

EU leaders study jab roll-out, vaccine certificates

February 25 2021

EU leaders met virtually Thursday under pressure to speed up Europe's coronavirus vaccine rollout and facing demands from some capitals for a continent-wide vaccine passport.

Their video summit comes a year into the COVID-19 crisis, as most of the 27-nation EU is experiencing a second wave of cases—or a third wave for some—that stubbornly won't diminish.

Brussels has warned six governments about unilateral border restrictions, while tourist-dependent countries are piling on pressure to lift travel barriers in time for summer vacations.

Ahead of the videoconference, Austria's Chancellor Sebastian Kurz and Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov called for "green passports" to be issued that contain vaccine and test results.

Kurz tweeted "we... want an EU-wide Green Passport, with which people can travel freely, do business without restrictions and go on holiday, as well as finally enjoy gastronomy, culture, events and other things again".

But several EU officials and diplomats warn that, while they back a verifiable vaccination record, it is too early to look at using them to permit easier travel.

They said it was still unknown if vaccinated people can infect others, and

worried that it could open a travel schism between a minority of vaccinated haves and a majority of unvaccinated have-nots.

Sea, vax and sun

Greece, however, has indicated it is ready to move faster than its EU peers. It has already struck a bilateral travel agreement with Israel, the world's vaccination champion.

And it is reportedly in similar talks with former EU member Britain, its second-biggest tourist market, which is contemplating lifting a ban on foreign leisure travel as early as mid-May.

One senior EU diplomat acknowledged that all European Union countries were eager to reopen travel for the June-to-September tourist season, but said "we have to move this forward together".

An EU official, also speaking on condition of anonymity, was blunter, saying the EU wants to avoid "a new death season".

On top of examining options for developing a common certificate strategy, the EU leaders will look at how to speed the continent's sluggish vaccines rollout.

The European Commission's vaccine procurement strategy in the first quarter was too dependent on doses from British-Swedish giant AstraZeneca, which drastically under-delivered.

The EU now hopes supplies will be greatly boosted from April with more stocks from Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna, and the possibility of new vaccines such as a single-dose one from Johnson & Johnson being authorised.

Despite ongoing concerns that several countries are underprepared to give out the millions of jabs in the pipeline, European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen is sticking by her goal of having 70 percent of adults in the European Union fully vaccinated by mid-September.

So far just four percent of the bloc's 450 million people have received at least one jab, according to an AFP tally of official figures, and only two percent have been fully vaccinated with two jabs.

Worry over variants

Brussels is also concerned the emergence of worrying variants could require retooled booster shots, which would in turn mean [vaccine](#) certificates would have to be constantly updated.

A dispute is also stewing over severe border restrictions put in place by several EU countries to curb the virus variants, and which the European Commission sees as disproportionate.

It has written warning letters to Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Hungary and Sweden about their measures, giving them until late next week to respond.

An EU official said he expected "quite a lively discussion between the member states" on that issue during the summit.

The EU's internal market commissioner, Thierry Breton, tweeted that "the closure of borders by certain member states hurts the entire single market", calling for curbs to be lifted as soon as it is possible to do so.

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