 2021

TEXTE EN

MINUTES

of the 2394th meeting of the Commission

held in Strasbourg

(Louise Weiss building)

on Tuesday 19 October 2021

(afternoon)

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<u>Single sitting</u>: Tuesday 19 October 2021 (afternoon)

The sitting opened at 13.04 with Ms VESTAGER in the chair for items 1 to 7 (in part).

Ms von der LEYEN, President, took the chair for items 7 (in part) onwards.

<u>Present</u>:

Ms von der LEYEN	President	Items 7 (in part) to 10
Ms VESTAGER	Executive Vice-President	
Mr DOMBROVSKIS	Executive Vice-President	
Mr BORRELL i FONTELLES	High Representative / Vice-President	
Mr ŠEFČOVIČ	Vice-President	Items 7 (in part) to 10 (in part)
Ms JOUROVÁ	Vice-President	Items 8 (in part) to 10
Ms ŠUICA	Vice-President	
Mr SCHINAS	Vice-President	Items 7 (in part) to 10
Mr HAHN	Member	
Ms GABRIEL	Member	
Mr SCHMIT	Member	
Mr GENTILONI	Member	
Mr WOJCIECHOWSKI	Member	Items 7 (in part) to 10
Mr BRETON	Member	
Ms FERREIRA	Member	
Ms KYRIAKIDES	Member	
Ms DALLI	Member	
Ms JOHANSSON	Member	
Mr LENARČIČ	Member	
Ms VĂLEAN	Member	
Mr VÁRHELYI	Member	Items 7 to 10
Ms URPILAINEN	Member	
Ms SIMSON	Member	

Mr SINKEVIČIUS	Member	Items 1 to 7 (in part)
Ms McGUINNESS	Member	

Absent:

Mr TIMMERMANS	Executive Vice-President
Mr REYNDERS	Member

The following sat in to represent absent Members of the Commission:

Mr MES	Member of Mr TIMMERMANS's staff
Ms TUTS	Chef de cabinet to Mr REYNDERS

The following also sat in:

Mr SEIBERT	Chef de cabinet to the PRESIDENT	Items 7 (in part) to 10
Mr CALLEJA CRESPO	Director-General, Legal Service	
Ms AHRENKILDE HANSEN	Director-General, DG Communication	
Mr MAMER	Head of the Spokesperson's Service and Chief Spokesperson of the Commission	Items 7 (in part) to 10
Ms RISO	Deputy Chef de cabinet to the PRESIDENT	
Ms PETKOVA	Director of Coordination and Administration in the PRESIDENT's Office	
Ms SCHULTZ	Policy Coordinator in the PRESIDENT's Office	
Ms BUKA	Secretariat-General	

Secretary: Ms JUHANSONE, Secretary-General, assisted by Mr TAQUET-GRAZIANI, Deputy Head of Unit in the Secretariat-General.

1. AGENDAS
(OJ(2021) 2394/FINAL; SEC(2021) 2394/FINAL)

The Commission took note of that day's agenda and of the tentative agendas for forthcoming meetings.

2. WEEKLY MEETING OF CHEFS DE CABINET
(RCC(2021) 2394)

The Commission considered the Secretary-General's report on the weekly meeting of Chefs de cabinet held on Monday 18 October 2021.

3. APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES OF THE 2392ND AND 2393RD MEETINGS OF THE COMMISSION (5 AND 13 OCTOBER 2021)

The Commission held over approval of the minutes of its 2392nd and 2393rd meetings for a later meeting.

4. INTERINSTITUTIONAL RELATIONS
(RCC(2021) 192)

The Commission took note of the record of the meeting of the Interinstitutional Relations Group (IRG) held on Friday 15 October 2021 (RCC(2021) 192).

The Commission approved the lines proposed for the following points:

– **European data governance (Data Governance Act) (Regulation) – NIEBLER report – 2020/0340 (COD)**

  Line set out in SI(2021) 289/2.

– **Roaming on public mobile communications networks within the Union (recast) (Regulation) – WINZIG report – 2021/0045 (COD)**

Line set out in SI(2021) 290.

– **Pilot regime on distributed ledger technology market infrastructures (Regulation) – VAN OVERTVELDT report – 2020/0267 (COD)**

Line set out in SI(2021) 291.

