



General Affairs Council Brussels, 21 September 2021

Chair: Gašper Dovžan, State Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Slovenia

The meeting will start at 10.00.

The Council will cover the state of play in EU-UK relations. The Presidency will provide information about the Conference on the Future of Europe. Ministers will exchange views on the draft agenda of the European Council on 21-22 October. The EU's ongoing efforts to coordinate on COVID-19 will also be on the agenda, and the Slovenian presidency will present its priorities. The Commission will present the letter of intent concerning its draft work program for 2022 and its annual Strategic Foresight Report.

A press conference will be held at around 17.00.

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

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Presentation of the priorities of the Slovenian presidency

During a public session, the Slovenian presidency will briefly present its overall priorities, as well as those falling within the remit of the General Affairs Council.

[Slovenian presidency programme](#)

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

European Council meeting on 21-22 October

The General Affairs Council will have a first exchange about the annotated draft agenda for the 21-22 October European Council. At the European Council, leaders will follow up on the coordination of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and review progress on digital issues. Turning to the international agenda, leaders will take stock of the preparations for COP26 in Glasgow (climate) and COP15 in Kunming (biodiversity). The European Council will also prepare for upcoming summits with third countries, namely the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and the Eastern Partnership.

[Provisional agenda](#)

EU coordination on COVID-19

Ministers will hold their first regular discussion on EU coordination on COVID-19 after the summer break and share their national experiences and exchange views on priorities for the months ahead.

Among the matters that ministers may want to raise are vaccination-related issues and travel measures.

The vaccine rollout in the EU has helped to stabilise the situation, with 70.9% of the adult population fully vaccinated in the member states and 77.7% having received at least one dose. However, vaccination rates are still uneven across the EU.

The Council adopted updated versions of recommendations on external and internal travel measures in May and in June respectively. This facilitated travel within the EU during the summer period and provided greater clarity for third-country nationals travelling into the Union.

The EU digital COVID certificate contributed to easier and safer travel within the EU over the summer. The question of acceptance of third countries' COVID certificates by member states needs further work and coordination. Another issue is that of bilateral arrangements between third countries and individual member states on the mutual recognition of COVID certificates when the Commission has not yet taken an 'equivalence decision' in the form of an implementing act.

[COVID-19: Council adds Uruguay and removes six countries from the list of countries for which travel restrictions should be lifted \(press release\)](#)

[COVID-19: Coreper endorses political agreement on the EU digital COVID certificate to facilitate free movement \(press release\)](#)

[COVID-19: Council agrees its negotiating mandate on the Digital Green Certificate](#)

[Presidency press release on solidarity vaccines \(press release\)](#)

[COVID-19: research and vaccines](#)

[Video conference of the members of the European Council, 25 March 2021](#)

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

[COVID-19: travel and transport - Council updates recommendations on COVID-19 travel measures \(background information\)](#)

[Commission proposes to ease restrictions on non-essential travel to the EU \(press release\)](#)

EU-UK relations

European affairs ministers will assess the state of play in EU-UK relations, in light of recent events.

On 1 January 2021, the substantive provisions of the protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland, agreed by the EU and the UK as an integral part of the withdrawal agreement, started to apply. As the UK was not fully ready for the end of the transition period, the EU and UK agreed on a number of unilateral declarations to provide time-limited solutions in a number of areas.

On 3 March 2021, the UK government stated its intention to unilaterally delay the full application of the protocol. On 15 March the EU sent the UK a letter of formal notice for breaching the substantive provisions of the protocol and the good faith obligation under the withdrawal agreement, as well as a political letter calling on the UK government to rectify and refrain from putting into practice these unilateral measures. In parallel, contacts between the EU and the UK continued at technical level to find swift pragmatic solutions within the framework of the protocol.

On 17 June 2021 the European Commission received a request from the UK to extend a grace period concerning the movement of chilled meats from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. On 30 June 2021, the EU took note of the UK's unilateral declaration setting out the practice it intended to put forward. It also reiterated that the full implementation of the withdrawal agreement is an international legal obligation for the EU and the UK.

