

Informal video conference of European affairs ministers, Tuesday 23 February 2021

Chair: Ana Paula Zacarias, Portuguese Secretary of State for European Affairs

The meeting will **start at 9.30**.

Ministers will prepare the video conference of members of the European Council due to be held on 25-26 February 2021.

The Presidency will inform ministers about the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Ministers will exchange views on the European democracy action plan.

They will also take stock of the state of play of EU-UK relations.

A presidency press conference will be held at the end of the meeting.

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[*Informal video conference of European affairs ministers, 23 February 2021 meeting page*](#)

[*Press conferences by video streaming*](#)

[*Video coverage in broadcast quality \(MPEG4\) and photo gallery*](#)

¹ This note has been drawn up under the responsibility of the press office.

Video conference of Members of the European Council

European affairs ministers will prepare the informal video conference of Members of the European Council on 25-26 February 2021. EU leaders will discuss the current situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, preparedness for health threats, security and defence, and relations with the Southern Neighbourhood.

COVID-19 and Health

EU leaders will take stock of the epidemiological situation. They will continue working to coordinate the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including on the authorisation, production and rollout of vaccines and the movement of persons.

Leaders will have an exchange of views on strengthening the EU's resilience to health threats.

Leaders will also discuss ways to reinforce international health cooperation-

Security and defence

Leaders will hold a strategic debate on European security and defence policy.

EU leaders will review ongoing initiatives on investment in defence, capability development and operational readiness. They will also discuss work to increase the EU's resilience, in particular against cyberattacks and hybrid threats.

Southern Neighbourhood

Leaders will hold a strategic discussion on EU relations with the Southern Neighbourhood. In December 2020, the European Council adopted conclusions on this partnership. Leaders emphasised at the time that a democratic, more stable, greener and more prosperous Southern Neighbourhood is a strategic priority for the EU.

[COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic: the EU's response](#)

[EU cooperation on security and defence \(background information\)](#)

[European Council conclusions, 10-11 December 2020](#)

[Annotated draft agenda](#)

Conference on the Future of Europe

Ministers will take stock of the current status of interinstitutional discussions on the Conference on the Future of Europe.

The Presidency will inform ministers about the latest talks with the other EU institutions, a revised Council position having been agreed on 3 February.

This revised position includes a proposal for a collegial presidency of the three institutions, represented at the highest level by the Council presidency, the President of the Commission and the President of the Parliament, acting as joint chair.

Under the proposal, there would also be an executive board composed of representatives from the European Parliament, the Council (and the European Commission, on an equal footing)

The Conference is expected to become operational this year and to conclude and deliver outcomes in the Spring of 2022.

The Conference on the Future of Europe should be seen as an inclusive platform, bringing together different voices to generate wide-ranging reflection and debate on the challenges Europe is facing and on its long-term future.

Reflecting on the challenges the EU is facing and on its future has become all the more important following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is essential that we continue reflecting on the resilience of our societies and economies.

[Conference on the Future of Europe - revised Council position \(3 February 2021\)](#)

[Conference on the Future of Europe - Council position \(24 June 2020\)](#)

[Commission communication on the Conference of the Future of Europe \(22 January 2020\)](#)

[European Parliament's position on the Conference on the Future of Europe](#)

European democracy action plan

Ministers will exchange views on the European democracy action plan, following an initial presentation by the European Commission on 8 December 2020.

The Commission adopted this initiative on 3 December 2020 with the aim of ensuring that citizens are able to participate in the democratic system through informed decision-making free from unlawful interference and manipulation.

The action plan sets out 30 actions designed to strengthen the resilience of EU democracies in the face of challenges (such as the rise of extremism and polarisation, perceived distance between people and elected representatives, deterioration of conditions for journalists and civil society, and disinformation and manipulation of voters, including by foreign actors). The action plan is comprehensive in its scope, its objective being to mitigate currently existing vulnerabilities, in particular in the context of COVID-19 and before the European Parliament elections in May 2024.

It focuses on strengthening the resilience and protection of EU democracies through three areas of action: 1) protecting the integrity of elections and promoting democratic participation; 2) strengthening media freedom and media pluralism; and 3) countering disinformation. Across all three areas, emphasis will be placed on promoting citizens' engagement.

[Communication on the European democracy action plan](#)

EU-UK relations

European affairs ministers will assess the state of play of EU-UK relations for the first time since the signature of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) in December 2020.

The EU and the UK agreed, on 24 December 2020, to provisionally apply the TCA and the Security of Information Agreement as of 1 January 2021, pending the EU ratification process and the official entry into force.

The agreement provides for its time-limited provisional application until the end of February, unless a later date is agreed by the parties. The EU decided this week to request an extension until 30 April 2021 to allow sufficient time to complete the legal-linguistic revision of the agreement in all 24 languages, prior to its scrutiny by the Council and the European Parliament. In order to change the end date of the provisional application, a decision needs to be taken jointly in the EU-UK Partnership Council, the governance body established by the TCA, where the EU is represented by Commission Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič.

Once the new date is agreed, the Council will ask the European Parliament for its consent. When this has been granted, the Council will then be able to proceed to the final step, adopting the decision on the conclusion of the TCA.

[EU-UK negotiations on the future relationship \(background information\)](#)

[Proposal for a Council decision regarding the extension until 30 April 2021 of the provisional application](#)

[EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement: Council adopts decision on the signing](#)