– **Amendment of Directive 2006/1/EC on the use of vehicles hired without drivers for the carriage of goods by road (Directive) – MONTEIRO DE AGUIAR report – 2017/0113 (COD)**

Line set out in SI(2021) 292.

– **2019 discharge: General budget of the EU – Council and European Council – DURAND report – 2020/2142 (DEC)**

Line set out in SP(2021) 651.

– **2019 Discharge: European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX) – CZARNECKI report – 2020/2167 (DEC)**

Line set out in SP(2021) 652.

– **Article 225 – Protecting workers from asbestos – VILLUMSEN report – 2019/2182 INL**

Line set out in SP(2021) 659.

The Commission approved the line set out for the following point, for transmission to the European Economic and Social Committee:

– **Follow-up to opinions of the European Economic and Social Committee – Plenary session of April 2021**

Line set out in SC(2021) 32/2.

The Commission took note of the following points:

– **Credit servicers, credit purchasers and the recovery of collateral (Non-performing loans Directive) (Directive) – DE LANGE & TINAGLI report – 2018/0063A (COD)**

Compromise text in SP(2021) 649, further to note SI(2021) 213, which the Commission had already approved on 30 June 2021.

– **Amendment of Directive 2009/103/EC of the European Parliament and the Council of 16 September 2009 relating to insurance against civil liability in respect of the use of motor vehicles, and the enforcement of the obligation to ensure against such liability (Directive) – CHARANZOVÁ report – 2018/0168 (COD)**

Compromise text in SP(2021) 650, further to note SI(2021) 216, which the Commission had already approved on 30 June 2021.

– **Results of Parliament's October I 2021 part-session**

Information set out in SP(2021) 616.

– **2021 Interinstitutional Exchange of views on the European Anti-fraud Office (OLAF) (2 December 2021)**

Information set out in SPI(2021) 53.

– **Conference on the future of Europe – State of play ahead of the October plenary (23 October 2021)**

Information set out in SPI(2021) 54.

5. COORDINATION OF EXTERNAL ACTION (RCC(2021) 43 AND /2)

The Commission took note of the operational conclusions in RCC(2021) 43/2 of the meeting of the Group for External Coordination (EXCO) held on Wednesday 13 October 2021.

6. WRITTEN PROCEDURES, EMPOWERMENT AND DELEGATION OF POWERS

6.1. WRITTEN PROCEDURES APPROVED (SEC(2021) 349 ET SEQ.)

The Commission took note of the Secretariat-General's memoranda recording decisions adopted between 11 and 15 October 2021.

6.2. EMPOWERMENT (SEC(2021) 350 ET SEQ.)

The Commission took note of the Secretariat-General's memoranda recording decisions adopted between 11 and 15 October 2021.

6.3. DELEGATION / SUBDELEGATION OF POWERS (SEC(2021) 351 ET SEQ.)

The Commission took note of the Secretariat-General's memoranda recording decisions adopted under the delegation and subdelegation procedure between 11 and 15 October 2021 archived in Decide.

6.4. SIGNIFICANT WRITTEN PROCEDURES (SEC(2021) 352 AND /2)

The Commission took note of the significant written procedures for which the time limit expired between 18 and 22 October 2021.

7. COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN CENTRAL BANK, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE, THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS – THE EU ECONOMY AFTER COVID-19: IMPLICATIONS FOR ECONOMIC GOVERNANCE (COM(2021) 662 AND /2; RCC(2021) 199)

Mr DOMBROVSKIS and Mr GENTILONI presented to the College the Communication on the EU economy after COVID-19 and the implications for economic governance.

Mr DOMBROVSKIS explained that the Commission was relaunching a debate that day on the review of the EU's economic governance framework, which had had to be put on hold more than a year ago due to the pandemic. He pointed out that the EU was now in a very different place owing to the upheavals in European society and the European economy brought about by the pandemic.

The EU had managed to cushion the impact of the crisis through its strong and coordinated response. However, he also stressed that this crisis had made certain weaknesses more acute and brought to the fore certain trends which were detailed in the analysis presented in that day's Communication. Thus, the fiscal support measures had driven up deficit and debt levels in all the Member States, albeit to varying degrees. Significant investment was needed for the green and digital transitions and also for the efforts to bolster the EU's economic and social resilience. Moreover, long-standing structural factors had widened the divergences between Member States, regions and sectors.

