

Beat: Politics

Impatience is legitimate, but should not blind us!

President of the EC says

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USPA NEWS - The president of the European Council, Charles Michel, said on Tuesday that “the coordinated vaccination of 450 million Europeans across 27 Member States, using vaccines that have only just been invented and whose production has only just begun, is an unprecedentedly complex undertaking. The difficulties in launching this massive operation have caused frustration and even anger among European citizens. I understand that. After a year of pandemic - and all its constraints ““ we are all longing to recover our freedom and return to normal life as quickly as possible.”

In a letter to the Europeans, Charles Michel said: “Citizens have voiced strong criticism of their national authorities and of the EU over the delays in producing, distributing and administering the vaccines. There will certainly be lessons to be learned, not least on the performance of contracts signed with pharmaceutical companies. But the current difficulties, however irritating, should not make us lose sight of the bigger picture and all that has been, and is currently, being achieved. Impatience is legitimate, but it should not blind us to the broader perspective.”

“Let's set out some facts which show that Europe is not lagging behind in a sprint, but is well placed to lead the field in a marathon,” added the president of the European Council. “Without Europe, it would not have been possible to develop and produce several types of vaccines in less than one year, when it usually takes at least four or five years. Vaccines of which properties and effects are subject to public, scientific review. The EU was the driving force and leading donor in the international fundraising that enabled the financing of the research into vaccines, including those based on the innovative messenger RNA (mRNA) technique, discovered by European researchers. And several of these vaccines have been developed or are in the process of being developed by European companies.”

“The 27 EU Member States decided to entrust to the European Commission their group purchase of vaccines from pharmaceutical companies,” he added. “The goal was to avoid competition and bidding between countries, and to allow all countries to obtain the doses at the same time. Otherwise, the larger or richer Member States would have been the first in the queue and best served, while the others would not yet have received a single dose. This would have created first- and second-class European citizens, which is unacceptable!”

“I am staggered to hear Europe accused of not acting in solidarity. And sad to see it criticised for wanting to share doses before having vaccinated all its citizens,” said Charles Michel. “Right from the start, Europe has been the most fervent advocate of an international response and of the principle that the vaccines must be universally accessible and affordable. For reasons of necessity as well as solidarity. Faced with a pandemic in a globalised world, it is logical that countries developing the vaccines should rapidly start vaccinating their own people. But no region of the world will be protected if all regions are not equally protected. The emergence of more contagious variants brings this into sharp focus: while the pandemic is still rife, there is a risk of mutations that are resistant to existing vaccines undermining the progress that has already been made.”

“This is why the European Union has launched the international COVAX initiative to supply vaccines to the world's lower income countries. The EU, together with its Member States, has committed EUR 2.7 billion to the initiative, which currently represents 25 % of its funding,” said the president of the European Council in his letter. “Furthermore, the EU has pre-ordered over two billion doses, more than double what is needed to vaccinate its population. The surplus which we will give to our partner countries and regions of the world, will make it possible to vaccinate several hundreds of millions of people.”

“By doing so, Europe will be actively promoting its values through specific and strong actions, especially in regions where we have strategic links, such as the Eastern Partnership countries, including Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine where I was last week. Or like Latin America or Africa, where I visited Rwanda and Kenya in recent days and where COVAX has delivered or will shortly deliver the first shipments of doses,” he explained.

“We should not let ourselves be misled by China and Russia, both regimes with less desirable values than ours, as they organise highly limited but widely publicised operations to supply vaccines to others. According to available figures, these countries have administered half as many doses per 100 inhabitants as the European Union. And Europe will not use vaccines for propaganda

purposes. We promote our values," he said.

"I am also shocked when I hear the accusations of "vaccine nationalism" against the EU. Here again, the facts do not lie. The United Kingdom and the United States have imposed an outright ban on the export of vaccines or vaccine components produced on their territory. But the European Union, the region with the largest vaccine production capacity in the world, has simply put in place a system for controlling the export of doses produced in the EU. Our objective: to prevent companies from which we have ordered and pre-financed doses from exporting them to other advanced countries when they have not delivered to us what was promised. The EU has never stopped exporting," said Charles Michel.

"For example, the vaccination operation in Israel, which has a population of 9 million, has been a success. Israel has incontestable scientific capabilities. But it has neither developed nor produced any vaccines. Most vaccination technologies have been initiated or developed in Europe. Most of the doses with which Israel embarked on its mass vaccination programme were sent from Belgium. So, as the proverb goes, there is no need to cross the river to get water," he added.

"Vaccine production is a complex industrial process. It requires a minimum period of time - there are no short-cuts. It is not a production line where components go in one end and finished products come out the other end fifteen minutes later. Rapidly achieving mass vaccine production requires a flawless industrial strategy and organisation. And thanks to the task force led by commissioner Thierry Breton, the EU is now taking all the necessary steps. We will become the leading vaccine producer in the world in the coming months. Europe is also the best equipped to adapt vaccine production quickly to virus mutations," explained the president of the European Council.

"Along with the US, we will undoubtedly be the largest producer of vaccines for the world. That is why our strategic partnership with the US, which we are currently relaunching with their new administration, is also crucial in the fight against the pandemic. We need them as much as they need us. By joining forces, we will demonstrate that liberal democracies, supported by science, collective intelligence and value-based international cooperation, are most effective in overcoming a huge crisis such as the current pandemic. We will win this war against COVID-19. And Europe will be a major ally in freeing the world from this virus," he concluded.

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