

Joint Statement of the Members of the EEA Council

The members of the EEA Council held a video conference on 18 November 2020 at the initiative of Ms Katrin Eggenberger, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Liechtenstein. The video conference was attended by Mr Michael Roth, Minister of State for Europe of Germany, Mr Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson, Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Development Cooperation of Iceland, Ms Ine Eriksen Søreide, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Norway, as well as representatives of the European Commission and the European External Action Service. The members of the EEA Council discussed the overall functioning of the Agreement on the European Economic Area (EEA Agreement), and held an orientation debate on Europe's Digital Future.

Following the videoconference, the members of the EEA Council adopted the following joint statement:

COVID-19

1. We acknowledge the far-reaching effects of the COVID-19 crisis and stress the need to meet this unprecedented challenge in a spirit of solidarity. Furthermore, we welcome the particularly close cooperation between the EU and the EEA EFTA States. We highlight the joint efforts on free movement of persons, border management and the repatriation of nationals stranded abroad, on the acquisition of medicines, medical and protective equipment, as well as on the research and development of a vaccine. Reaffirming the central role of the EEA Agreement in closely linking our societies and economies, we continue to stress the need for such close cooperation and the importance of considering how to help alleviate the serious socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic through all available instruments. Ensuring the integrity of the Internal Market and a smooth functioning of the EEA Agreement remain essential priorities in this context.

Cooperation in the EEA

2. We confirm our support for the EEA Agreement as the continued basis for future relations between the EU and the EEA EFTA States, and stress the importance of the two-pillar structure of the EEA Agreement. We recognise the positive contributions made by the EEA EFTA States to the decision-shaping process of EEA-relevant EU legislation and programmes through their participation in the committees, expert groups, studies and agencies, as well as through the submission of EEA EFTA Comments. Furthermore, we stress the positive contribution of the EFTA Surveillance Authority and of the European Commission in monitoring the compliance with the EEA Agreement in all its Member States. We underline the importance of inviting EEA EFTA Ministers to informal EU Ministerial meetings and Ministerial conferences, organised by the Presidency, relevant to EEA EFTA participation in the Internal Market and express our appreciation to the current German and incoming Portuguese Presidencies for the continuation of this practice.
3. Recognising the important role of parliamentary cooperation and cooperation between economic and social partners, we note the Resolution of the EEA Joint Parliamentary Committee adopted at its meeting on 16 November on the *Annual Report of the EEA Joint Committee on the Functioning of the EEA Agreement in 2019* and the Resolutions of the EEA Consultative Committee adopted at its meeting on 18 September 2020 on *the Green Deal*, and on *the Industrial Strategy*.
4. We agree on the need to further strengthen communication efforts on the EEA Agreement and on its benefits for citizens and businesses. Emphasising that greater knowledge of the EEA Agreement throughout the EEA at all levels is in the interest of all Contracting Parties, we urge the EU and the EEA EFTA States to ensure that information on the EEA Agreement is made readily and easily available.
5. We express concerns regarding the current challenges in international trade at a time where global supply chains are under strain due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We reconfirm our commitment to open and fair trade and rule-based trade relations. We reiterate our support for the modernisation of the World Trade Organisation in order to adapt it to the rapidly changing economy and to ensure a level playing field on world markets.

Political dialogue

6. We recognise that the special partnership between the EU and the EEA EFTA States is the best guarantee of long-term shared prosperity and stability. It shall contribute to a Europe based on stability, peace, democracy, the rule of law and human rights. In this context, within the framework of the Political Dialogue, we held informal exchanges of views on current foreign policy matters of mutual interest. We underline the importance of continuing the practice of inviting officials from the EEA EFTA States to political dialogues held in conjunction with the EU Council working parties.

The withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU and the EEA Agreement

7. We welcome the dialogue between the EU and the EEA EFTA States on issues related to the implications of UK's withdrawal from the European Union that are relevant for the EEA Agreement and encourage the continuation of this dialogue until the end of the transition period and beyond. In this context, we underline the importance of safeguarding the EEA Agreement, ensuring the continuation of a well-functioning, homogenous EEA and preserving the integrity of the Internal Market.

The development of the Internal Market

8. We underline the indivisibility and importance of the four freedoms and of the common rules and equal conditions of competition and state aid in the Internal Market, while noting that due to the COVID-19 crisis, it has in some cases been necessary to temporarily adapt the rules on state aid. We reiterate the importance of the close involvement of the EEA EFTA States in the design and development of Internal Market policies and initiatives, particularly in relation to the green and digital transitions. We encourage active cooperation on initiatives for better enforcement and implementation of Internal Market rules, including the EEA EFTA States' participation in the Single Market Enforcement Task Force (SMET), and on eliminating remaining trade barriers, particularly in the field of services.
9. We welcome the focus on further strengthening the Internal Market. We commend that the European Commission's COVID-19 recovery efforts put emphasis on ensuring that the Internal Market work properly again, whilst becoming greener and more digital.

Incorporation of EEA-relevant EU acts

10. Noting the Progress Report of the EEA Joint Committee, we express our appreciation for the work of the Joint Committee in ensuring the continued successful operation and good functioning of the EEA Agreement.
11. We recognise that the efforts to reduce the number of EU acts awaiting incorporation into the EEA has continued in 2020 and that important progress on complex files has been achieved. We acknowledge that these positive developments were the result of joint efforts between the EU Institutions and the EEA EFTA States. We however note with regret that the total volume of acts incorporated in 2020 was considerably smaller than in previous years. We stress the need to make necessary resources available to increase the speed and volume of incorporation of EU legal acts and thereby continue to ensure legal certainty and homogeneity in the EEA.