Mr DOMBROVSKIS pointed out that over the past decade, the fiscal rules in force had helped to keep public finances under control, particularly the government deficit threshold of 3% of GDP, which had become a yardstick to avoid excessive deficits. He added that during the pandemic these rules had proved their flexibility. However, the weaknesses described almost two years ago were still relevant today.

He then went on to review the main guidance emerging from the Communication. First, it was essential to reduce the high level of government debt to enable the EU to respond to possible future shocks. This objective had to be achieved in a smart way, i.e. in a gradual, sustainable and growth-friendly way, by promoting the high-quality public investment that the EU needed to achieve its green and digital transitions. It was necessary to strike a good balance between debt reduction and investment, and this meant that the composition and quality of public finances needed to be improved.

Second, funding under the Recovery and Resilience Facility would have an important role to play, and Member States should make good use of it. The Facility also had a unique governance approach, based on transparency, ownership and dialogue, and this could provide inspiration in the debate on the review of the EU's economic governance.

Third, it was important to identify how the different tools available to the EU – the Stability and Growth Pact and the Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure – could best complement each other within the European Semester of economic and fiscal policy coordination.

Fourth and finally, the rules based on unobservable variables needed to be simplified to allow Member States to better take ownership of them and comply with them.

Mr DOMBROVSKIS pointed out that the public debate launched by the Commission took all these factors into consideration. The contributions received by the Commission would be used to determine the way forward towards an economic governance framework based on consensus, trust and efficiency. In achieving this objective, changing the Treaty was not the priority; it should be possible to act within the thresholds of 3% of government deficit and 60% of government debt laid down in Protocol No 12 to the Treaty on European Union.

As regards the next steps, the Commission would continue its regular monitoring. Furthermore, with the deactivation of the general escape clause of the Stability and Growth Pact expected in 2023, in the first quarter of 2022 the Commission would propose guidance to facilitate the coordination of fiscal policies and the preparation of the Member States' stability and convergence programmes. It was likely that in the first half of 2022 the Commission would examine possible changes to the economic governance framework that would reflect the global economic situation, take into account the specific situation of each Member State and draw the conclusions of the debate relaunched that day.

Mr GENTILONI noted that this debate was a complex exercise, but that the time had come to give fresh impetus to the review of the EU's economic governance framework.

He gave an overview of the current economic situation, pointing out in particular that, in its October 2021 'World Economic Outlook', the International Monetary Fund (IMF) had revised upwards its growth forecasts for the euro area, which was not the case for other global players. The Commission would publish its own economic forecasts in three weeks' time. He referred to the lengthy discussions at the recent meetings of the IMF, the G7 and the G20 concerning the risks to global growth; inflation and its link with rising energy prices; bottlenecks in supply chains; and contradictory labour market developments, with massive unemployment in some sectors and labour shortages in others. Most of the participants at these meetings considered these to be temporary factors, while acknowledging that the economy was currently in an unprecedented situation, hence the need to keep a close eye on how it developed. For this reason, at the present time it appeared that the central banks did not want to significantly change the direction of their monetary policies.

Mr GENTILONI added that the crisis had resulted in a sharp increase in deficits in public finances, even if, in their national plans, the Member States planned to gradually bring these down over the next few years. The situation was more delicate with regard to government debt, which had reached 100% of the gross domestic product (GDP) of the euro area and 93% of that of the EU as a whole. He pointed out that the threshold of 60% of GDP set in the Treaties corresponded to the Member States’ average debt at the time of the introduction of the Maastricht criteria. He stressed that government debt was thus now much higher, but also much cheaper. At the same time, the EU needed to make significant public investment to achieve its twin green and digital transitions, as it was estimated that the green transition alone would require additional investments of EUR 520 billion every year.

On the basis of these considerations, Mr GENTILONI explained that the broad aim of the review of the economic governance framework was to achieve common rules capable of promoting sustainable and convergent growth. Consideration should therefore be given to how to steer Member States not just towards an economic rebound but also towards long-term growth. The Commission was not putting forward concrete proposals at this stage, but would do so in the course of next year when the budget guidelines for 2023 and the guidelines on the future regulatory framework were presented.

