Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the state of play of the EU's COVID-19 Vaccination Strategy

Brussels, 10 February 2021

Mr President, Minister,

Honourable Members,

In Poland, 94 per cent of medical workers and 80 per cent of care-home residents had been vaccinated by the beginning of February. In Denmark the figure for care-home residents is as high as 93 per cent. And in Italy over four per cent of the population have now received a dose. These three examples show that, in many parts of Europe, the vaccination campaign is gathering pace.

A total of 26 million doses of vaccine have been delivered in Europe since December. Over 17 million people have been vaccinated. And we will work as hard as we possibly can to meet our big target, which is to vaccinate 70 per cent of the adult population of Europe by the end of the summer.

Nevertheless, the fact is that today we are not where we want to be in combating the virus. We were late in granting authorisation. We were too optimistic about mass production. And maybe we also took for granted that the doses ordered would actually arrive on time. We must ask ourselves why, and what lessons we can draw from it.

But let me start with three points of which I am wholly convinced: it was right – and is right – that we Europeans ordered our vaccine jointly and that we are now sharing it in a spirit of solidarity. I don't even want to imagine what it would have meant if some large Member States had secured the vaccine while the rest went empty-handed. What would that have meant for our internal market, and for European unity? It would have made no economic sense. And it would have meant the end of our Community.

The second point I am deeply convinced of: The same solidarity must also be shown with our partners in our neighbourhood and across the world. This is also a matter of stopping the spread of the virus to reduce the likelihood of mutations. The access to vaccines for low- and middle-income countries is therefore as much about our own interest as it is about solidarity. And this is why we set up COVAX – COVAX, the Facility in which high-income countries can finance the access to vaccines for low- and middle-income countries.

As Team Europe – that is the Member States and the European institutions – we have provided EUR 850 million, making us one of the biggest contributors to COVAX. And COVAX will start delivering vaccines as of this month. And I am sure that this House will agree that we need more. Because our responsibility extends far beyond Europe's borders.

Honourable Members,

The third point that I should like to make concerns our approach and our procedure. We have chosen not to cut any corners as regards safety or effectiveness. This is a choice that we stand by wholeheartedly. There are no compromises to be made when we are injecting a biologically active substance into a healthy person.

And this is why we rely on the evaluation procedure followed by the EMA – our European Medicines Agency. Yes, this means that approval takes an extra three to four weeks. And that extra time is an investment that is crucial to trust and safety.

But it is true that there are also lessons to be drawn from the procedure we have followed. And we are already drawing them. First, we must improve the way in which data from clinical trials are shared with the EMA. That is why we are now launching a new European clinical-trial network. At the same time, our Health Commissioner Stella Kyriakides is to work on a regulatory framework that will enable EMA to examine vaccines as quickly as possible.

Another lesson to be drawn concerns the mass production of vaccines. We were all highly focused on the development of the vaccine – and rightly so. But overall we have underestimated the difficulties

inherent in mass production. Producing a new vaccine normally takes between five and ten years. We did it in the space of ten months. That is a major scientific achievement of which we should be proud.

But science has in a sense overtaken industry. Producing new vaccines is a highly complex process. There is simply no way of setting up a production facility overnight. Furthermore, the vaccines concerned contain up to 400 components – and over 100 undertakings are involved in production.

That is why we have set up – under the leadership of Thierry Breton (our Internal Market Commissioner) – a taskforce whose job is to step up the industrial production of vaccines. The aim is to identify problems and to help to find solutions to them. Industry needs to keep up with science.

Honourable Members,

Indeed, industry has to match the ground-breaking pace of science. We fully understand that difficulties will arise in the mass production of vaccines. But Europe has invested billions of euros in capacities, in advance. And we urged the Member States to plan their vaccine roll-out. So now we all need predictability.

And this is why we introduced the export transparency and authorisation mechanism. To be very clear: We do not intend to restrict companies that are honouring their contracts with the European Union. And there is an automatic exemption for exports to the EEA countries, for the Western Balkans and the rest of our neighbourhood, for humanitarian needs, and for the 92 low- and middle-income countries covered by COVAX. So Europe is always ready to help. But we insist on our fair share.

And as far as the mechanism goes, allow me a word on the island of Ireland. The bottom line is that mistakes were made in the process leading up to the decision. And I deeply regret that. But in the end, we got it right. And I can reassure you that my Commission will do its utmost to protect the peace in Northern Ireland. Just as it has done throughout the entire Brexit process.

Honourable Members,

The battle against the virus is a marathon and not a sprint. It needs foresight, endurance and stamina. Almost every day we hear news of different variants and how contagious they are. We do not yet have the full picture when it comes to the effectiveness of treatments and vaccines on new strains. But we do know these variants will continue to emerge. And we do know that we need to anticipate and prepare immediately. This is why we start our new HERA (Health Emergency Response Authority) project now, by launching our preparedness agenda against new variants next week.

We need to adapt our regulations to this new challenge. We need rapid sequencing and clinical characterisation of new mutations. And we need systematic sample and data sharing across networks and labs. Because to defeat the virus, we need to know as much detail about it as possible.

In parallel, we will tackle a second challenge. As I said, we are dealing with completely new mRNA-vaccines, never manufactured at scale before. One of the current bottlenecks is for example linked to just two synthetic molecules: If we had just 250 grammes more of these molecules, companies say, they could produce one million more doses of vaccine.

This is why we need more coordination on the supply of key ingredients. We need to improve manufacturing surge capacity and we need to boost cooperation between the public and private sector. And this will be the core task of HERA. Because we must ensure that despite future mutants we will be safe next winter and beyond.

Honourable Members,

We all know that the information we have on the virus and the vaccines can change by the hour. This is why we will set up a contact group between the European Parliament and the Commission. And I will do my utmost to ensure that you are able to scrutinise all the contracts we have signed. Because I know that trust needs transparency.

Honourable Members,

We are all doing the best we can to fight the virus. In our families, in our towns, cities and communities, in the Member States and at European level. We should acknowledge the efforts that each one of us is making. We will overcome this challenge only if we stand together. Our common enemy is the virus.

Long live Europe. Thank you!

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