

Joint Declaration Benelux Summit

7 October 2020

For over 75 years, the cornerstones of the close cooperation between the Benelux countries have been security, prosperity and freedom within the European context. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has confronted us with severe challenges, including with regard to these core European values. The current crisis is however also an opportunity for Europe to demonstrate to its citizens the value of close cooperation among neighbours in times of crisis and growing uncertainty.

We, the Prime Ministers of Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, firmly believe that a united European Union is of the essence to find responses to our common challenges. Especially if we want the EU to remain a source of prosperity and wellbeing for our citizens. In light of the COVID-19 crisis, it is our goal to weather this crisis together, achieving a sustainable recovery for our economy, society and our people, and to emerge from the crisis stronger than before. The Benelux partnership continues to be instrumental in leading by example to find solutions to cross-border issues for the benefit of our countries, citizens and businesses.

[EUROPEAN INTEGRATION]

First of all, there are many topics on the European agenda on which the Benelux-countries are working together closely. We remain committed to fostering a green transition and digital transformation, strengthening the single market, promoting the rule of law and increasing the EU's self-assurance on the world stage. We emphasise the crucial role of the Benelux as a sustainable and innovative frontrunner within the EU in strengthening the EU's single market. We will undertake steps for a more integrated, future proof and fair European single market with the aim to create growth and jobs in our countries and to enhance the Union's competitiveness.

With respect to the Union's COVID-19 recovery strategy, we call on member states to present and implement ambitious national recovery and resilience plans that further strengthen their economic potential and make the countries' economies more resilient. Alongside we emphasise the opportunities outlined in the European Green Deal and the new European Digital strategy to transform the EU into a sustainable, climate-neutral, circular and digital economy.

The EU is built on respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and human rights. These values are the Union's backbone and the foundation on which cooperation between member states in the EU has been based since its inception. We underline the shared responsibility of the member states and the institutions to uphold and promote those values unconditionally. In this context, we welcome the new Rule of Law Report published by the European Commission, and we are committed to making the reinforced rule of law dialogue in the Council meaningful and effective. We also reaffirm the

importance of a strong and effective Rule of Law conditionality in the EU budget. The rule of law is the cornerstone of European cooperation, and we therefore call for a direct link between the distribution of EU funds and respect for the rule of law principles. To ensure effectiveness of this rule of law conditionality, decisions on possible measures should be taken on the basis of qualified majority voting.

As founding member states, we are determined to continue making a success of the EU, with 27 member states, building on its joint history, common values and achievements. As underlined in the Benelux non-paper on the reinforcement of a transparent, values- and rules-based European Union we believe that an EU with strong institutions is best placed to defend the values at the heart of the European project, while delivering the concrete added value its citizens and Member States seek. We welcome the Conference on the Future of Europe as a means of bringing Europe closer to its citizens, with the aim of strengthening democratic legitimacy and accountability and continuing to build trust and confidence in the EU. The Benelux countries also underline that during this process the EU needs to be a willing listener, open to concerns voiced by its citizens. The Conference can serve as a forum to consider ways of better realizing our priorities, in line with the Strategic Agenda 2019-2024 of the European Council, and of strengthening public support for it, as well as of pursuing longer-term priorities. In general, with the challenges the EU is currently facing, we should focus on delivering concrete results for the EU and its citizens.

We remain committed to the broadest and most ambitious possible partnership with the United Kingdom. This partnership should preserve the EU's decision-making autonomy, be based upon a balance of rights and obligations and link market access to credible guarantees on a level playing field for economic competition. The Benelux calls on the United Kingdom to make realistic and concrete proposals which will build the confidence needed for further progress towards that goal. In this connection, we emphasize that a positive start of the future partnership between the EU and the UK can only be based upon a full and effective implementation of the Withdrawal Agreement, including the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland. Regardless of the outcome of the negotiations, our relationship with the UK will change after the transition period, and we call upon all businesses and stakeholders and the general public to make the necessary preparations.

[BENELUX COOPERATION]

Next to our shared position in many EU-discussions, the Benelux-countries are taking concrete steps in the Benelux-area to further strengthen the ties between our countries and people. The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly demonstrated the need for close cooperation. Protecting public health and limiting the spread of the virus is a key priority for our countries. The current situation demands continuous dialogue and the use of direct communication channels. It is evident that national response measures affect other countries. Therefore, we pursue to inform each other at the earliest possible stage about our national epidemiological situation and new national measures. We are committed to continuing and intensifying our cross border cooperation in health policy. Moreover, we will explore the possibilities of helping each other, where possible, deal with shortages or problems, for example with regards to testing and ICU capacity.