That day’s Communication opened the debate with three main questions, namely (i) how to reduce debt in a realistic and growth-friendly manner, (ii) how to facilitate public investment as part of the strategic transitions over the next decade, and (iii) how to simplify the regulatory framework and strengthen ownership of the rules by the Member States and, at the same time, the role of the Commission, possibly drawing lessons from the methodology used in the context of the Recovery and Resilience Facility.

Mr GENTILONI suggested using the current political momentum to reach consensus on these issues in the public debate. The Commission could be an important player in this process, for example by making proposals on the economic governance framework after an initial consultation phase. He suggested that the College hold a policy debate to this end in the coming months.

In the course of the discussion that followed, the Commission raised the following main points:

– the complexity and difficulty of the debate on economic governance, hence the importance and political expediency of this Communication;

– the fact that the volume and pace of the investments needed for the green and digital transitions were often underestimated and that carbon neutrality required the adoption of fiscal rules consistent with this objective;

– a reference to the recent good fiscal policy decisions taken to address the macroeconomic shocks related to the COVID-19 crisis, which had led to a rapid return to growth after the 2020 recession;

– the need to avoid divergences between Member States, in particular in the euro area; to that end, the possibility of taking into account exceptional factors, such as expenditure linked to the COVID-19 crisis and the green transition, by excluding it from the calculation of their debt;

– a reminder that the six-pack and two-pack legislation had been drawn up in response to the economic situation at the time, which was why a revision clause had been included at the end of the negotiations with the co-legislators;

– the need for the EU to inform the markets how government debt would be honoured, while keeping in mind the repayment capacities of different Member States and seeking smart solutions to keep growth, inflation, government debt and government deficit at levels consistent with one another;

– the current intention to seek solutions within the scope of the Treaty to avoid the pro-cyclicality of fiscal policy, both in good and bad times, for example by adjusting the annual government debt reduction path;

– the Commission's key role in this debate and the need for an imaginative and constructive approach; hence the College's full support for the idea of holding a policy debate that would allow it to discuss in detail the future and stability of the euro area.

The PRESIDENT thanked all the speakers for their analyses and their overview of the current economic situation. She supported the idea of holding a policy debate in due course in order to reach a collegial position on the Commission's future key proposals.

Following these presentations, the Commission approved the Communication in COM(2021) 662/2 for transmission to Parliament, the Council, the European Central Bank, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions, and, for information, to the national parliaments.

8. COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE, AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS – COMMISSION WORK PROGRAMME 2022 – MAKING EUROPE STRONGER TOGETHER (COM(2021) 645 TO /3; RCC(2021) 197)

At the request of the PRESIDENT, Mr ŠEFČOVIČ presented to the College the Commission Work Programme for 2022, which set out the next steps for a bold and transformative policy for a greener, fairer, more digital and more resilient EU post-COVID-19.

He explained that the Commission had been engaged in structured dialogues with the European Parliament bodies since July and that the formal stages of that process had concluded with a meeting with the Conference of Committee Chairs at the beginning of October. He had also had an exchange of views with the Member States about legislative priorities at the General Affairs Council in September.

The Work Programme was structured around the six headline ambitions announced in the PRESIDENT's political guidelines and dealt with in the various annexes thereto.

Annex I of the Work Programme contained the list of new initiatives in the form of a selective overview of the main proposals, most of which were legislative.

In addition to the Work Programme files, the Commission would continue to present other initiatives where this proved necessary or useful.

The work would not stop with the adoption of the Work Programme: on the contrary, it would intensify, as the Commission would have to provide political steering and monitoring to the services to ensure its implementation. For that reason the Commission Work Programme initiatives had been selected on the basis of the credibility of their timeline for delivery in 2022, taking into account the initiatives needed to improve the quality of regulation.

He noted that 2022 would be the first year that the one-in, one-out approach was applied in full. This principle would be essential for the adoption of all the initiatives proposed next year. The initiatives listed in Annex II to the Commission's Work Programme would make an important contribution to this essential exercise.

Mr ŠEFČOVIČ then highlighted a few of the key initiatives that the Commission would present in 2022.

As part of the European Green Deal, it would propose a certification framework for carbon removals, to boost their sustainable deployment and create a new business model to reward land managers.

To deliver on its zero pollution action plan, the Commission would also tackle surface and groundwater pollutants and ambient air quality.