The European Green Deal - climate change, environmental protection and energy

12. We reiterate the ambition of making the EU climate neutral and transforming the EEA EFTA States into low-emission societies by 2050 while safeguarding and enhancing competitiveness. We agree that it is essential to put climate change, the loss of biodiversity and the protection of the environment at the heart of a renewed ambition to achieve sustainability. In this context, we note that a number of key initiatives have been launched this year within the framework of the European Green Deal, such as the European Climate Law, a new Circular Economy Action Plan, the Biodiversity Strategy, the Farm to Fork Strategy, and the Green Deal Investment Plan, the 2030 Climate Target Plan and the Chemicals Strategy.
13. We remain fully committed to addressing climate change, pursuing energy transition and protecting the environment, and emphasise the importance of continued close cooperation between the EU and the EEA EFTA States on climate change, environment and energy matters hereunder on renewable energy, hydrogen and carbon capture and storage and mineralisation (CCSM), including within the framework of the European Green Deal and on key initiatives with EEA relevance.

14. Recognising that climate change is a global problem, we reiterate our commitment to implement the UN's 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement as the essential multilateral frameworks governing global action against climate change. We remain determined to raise global climate ambition with a view to limiting global warming to well below 2°C, pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C. In that regard, the need to put forward enhanced global efforts and ambitions by 2020 is underlined.
15. We note the high ambitions stated in the communications of the European Commission on an Energy System Integration Strategy and the EU Hydrogen Strategy and agree on the necessity of a long-term, efficient and market-based approach to the energy transition.

A Europe fit for the digital age

16. Underlining the importance of making the digital transformation work to the benefit of the whole of society, we take note of the communication of the European Commission on Shaping Europe's digital future and its accompanying White Paper on Artificial Intelligence and European data strategy. We furthermore recognise the key role new technologies will play in making our societies smarter and greener.
17. We stress the importance of the EU and the EEA EFTA States working together in building the European Data Economy and welcome the EEA EFTA Comment on the Commission's strategies for Artificial Intelligence (AI) and data. In this Comment, the EEA EFTA States support the vision of Europe becoming a role model for a society empowered by data, a risk-based approach to regulation of AI, and recognise the need for a common European approach in order to reach sufficient scale and avoid fragmentation of the Internal Market.
18. We confirm our commitment to facilitate the free flow of data across the entire EEA, underlining the importance of effective implementation and harmonized enforcement of legislation such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). We support the proposal to establish common European data spaces to modernise the economy, combat the COVID-19 pandemic and meet climate objectives.

19. We recognise that the emergence of large online platforms creates distinct challenges and stress that the main aim of the upcoming Digital Services Act package should be to strengthen the Internal Market for digital services while protecting the rights of citizens.

The Social Dimension

20. We underline that the social dimension, including in relation to labour law, health and safety at work and gender equality, is an important part of the EEA Agreement. We note with satisfaction that a number of initiatives have been taken in recent years, including the Communication of the European Commission on a Strong Social Europe for Just Transition, setting out the road towards an Action Plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights. We note the newly launched European Skills Agenda and support its aim of ensuring that the right to training and lifelong learning becomes a reality across Europe.

EU programmes

21. Acknowledging the contribution made by EU programmes to building a more competitive, innovative and social Europe, we welcome the participation of the EEA EFTA States in EEA-relevant programmes and note their significant financial contributions under the current Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2014-2020.
22. We encourage the EEA EFTA States to take an active part in EU programmes foreseen under the new financial framework and welcome their preliminary Expression of Interest. The participation of the EEA EFTA States in the future EU programmes for 2021-2027 shall remain based on the relevant provisions of the EEA Agreement.

Financial Mechanisms

23. We commend the positive contribution made by the EEA and Norway Financial Mechanisms in reducing social and economic disparities throughout the EEA and in supporting a free and vibrant civil society, as this contributes to a well-functioning Internal Market.
24. With regard to the agreements on an EEA and a Norwegian Financial Mechanism for the 2014-2021 period, we welcome the conclusion of Memoranda of Understanding between the EEA EFTA States and almost all of the Beneficiary States. We encourage the Contracting Parties to continue the dialogue with a view to a swift conclusion of the remaining country-specific Memorandum of Understanding, a timely implementation of the Memoranda of Understanding, and a swift signing of the remaining programme agreements, while ensuring quality at entry for programmes and projects, flexibility and broad participation, in order to achieve the expected results. We recall the importance of maintaining a close cooperation between the Beneficiary States and the EEA EFTA States, in the spirit of equal partnership between the Contracting Parties to the EEA Agreement.
25. We note that, in the face of the COVID-19 crisis, a number of steps have been undertaken to mitigate risks for the timely realisation of the programmes. We ask the EEA EFTA States to continue to assess the situation and undertake appropriate mitigation measures in cooperation with the Beneficiary States in order to achieve the best results in the implementation of the EEA and Norway Financial Mechanisms 2014-2021.

Agricultural trade

26. We recall the commitment of the Contracting Parties in accordance with Article 19 of the EEA Agreement and call on the parties to pursue the dialogue with a view to reviewing the conditions of trade in agricultural products. We note Contracting Parties' intention of conducting a new review of the trade regime for processed agricultural products within the framework of Article 2(2) and Article 6 of Protocol 3 to the EEA Agreement, in order to further promote trade in this area.
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