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# Joint press conference by Xavier Bettel and Charles Michel (16.09.2021)

# Participants

* Xavier Bettel, Prime Minister, Minister of State
* Charles Michel, President of the European Council
* Journalists

# Language

* English

# Transcript

[Xavier Bettel]

Ladies and gentleman,

dear President of the European Council,

dear Charles.

First of all, let me take this opportunity to welcome President Michel.

It's a great honor to be able to receive you here today in Luxembourg.

Our meeting this morning provided an opportunity to discuss a series of issues and then we went to a very symbolic place: the birthplace of Robert Schuman. He was born here in Luxembourg.

As we are both convinced European, it was important to show that we are attached to the birth of the European Union.

It started small but let me tell you that as I can do it with my vegetables in my garden, we have to keep feeding it for it to become larger, bigger.

It's today a different Europe. A Europe of values, principles and of course peace at hand.

We both come from a generation that didn't know war and I think Europe is one of the reasons why.

Without the European Union we wouldn't have known this peace, this long standing peace on this continent.

I will give you a bit of an update on the different topics that were discussed and I would like to thank Mr. Michel for his commitment, personal commitment, because these last years I've seen it in the European Council...

Some of the objectives we had, some of the ambitions we had, some of the figures we were aiming for, were very difficult to achieve; for example, the carbon neutrality for 2050 and minus 55% by 2030.

It was very difficult to achieve these figures, so I know that Mr. Michel, the President, really spent a lot of time for these ambitions to go forward.

We have to say it - and this is not a critique -with 27 members, it's difficult sometimes to find compromises and sometimes it's very difficult to find agreements and I think that this was one of the strengths of Mr. President Michel.

He was able to find what's the common agreement between everybody and find a basis for discussion ...

about now the budget, the European budget, the recovery, all these topics were topics that were discussed at the beginning - will we do it or not? That was the question at the beginning and finally we could make it, so this was very important. So this morning, we've discussed the Covid-situation, of course.

You know that it is still there. You should not believe that the virus has disappeared.

This is not through at all and today we are ...talking about vaccination because in most countries in Europe you can get a jab.

There is enough vaccine in Europe for everybody and I must say that the European Union was criticized at the beginning because it bought the vaccines at a certain price and I must say that i was aware that there were two options:

we could have let everything go ...on its own way and we would have had a kind of "ebay" of vaccines with very high prices because the providers would have been really happy to get higher prices and in other countries, it would have been impossible to get the vaccine

or other countries could have said "oh i'm producing the vaccine, so I will keep it for me" and in Luxembourg, we wouldn't have get any vaccine.

So I was happy to see that we were able to make it a common goal and buy together the vaccine from the provider.

So I would like to thank the President but also Madam von der Leyen for taking into account the specific situation of Luxembourg in this Covid-crisis.

We all know that cross-border is our everyday life in Luxembourg because having closed borders in Luxembourg would have meant closing the hospitals for example.

Today, we wouldn't have any health system without the people coming from the borders, across the borders, so we've had to insist and explain, that closing our borders was not the solutions to our neighbors and we know that Europe helped us with this and it's important to us to insist on that.

To us, the barriers to the freedom of circulation, of freedom of movement, sorry

is really an important ... obstacle to our country's economy.

We've also talked about climate, of course.

It's something that's important to us.

We've talked about the "Fit for 55 package" and this new package, that has been presented, is something the Luxembourg government has agreed upon, and we must keep our ambitious objectives at a line with the expectations of our citizens.

And I'm talking also about the future generations.

We cannot only talk about climate, we have to take action on the climate situation. We cannot say "how can we do it?". No, we have to act now.

It's not time to discuss right now, it's time to take action and it's very important for us to see the discussions ongoing with our ministers, with the environment ministers, because we know that we can find more ambitious objectives and so we must keep working constructively, really, to work in favor of the climate.

We've also talked about state of rule, of rule of law, of course, it's very important to us in Luxembourg.

I've talked about this peace project in the European Union and it's also about law, right, human rights, diversity, not accepting that in some countries.

As of today, some of the liberties we thought were acquired, were there, are not there anymore. So I was talking about the vegetables in my garden and it would be the same if I wasn't getting them any water and we see now this happening: some of the freedom, some of the liberties that were ... the rights that were acquired, that everybody had, are not there anymore, so we need a tolerance project and I would like to thank the presidency of the Council but also the Commission for defending these values.