In the past months, the Commission has engaged thoroughly in identifying flexibilities and technical solutions to safeguard the stability and predictability afforded by the full and effective implementation of the protocol. It has put forward solutions in a number of areas, including for the continued supply of medicines and for guide dogs, that help ensure the application of the protocol impacts the everyday lives of communities in Northern Ireland as little as possible.

On 21 July, the UK issued a command paper on the protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland. In reaction to this paper, the Commission pointed out that the protocol is the joint solution that the EU found with the UK to address the unique challenges that Brexit poses for the island of Ireland and that in order for this objective to be achieved the protocol must be fully implemented. The Commission also reiterated its readiness to continue to seek creative solutions, within the framework of the protocol, in the interest of all communities in Northern Ireland.

On 6 September, the UK government announced that existing grace periods would continue. The Commission took note of this statement, while continuing to stress that both sides are legally bound to fulfil their obligations under the withdrawal agreement. The EU's focus remains on identifying long-term, flexible and practical solutions within the framework of the protocol. The Commission reserves its rights in respect of infringement proceedings. At present, the Commission is not moving to the next stage of the infringement procedure launched in March 2021, nor is it opening any new infringements for now.

[Statement by the European Commission following the UK announcement regarding the operation of the Protocol on Ireland / Northern Ireland \(6 September 2021\)](#)

[Statement by Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič following today's announcement by the UK government regarding the Protocol on Ireland / Northern Ireland \(21 July 2021\)](#)

[Application of Union law related to meat products in Northern Ireland after the end of the transition period: unilateral declaration by the EU \(30 June 2021\)](#)

Legislative programming

During a public debate, the Commission will present the 2021 Strategic Foresight Report and its letter of intent, and will exchange views with ministers.

The purpose of this exchange of views is to allow ministers comment on the priorities the Commission has envisaged and to assist it in drawing up its 2022 work programme.

The discussion will be summarised by the Presidency in a letter addressed to the Commission. This letter will serve as input as the annual programming exercise continues.

Once the Commission has adopted its work programme, the Council and European Parliament will agree a joint declaration on legislative priorities for 2022.

The 2021 Strategic Foresight Report was published by the Commission on 8 September and the letter of intent was circulated to delegations after its official submission by the Commission on 15 September.

In 2016, the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission agreed to reinforce the Union's annual and multiannual programming through the Interinstitutional Agreement on Better Law-Making. The multiannual programming exercise starts on the appointment of a new Commission, leading to joint conclusions. The annual programming cycle culminates in a joint declaration.

The multiannual programming exercise was conducted last year for the first time, for the period 2020-2024.

[Strategic Foresight Report](#)
[Letter of intent](#)

Conference on the Future of Europe

The presidency will give an update on the Conference on the Future of Europe, after the launch of the European citizens' panels on 17 September and in the run-up to the October plenary. Delegations will also have the opportunity to exchange views on these issues.

The Conference on the Future of Europe is aimed at involving citizens in a wide-ranging debate on Europe's future over the coming decade and beyond, including in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On 10 March the Council, the European Parliament and the Commission signed a joint declaration that sets out the objectives, structure, scope and timing of the conference.

The Conference on the Future of Europe was formally inaugurated on 9 May in Strasbourg, following the launch of the conference's digital platform on 19 April.

[Conference on the Future of Europe: citizens in the spotlight](#)
[Conference on the Future of Europe: launch of the citizens' platform on 19 April](#)
[The Conference on the Future of Europe gets green light from the Council](#)
[Joint declaration](#)
[Conference on the Future of Europe - revised Council position \(3 February 2021\)](#)
[Conference on the Future of Europe - Council position \(24 June 2020\)](#)

Any other business

The Commission will update ministers on EU-Switzerland relations. Switzerland decided last May to unilaterally terminate the negotiations for the EU-Swiss Institutional Framework Agreement.

There will also be an information point on the EU-MED summit of last Friday in Athens. Following the devastating fires in the region, the EU-MED leaders (nine Mediterranean countries in the EU: Croatia, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain) met in Athens on Friday 17 September 2021.