Apart from COVID-19, we are committed to continuing our cooperation in the Benelux on conducting cross-border data exchange. This is key in a situation where medical care is increasingly being provided abroad. A good example of our cooperation is the Benelux Decision on the cross-border exchange of electronic personal data on health, which provides the necessary legal basis for data exchange.

This year, as we marked the 25th anniversary of Schengen we were confronted with unprecedented risks for public health, leading to restrictions within the EU affecting cross-border movements. We had fruitful exchanges of views on how best to protect our people while minimizing the effects on cross-border mobility. We remain committed to open borders as an essential element of the European success story and free movement is a fundamental right recognized and regulated by the EU Treaties. The single market is not only of immense economic value, but also one of the achievements that is most visible to European citizens. For the border regions, cross-border cooperation, coordination and information sharing are crucial, to enabling individuals, public and private organizations in border regions to benefit from the single market in daily life. In this context, we agree to assess the desirability of closer coordination between our three countries. Our citizens' expectations are high, and the Benelux countries will continue to defend the integrity of the Schengen partnership and the principles of free movement as cornerstones of our common European project. We support the recommendations of the European Commission and the work undertaken by the EU in this regard.

Furthermore, we are resolved to continue monitoring the socioeconomic situation of those the pandemic has hit the hardest: the most vulnerable employees with low-paid and or flexible jobs, those whose very limited resources are obstacles to a decent livelihood, and those at risk of losing their jobs and income. We also seek to keep employment as high as possible, and to safeguard decent working conditions, although it remains necessary to assess which forms of assistance benefits work best and are sustainable. It is also crucial to inform cross-border workers fully about these developments, as they may be eligible for assistance from more than one country.

Children and young people have been strongly affected by the pandemic and we need to ensure continuation of learning and teaching. We also need to offer the necessary support to mitigate learning losses and to encourage companies and businesses to offer apprenticeships to young people in VET. The crisis has revealed the necessity of digital skills in many aspects of daily lives and for business continuity. In order to be able to master the green and digital transition re- and upskilling opportunities have to be offered to all citizens and we support the European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience presented by the EU Commission on July 1, 2020.

The principle for the free movement of goods in the European single market entails the removal of the existing barriers that prevent the completion of the single market. In 2017, the Benelux-countries launched a pilot project on the use of digital waybill (e-CMR) as part of their overall efforts to reduce administrative costs in the freight transport and logistics sector. Evaluation has shown that the pilot project was successful. In order to bridge the gap with the EU Regulation on electronic freight transport information (eFTI) adopted in July 2020 and entering into force in 2025, we plan to extend the pilot project in November 2020 in order to develop rapidly a one-stop access point for control authorities. We are also pursuing collaboration with the Digital Transport and Logistics Forum (DTLF) of the European Commission

and EU-funded projects European Federated Network of Information eXchange in LogistiX (FENIX), in order to enable a coherent and cost-efficient implementation of the eFTI Regulation. A broadening of the pilot project's scope upon success of the one-stop access point is also being considered.

We emphasise the Benelux countries' close cooperation on energy in the overall framework of the Pentalateral Energy Forum. We reaffirm our commitment to the Pentalateral Forum's recently signed joint political declaration, in which the Pentalateral countries' energy ministers agreed to strengthen their joint efforts to produce hydrogen in a manner that reduces CO2 emissions. This partnership is aimed at contributing to the full decarbonisation of the energy system, with particular emphasis on renewable hydrogen, and at making possible a forward-looking European hydrogen infrastructure and liquid market in the near future. We will endeavour to work together on joint proposals on green hydrogen infrastructure, an international offshore energy hub and the joint deployment of green energy hydrogen fuelling and green electricity charging infrastructure for zero emission transport.

The COVID-19 crisis has quickly changed Europe's stance on active mobility. Cycling has increased in many cities and rural areas of Europe as one of the safest mobility options, a development that also has a positive impact on the environment, the economic recovery and the public health. We therefore reaffirm the Benelux Bike Declaration, addressed to all European authorities, calling upon them to prioritise cycling in the post-virus recovery.

