COVID, UKRAINE, AND MIGRATION OCCUPY BULK OF EUROPEAN COUNCIL'S ATTENTION

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With the Omicron variant rapidly spreading throughout Europe, the European Council held its last summit of the year on Thursday, after which it presented its report.

The new COVID variant is causing concern among the EU leaders, as it is far more contagious than previous ones, raising fears it could worsen an already precarious epidemiological situation. While initial findings suggest a milder progression of illness, its increased infectiousness has scientists worried. Whether vaccines currently in use offer sufficient protection is still unclear, though a new study suggests a Pfizer COVID-19 booster would decrease risk substantially. The World Health Organization (WHO) has considered Omicron a "variant of concern" and is monitoring the situation.

Compelled by circumstances to take a fresh look, EU leaders discussed their response to a pandemic situation that's quickly evolving. "Urgent administration of booster shots" and "overcoming vaccine hesitancy," which also entails "addressing disinformation," remained primary goals, though it was agreed to "take forward the implementation of COVID-19 therapeutics via joint procurement."

Coordination in response to quick developments was deemed key, and that "restrictions should be based on objective criteria and not undermine the functioning of the Single Market or disproportionately hamper free movement between EU countries or travel into the EU." A call was made for "adoption of the revised Council recommendation on safe free movement and of the revised Council recommendation on non-essential travel into the EU." The importance of a "coordinated approach on the validity of EU digital COVID certificates" was also stressed.

Internationally, the European Council agreed that much more needed to be done to contain the pandemic. Therefore, EU leaders reaffirmed their commitment to arriving at global vaccination: "We will continue to export and share vaccine doses and ancillary materials, and step up our support for the countries most in need, in particular in Africa, both by continuing to provide support to COVAX and on a bilateral basis, in cooperation with partners."

Additionally, it welcomed the agreement reached by the World Health Assembly on 1 December 2021 to start a global process of drafting and negotiating a "convention, agreement or other international instrument on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response."

Faced by "increased global instability, growing strategic competition and complex security threats," EU leaders agreed that the bloc "will take more responsibility for its own security and defense, pursue a strategic course of action and increase its capacity to act autonomously." Whether this means steps toward the creation of a unified European military force, as suggested in the past by Belgian MEP Guy Verhofstadt, the statement did not say.

Also brought to mind are French President Emmanuel Macron's controversial 2019 statement that NATO "was experiencing brain death," and that "European members could no longer rely on the US to defend the alliance." While such fears have slightly abated since former U.S. President Donald Trump has left office, the experience did expose a flaw within the NATO framework: without the U.S. as guarantor of Europe's security, the bloc is largely toothless, especially against Russia, which is once again a great power and is

now de facto wedded—both militarily and economically—to China to boot.

EU leaders stressed that "the Union is committed to the global rules-based international order, with the United Nations at its core, and close cooperation with NATO." They supported "strengthening the EU-NATO strategic partnership and looked forward to the third joint declaration on EU-NATO cooperation."

The European Council also invited the Council of the European Union to "take forward the work on an ambitious Strategic Compass, based on a first draft presented by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in November 2021," which The European Council is expected to endorse during its meeting in March 2022.

In regards to foreign policy, The European Council strongly condemned the "instrumentalisation of migrants and refugees by the Belarusian regime and the humanitarian crisis it has created," and that the EU "will continue to counter the hybrid attack launched by Belarus and address all dimensions of the crisis in line with EU law and international obligations, including fundamental rights."

For that, it called for "protecting the EU's external borders by strengthening the EU's legal framework," "combating smuggling and trafficking," "implementing restrictive measures following the adoption of the fifth package of sanctions, ensuring unhindered access for international organizations in Belarus and stepping up humanitarian support," as well as "supporting the return of migrants from Belarus."

The European Council reiterated its call for "the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners, and for an end to the repression of civil society and independent media." Additionally, it stated that the Belarusian people "have a democratic right to elect their president through new, free and fair elections."

The crisis at the Ukrainian border prompted The European Council to call for de-escalation of tensions while reiterating its full support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial

integrity. President of the European Council Charles Michel, said in a tweet that "massive consequences & severe costs will follow if Russia takes further military action against Ukraine." EU leaders encouraged diplomatic efforts and expressed their support for the Normandy Format to achieve full implementation of the Minsk agreements.

Moscow on its part has made it clear that it seeks no military conflict, but that an eventual membership of Ukraine to NATO is a 'redline.' In a tweet, Chief of NATO Jens Stoltenberg said that "NATO Allies are gravely concerned by the substantial Russian military build-up on the borders of Ukraine and reject false claims of Ukrainian and NATO provocations."

Another important item on the agenda was addressing migratory routes, with The European Council urging "implementation of recent action plans for countries of origin and transit without further delay, and effective returns from the EU to countries of origin." It also urged the Commission to "make sure that adequate financing is clearly identified and mobilized without delay for migration-related actions on all routes, in line with the EU's increased ambition."

A most pressing issue in these winter months, the spike in energy prices impacting citizenry and businesses alike was under discussion but, disappointingly, bore no fruit other than "the European Council will continue to closely monitor the situation and revisit this issue at a future meeting."

The European Council will convene again on March 24-25, 2022.