To make the most of increasing digitalisation, EU legislation on chips would help to foster an innovative European ecosystem for semiconductors to prevent current supply shortages from recurring in the future.

In order to ensure that all citizens could benefit from a successful digital transition, the Commission would propose a package of recommendations on digital skills in schools and higher education and new measures on multimodal digital mobility services.

As regards social policy, the Commission would present a recommendation on minimum income and an initiative to protect workers from the risks related to exposure to asbestos at work.

In the context of the political priority ‘A stronger Europe in the world’, Mr ŠEFČOVIČ explained that the Commission would continue its efforts to support the rules-based, multilateral global order. Along with its ‘Global Gateway’ initiative, which would encourage international cooperation on transport, energy and telecommunications with partners across the globe, the Commission would work towards developing a strategic partnership with the Gulf countries.

It would also propose a new strategy on international energy engagement with the goal of progressively replacing fossil fuel imports with green energy solutions.

As part of the new push for European democracy, the Commission would continue to support the crucial role played by a free and vibrant media sector by proposing a European media freedom act.

He concluded his presentation by pointing out that the Commission recognised the numerous sacrifices made by young people during the pandemic by declaring 2022 the European Year of Youth.

The PRESIDENT underlined the high level of ambition of the Commission Work Programme for the coming year, drawn up in the difficult context of a pandemic which had nonetheless demonstrated that the EU could overcome challenges when the Member States acted together. She invited the College to continue its action in the same spirit in 2022, in order to implement climate neutrality policies by 2050, shape the EU's digital future, strengthen its social market economy and defend its values and interests, both internally and externally.

Following this presentation, the Commission approved the Communication in COM(2021) 645/3 for transmission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions and, for information, to the national parliaments.

9. COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE, AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS – 2021 COMMUNICATION ON EU ENLARGEMENT POLICY (COM(2021) 644 TO /5; SWD(2021) 288 TO /3; SWD(2021) 289 AND /2; SWD(2021) 290 TO /3; SWD(2021) 291 AND /2; SWD(2021) 292 AND /2; SWD(2021) 293 AND /2; SWD(2021) 294 AND /2; RCC(2021) 198)

The PRESIDENT emphasised that during her visit to the region and at the EU-Western Balkans Summit held on 6 October 2021 in Brdo, Slovenia, a clear signal had been sent to the Western Balkans that their future lay within the European Union. This clear strategic commitment on the part of the EU was reflected in tangible actions for the citizens of the Western Balkans, from the continued support provided under the COVID-19 response to the Economic and Investment Plan aimed at supporting the region's long-term economic growth and its move towards greener, digital and innovative economies.

Mr BORRELL presented the 2021 Communication on EU enlargement policy, the aim of which was to take stock of progress made and to flag to the leaders of candidate partners and their citizens where they needed to focus their efforts to move forward on EU integration. It also provided the Member States with an objective account of the state of play on the most sensitive and geostrategically critical issues.

This year's assessment exercise reflected a difficult political context. The partners with the best prospects of membership – namely Albania, North Macedonia, and to some extent Serbia – had managed to maintain some momentum, although their action plans still left room for actual progress on reforms. On the other hand, other candidates, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo[*], had lost much momentum. Meanwhile, although Turkey continued to express its interest in the accession process, it seemed unlikely to implement a real reform agenda, without which its accession prospects would not be able to be realised.

On Serbia and Kosovo in particular, he reported on the recent progress made since the resumption of dialogue between the two parties but noted tensions on the ground. He was working very closely with the EU's Special Representative in Kosovo and Serbia, remaining in constant contact with both sides to try to reach an arrangement.

On a broader note, Mr BORRELL pointed out that credible mutual commitment on the part of both the EU and candidates lay at the core of the enlargement process. With this in mind, the Communication gave a clear picture of the political cost of the delay in opening accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia – a cost which called for the process to be accelerated.

[*] This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

The Western Balkan partners' alignment with the EU's foreign and security policy needed to demonstrate a long-term political commitment, as emphasised by the Member States and confirmed in the series of measures put forward in the Communication. However, this alignment varied from one partner to another.