In addition, we are committed to further develop cross-border security and police cooperation, especially in the fight against organised drug-related crime. We recall the Benelux Police Treaty of 2018, and we will pursue its ratification. Furthermore, we are committed to strengthen our capabilities in the field of cross-border crisis management. We will work towards both of these goals by sharing information and by working more closely together.

Another area in which Benelux cooperation has proven to be effective is in the field of safety standards, for example regarding fireworks. Fireworks is an issue where we see the interaction between the Benelux Union and the EU come to fruition, with the Benelux playing an important role as the testing ground for new EU initiatives. The Benelux has developed and continues to prepare rules and guidance to enhance safety standards within the Benelux countries. Meanwhile the European Commission is looking at these arrangements with a view to possible upscaling within the EU. One example is the introduction of a pyro-pass for professionals selling commercial fireworks, which is a Benelux initiative to prevent illegal trade in commercial fireworks within the Benelux countries.

The Benelux countries remain committed to continue their close cooperation in the field of immigration and asylum, at operational as well as policy level. The Benelux countries will continue to exchange relevant information at operational level and will act jointly where possible to prevent secondary movements of asylum seekers, disrupt human smuggling networks and to improve the return of migrants.

The Benelux countries will also continue to work with one another, with neighbouring countries and international partners, to pave the way for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, through e.g.

cross-border cooperation on Education for Sustainable Development, to help build a more resilient society that is better equipped to face the new environmental challenges of tomorrow.

[GEOPOLITICAL]

We as Benelux countries are aware of the role we play in the world as founding members of the EU. We recognise the need for more EU cooperation on common foreign and security policy to enable the EU to confront the challenges of the 21st century.

More than ever, we strive for a decisive, geopolitical EU that stands up for its interests and shows international solidarity. Europe is confronted with an ever more turbulent world, with political and economic challenges and crises at its doorstep. The tectonic plates underpinning the international rules-based order are shifting. The international principles and multilateral institutions that have helped advance peace, stability, prosperity and respect for human rights are facing unprecedented challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated this trend. At the same time the crisis has underlined the need for global cooperation and solidarity: we are only as strong as our weakest link.

The COVID-19 crisis has also shown once more how much we, like the rest of the EU, depend on third countries for the delivery of essential goods. This has increased the urgency of a common strategic approach to unwanted, asymmetric dependence. We need to address the vulnerabilities in our global supply chains and we need to do so at EU level. We need to become more resilient to external influences while safeguarding our open economy.

As the world's largest trading block and the leading donor of development assistance, with a broad range of foreign and defence policy instruments at their disposal, the EU and its member states have the potential to become an even stronger global actor. Ensuring and increasing coherence between different instruments is key to further developing a resilient and powerful EU capable to engage with other global powers on an equal footing.

If the EU intends to develop its leadership, it must be able to take positions swiftly, when needed, on foreign policy issues. These positions should then be voiced without constraints by the High Representative on behalf of the Union. To help promote a rules-based global order and multilateralism, our three countries have – together with other member states – tabled proposals aiming at helping the EU to exert its influence in multilateral forums.

Sanctions have a prominent role to play in the EU's foreign policy. We look forward to concluding the negotiations for a EU Global Human Rights Sanctions regime as soon as possible. This will strengthen Europe's voice in the world, by allowing us to respond faster to serious human rights violations and abuses – in a targeted way, anywhere in the world.

The Benelux countries will seek to engage with other Member States, including the Nordics, the Visegrad countries and the Baltic states in order to develop joint initiatives that shape EU decision-making and achieve results. We will also continue to reach out to partners outside the EU, including through joint visits to third countries.

We firmly believe that the Benelux partnership, including its cross border partnerships with our neighbours, can serve as a model for regional cooperation outside the EU. In this regard, we welcome the strengthening of the EU-Africa partnership which is crucial in addressing today's global challenges.

We wish to underline the importance we attach to the close cooperation between the Benelux-countries, especially in these challenging times. We also appreciate the tireless work done by the Benelux Parliament. We particularly value its contacts they are having with other national and regional parliaments, which we encourage them to continue. We as Benelux countries will continue working together closely in the Benelux Union, but also as founding members within the European Union, and as part of the European Union in the wider world.