They are very important. The European Union is not only a common market, it's not a financial market, it is also a union for the citizenships, a union of human rights and these rights should never be questioned.

About Afghanistan now.

It's really important for the European Union to work with its international partners.

We can see that when there's a lack of coordination, we cannot observe any efficacy and I'm ...seeing it again:

We had a meeting with the government of Belgium and I have to thank them because with our neighbor, we have a good partnership, we can count on them and we have the same with friends with Germany and we were able to coordinate our actions because at the European level, it was impossible to coordinate.

So how to explain to afghan people nowadays, that it is ... they have fought all their lives, they're lawyers, they're human rights defenders, they were there, they were convinced that they could have a better Afghanistan and now we let them down.

It's impossible. There is a common responsibility of all the European states.

We should tell them: we haven't forgotten you but it's not enough. We have to help them.

How can we help them? How can we offer them a good life? Because they are in danger in the country I was ...

I've talked a bit too long, if I'm honest and we have many topics to discuss and I would like to thank Charles and this is really a Belgian quality, I would say, he is able to find agreements with so diverse partners, find a common solution to go forward because sometimes I get to Brussels and I just think, it's impossible, we will not find a solution and he is able to find a solution and we get great conclusions.

I have to tell you that Charles is able to say "okay, we conclude on this. We have to go forward. We have ambitions."

Of course, they are not easy.

When we get to the meeting, when we get there, it's very difficult to go forward but under President Michel, we've stepped forward really and he is a friend of Luxembourg, a neighbor and someone that I really can count on. He's very efficient. He didn't ask for me to praise him but as I am really convinced of how good he is, I have to say it.

Thank you.

[Charles Michel]

Thank you very much Mr Prime minister.

Thank you very much Xavier. It's a great pleasure for me to be here today. Thank you for welcoming me warmly and it was a great meeting about the European project.

Luxembourg is a great partner for us. He is a friend of mine too ... and you are always someone that is very honest, pragmatic, convinced, committed and this is key to the European dynamism, way of life.

So I would like to thank you for that.

Xavier has talked to you about some of the topics we've discussed this morning because we are preparing the next European meetings, so I will try not to repeat what he has said but I want to highlight some of the topics.

So this morning, we have had this work meeting with our teams for the future of Europe but this was also a moving moment: we were together in the birthplace of Robert Schuman.

There are challenges sometimes.

Sometimes you face great obstacles and it is important in these moments to be really anchored in history, to know your history and have the same direction.

So, we have challenges at hand and we know that we have great values to anchor our works.

First of all freedom, liberty, the human rights - all of these are really important after the dramatic situation we've seen in the past centuries and people such as Robert Schuman decided upon the right way to follow for Europe and today, this generation, our generation should be cautious but also courageous to face the challenges.

So, rule of law should still be at the core of our European ambition and this is not and by any luck that we had to discuss this budget and recovery plan for so long.

We had to decide on this and we decided to strengthen the link with rule of law and we have now really to check the implementation of these decisions.

Second topic I would like to talk about.

The European values is also about economic development and we can see that prosperity is in a bad state right now because of the current situation.

We understand that there is a revolution, a technical revolution, digital revolution but also a climate change and so I think that we are happy to see that the European Council, before even the Covid-crisis, made important decisions on this.

For example, the European continent is the first to decide to become neutral about carbon.

Also, you have to know that the climate threat is not virtual.

It is a true situation. It really puts in difficulty families in Europe and we will have to review all our ways of life.

The resources have been used, maybe sometimes exhausted, and we have to build a new model to be able to innovate, research. Courage will be needed to be able to overcome the obstacles and we've talked about the "Fit for 55"-package.

This package will give us a lot of work at the ministerial level, of course, because we will have to work on implementing the decisions and, of course, the European Council will take its responsibilities to encourage the decisions on these important topics.

Second element I would like to talk about is about prosperity and the transformation of the importance of making right decisions at the right time and I would like to talk about the influence of the European Union in the world.

So this strategic aspect of the European Union and we are many to think that as the European Union, as a power in the world, we have to become more efficient to be able to promote peace, freedom, rule of law, all over the world and so ... what is happening in Afghanistan should really make us increase our work.