Mr VÁRHELYI emphasised the progress made thanks to the implementation of the revised accession methodology, which placed an even stronger focus on fundamental reforms of the rule of law, the economy, the functioning of democratic institutions, freedom of expression, media freedom and pluralism as well as public administration. He welcomed the fact that the new methodology allowed the enlargement process to progress in a more solid, predictable and dynamic way thanks to clearer and firmer political guidance.

He added that the EU's Economic and Investment Plan to support the Western Balkans' long-term economic growth gave visibility to the EU's support on the ground and made it possible to embed the region in the process of transitioning to a green and digital economy. He also called for a roadmap to be drawn up to finalise the removal of roaming charges in the telecoms sector, a measure which should benefit everyone in the region and promote an inclusive digital transition.

Based on the assessments in the Communication, he also felt it was important to hold intergovernmental conferences which would open future accession negotiations and thus give concrete prospects to the best prepared candidate countries.

Mr VÁRHELYI went on to describe in more detail the state of play of each accession candidate, starting with Montenegro, which needed to further intensify its efforts to address the outstanding issues, including freedom of expression, media freedom, the fight against corruption and organised crime, without jeopardising the results already achieved in judicial reform.

He noted that Serbia, meanwhile, needed not only to continue but to accelerate and deepen its reforms on the independence of the judiciary, the fight against corruption, media freedom, the domestic handling of war crimes and the fight against organised crime. The Serbian authorities were expected to finalise the constitutional reform process relating to the judiciary by the end of the year. This reform was supported by the Venice Commission, which called for it to be put to a referendum. He noted with satisfaction that Serbia had satisfied the benchmark criteria allowing new accession chapters to be opened, as long as progress continued to be made on reforms.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, sadly, the domestic political climate had hindered any progress on the priorities set.

In Kosovo, the early parliamentary elections in February 2021 had resulted in the formation of a new government that enjoyed a clear parliamentary majority, providing a favourable context to intensify dialogue with its neighbours and foster a regional common market.

He regretted that, while Albania and North Macedonia had advanced steadily on the reform path and continued to fulfil the necessary conditions, the official launch of accession negotiations had been delayed. He felt that the priority should be given to resolving the disputes that were hindering this process.

He concluded by turning to relations with Turkey, which was still a candidate for membership of the EU, of which it remained a key partner in areas of common interest such as migration, the fight against terrorism, the economy, trade, energy and transport. He welcomed Turkey’s ratification of the Paris Agreement on climate change. Despite certain positive developments, some major concerns nonetheless remained, particularly as regards respect for the rule of law and the resumption of negotiations on a fair, comprehensive and viable settlement of the Cyprus issue within the UN framework. He felt that the Commission should consider devising an action plan to restart dialogue on this issue.

In the course of the brief discussion that followed, the Commission referred to the importance of multiplying the messages of encouragement addressed to EU membership candidate countries, whether in terms of their participation in the

Conference on the Future of Europe or the implementation of the EU's Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans.

Concluding the discussion, the PRESIDENT emphasised that the objective and detailed assessment of the progress made by the Western Balkans and Turkey on their respective paths to the European Union showed contrasting results, and thus different prospects. She stressed the importance of keeping the Western Balkans by the EU's side throughout the lengthy accession process. The EU's Economic and Investment Plan would make it possible to stem the brain drain from the Western Balkans and help both that region and the EU move further along in the green and digital transition.

Following these presentations, the Commission approved the Communication in COM(2021) 644/5, for transmission to Parliament, the Council, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, and, for information, to the national parliaments, together with the staff working documents distributed as SWD(2021) 288/3, SWD(2021) 289/2, SWD(2021) 290/3, SWD(2021) 291/2, SWD(2021) 292/2, SWD(2021) 293/2 and SWD(2021) 294/2, the contents of which were noted.

10. OTHER BUSINESS

10.1. PREPARATION OF THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL (BRUSSELS, 21 AND 22 OCTOBER 2021)

The PRESIDENT informed the College of the topics included on the agenda of the next meeting of the European Council on 21 and 22 October, namely a new review of the measures taken so far in the fight against the COVID-19 crisis and the next steps, migration-related issues, the recent trend in energy prices, the digital transformation and, finally, the EU's trade policy.

In the course of the brief discussion that followed, the Commission raised the following main points:

- the EU's success in exporting COVID-19 vaccines to the rest of the world, but also the need to strengthen the COVAX mechanism with additional vaccine donations from Member States in view of the large number of requests received from third countries;

- the Belarusian regime's current political exploitation of migration at the EU's borders;

- the current intensification of migration flows from different regions of the world to Belarus and of secondary movement; the desirability of conducting a wide-scale information campaign in the countries of origin.

The PRESIDENT said that the European Council would discuss in detail the situation at the EU's borders with Belarus and the related geopolitical stakes. With regard to vaccine donations, she stressed the importance of presenting precise figures to Heads of State or Government.

The Commission took note of this information.

10.2. LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN EXTERNAL RELATIONS

Mr BORRELL reported to the College on his visit to Washington on 14 and 15 October and on the meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council on 18 October.

On the subject of the visit to Washington, he noted the openness of the US partners to dialogue, which he had witnessed during his meetings with both Secretary of State Antony BLINKEN and Deputy Secretary of Defence Kathleen HICKS.

Mr BORRELL said that with the Secretary of State he had raised the importance of having a continuous EU-US dialogue and that they were now discussing to implement the joint agenda as set out in the EU-US Summit statement of 15 June 2021. A lot of ground had been covered in the past four months, in particular with the launch of the EU-US Trade and Technology Council in September. The US partners had agreed to build on this further with several important foreign and security policy initiatives.

He mentioned the other foreign policy topics that had been discussed at his meeting with Mr BLINKEN, namely (i) the organisation of the next EU-US High-Level Dialogue on China by the end of the current year, (ii) the situation in Afghanistan and the challenges to be met, with utmost priority accorded to supporting the Afghan people, (iii) the situation in the Western Balkans, (iv) Venezuela and the political process led by the EU to restore stability in the country, (v) high energy prices, and (vi) confirmation that the next EU-US Energy Council meeting would take place in early 2022.

At the meeting with the Deputy Secretary of Defence, Mr BORRELL said that the conversation had focused on (i) the European suggestion for a structured dialogue with the US on security and defence, (ii) acknowledgement by the US of the fact that EU efforts in the field of defence were complementary to transatlantic military cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies, (iii) the current work on the EU's 'Strategic Compass' and the importance of working hand-in-hand with the US, and (iv) the clear interest expressed by his US interlocutors in cooperation with the EU and their hope that an Administration Arrangement would be concluded with the European Defence Agency.

Mr BORRELL then reported to the College on the main results of the Foreign Affairs Council held on 18 October 2021.

A first discussion had taken place on relations with the Gulf countries following Mr BORRELL's recent visit to three of them. An EU-Gulf Cooperation Council would be held in early 2022 and the EU would open a delegation in Qatar the following year. The EU's collective reflection would feed into the Joint Communication on Partnership with the Gulf planned for the spring of the following year.

He also reported that the members of the Council had had a debate on the Eastern Partnership in preparation for the Eastern Partnership Foreign Affairs Ministerial meeting in November and the Eastern Partnership Summit in December 2021. The region was currently facing a difficult geopolitical context.

Mr BORRELL then referred to a discussion on Ethiopia and the conflict in Tigray. The EU ministers had discussed options for dealing with the humanitarian situation in the country. They had agreed to step up efforts to define a common EU position.

He said that the Foreign Ministers had also had an exchange on Nicaragua. The EU continued to insist on respect for democracy, human rights and the rule of law, which included in particular the release of political prisoners, the return of international human rights organisations and the holding of free and fair elections.

Under Current Affairs, the Foreign Affairs Council had first discussed Afghanistan and, in this connection, the need for an EU minimum presence in Kabul to continue to support the Afghan people, without however recognising the current government.

Mr BORRELL reported that on 15 October he had met again with the Tunisian President to underline the importance of resuming institutional normalcy. The recent appointment of a new prime minister and a new cabinet were a first positive step but needed to be followed by concrete progress.

The ministers had also discussed COP26. They had stressed that financing climate change adaptation was central in implementing the Paris Agreement, that the EU and its Member States had provided the biggest share of such financing and that other donors should follow this example.

With regard to Varosha, the ministers had referred to the interventions by Turkey against European vessels operating in the Exclusive Economic Zones of Greece and Cyprus.

Finally, they had also discussed the worrying developments in Mali and had looked at the financial and political leverage on which the EU could rely. They would return to this issue at their meeting in November.

The Commission took note of this information.

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The meeting closed at 15.01.