To become stronger on the geopolitical level and we have really to progress on the cooperation in defense.

This is why, starting from June, in the agenda, that was proposed to the members of the government, we've decided that in March, we will have a European Council on defense and safety, security.

And this will be prepared with representative Borrel and this will be really important.

So, I was talking about Afghanistan, the relationship with China, with Russia, the commitment in the western Balkan, the commitment in the CEFTA, the rollout of our investment capacities and also all the work to promote freedom, rule of law and so on and of course, I repeat this, we have great alliances and NATO is one of them, of course.

If we want good alliances, we want strong partners, so we have to reinforce the European Union because with a stronger partner, we will become stronger on the geopolitical level.

Now to my last point. In the next month, we will be able to talk about economy, finance - thanks to the implementation of the recovery plan in the national plans.

They will start to be implemented but also we will have debate in the stability plan because we want a new finance world for this next step because there is a digital revolution but also a climate revolution that we have to answer to.

We will have to find the balance that will make the European Union proud because we have to develop solidarity, social consideration, investment.

At the end of the day, the European Union's project is the citizen, the men and women of the continent.

We are the third generation and we should never forget that this is why the European union is is there.

Our objective should be the well-being, the life of our citizens. So these are the many topics we've discussed this morning with Xavier. So thank you once again to the Luxembourgish government.

Thank you Xavier also for your commitment for the project, the European project. It's very useful because, often, when you take the floor and you remind the different important values of the European Union, it's very needed to make the European Union better so thank you for using efficiently your tools to better Europe.

Thank you.

[Journalist]

Maurice Molitor from Luxembourg from radio 100,7.

Thank you Mr President. Your mandate will come to an end during the first semester next year. I guess you are candidate for the next election and I guess you have the support from Xavier the Prime Minister of Luxembourg...

So my first question is this uh.. because Mr Weber is not gonna apply uh is does this change something?

[Charles Michel]

No, I will not discuss the election at the European level. There is a lot of work to do right now.

Honestly, there are many questions so the question about the European Parliament are linked to the European Union and now about the uh Council this is something that will be dealt in time.

[Journalist]

So the balance will be uh will change?

[Charles Michel]

No. This is my answer: no.

[Xavier Bettel]

This is not what we are discussing right now. The elections for the European Parliament is something I will never infer on.

They are independent, I have nothing to do with this.

And about the European Council: this is something that will be discussed in time with the Head of State, if a candidate is highlighted and all I can say on this, is that what the presidency of the Mr Michel was great, what they've done is was great, and I think that the President should be the one that can gather people around the table.

He must be able to find an agreement with all the diversity among the 27 Member States.

And I know that President Michel was good at it, but first, it's his choice. He has to choose if he wants to be a candidate and then a decision will have to be made at the time. This is not the time the right time to answer this question.

[Journalist]

I’m from Luxembourg Times. Uh as you know, Mr President,Luxembourg is a very important location for the European Institutions and it hosts a lot of agencies and and bodies here, but a few months ago the European Court of Auditors sent a letter to the European Commission, in which it, um, spoke about the difficulties in recruiting staff for posts in Luxembourg, and it specifically suggested that um people in Luxembourg should get a salary increase, so I suppose my question is: do you agree that there's an issue with recruitment for Luxembourg, and if so, do you think... what do you think should be done about it? What has the EU, what measures has he taken, what can it take, to attract more candidates here? Thank you.

[Charles Michel]

Of course I don't want to to speak on behalf of the President of the European Commission, but I'm informed.

And you know that for me this important process in Luxembourg for European Institutions is a paramount because, it's an important uh signal and we had the opportunity in the past, several times, many times, to discuss with the Prime Minister the importance for Luxembourg to keep an important European role with this important presence of EU institutions. I remember the last European budget that we discussed uh during the last summer uh in July: we made sure together with the Prime Minister of Luxembourg and together with the other 26 colleagues around the table that we would confirm this important role played by Luxembourg when it comes to the presence of of uh institutions.

And I'm informed that there is a topic there is a debate related to what we have mentioned.

And last point: I'm very pleased that the Prime Minister took this initiative to organize, after this press conference, a lunch with the representatives of those institutions based in Luxembourg.

[Charles Michel & Xavier Bettel]

Thank you very much.