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***The European Council***  
***in the first half of 2021***



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**TRACK** Teaching and Researching  
the European Council

## TRACK Semi-Annual Report first half of 2021: a short overview

### The European Council from January 2021 – July 2021<sup>1</sup>

In the first half of 2021 the European Council (EUCO) continued its role as the crisis manager for the European Union and therefore mainly dealt with problems regarding the COVID pandemic. Though other topics of international relations started to gain relevance again. In December 2020, the European Union's 750 billion Euro recovery plan "NextGenerationEU" was finally realized after some institutional arguments about a conditionality clause<sup>2</sup>. Now for the first half of 2021 the EUCO had time and resources to deal with the purchase, delivery, and redistribution of COVID vaccines<sup>3</sup>, the end of intra-EU travel restrictions and the return of a full functioning single market.



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<sup>1</sup> Wessels, Wolfgang (2021): Der Europäische Rat. In: Werner Weidenfeld, Wolfgang Wessels (Eds.): Jahrbuch der Europäischen Integration 2021.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on "NextGenerationEurope", see TRACK semi-annual reports 1-3, available online on the project's website: <https://track.uni-koeln.de/de>.

<sup>3</sup> Böning, Sarah-Lena/ Maier-Rigaud, Remi (2021). Gesundheits- und Verbraucherpolitik. In: Werner Weidenfeld, Wolfgang Wessels (Eds.): Jahrbuch der Europäischen Integration 2021.



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And despite the pandemic, external crises shifted the EUCOs focus to other political topics again. In the eastern Mediterranean Sea, a conflict between Greece and Turkey evolved due to illegal oil drillings by Turkey. In Russia the poisoning and imprisonment of Alexey Nawalny concerned the EUCO. Conflicts in Belarus and Nagorno-Karabakh continued and political crises in Mali and the Ukraine became topics on the EUCO's meeting schedule. Consequently, the EUCO met with major political leaders from China, Russia and India, as well as partners from Japan, South Korea, Canada and a newly elected US-American president, Joe Biden. Between these meetings the EUCO tried to establish its position in the global dispute for democracy, climate crisis and trade politics.

This report will list the meetings held by the EUCO and provides a brief analysis on the major topics discussed by the European Council in the first half of 2021. For more detailed information, the European Council Conclusions themselves and respective Post-European Council Briefings of the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) can be accessed and studied.

### The COVID Pandemic

*Table 1: The European Council Meetings and COVID responses January 2021 – July 2021*

21 January 2021	Video conference: Fighting new COVID variations, delivery of vaccines, standardized vaccination card
25 – 26 February 2021	Video conference: Faster vaccination supply, restriction for non-essential travel
25 March 2021	Video conference: Acceleration of the vaccination process, multinational vaccination cards
7 – 8 May 2021	Informal meeting: digital vaccination cards, EU-wide and global distribution of vaccines
24 – 25 May 2021	Special meeting: Restoration of social life; Donation of 100 million vaccines
24 – 25 June 2021	Meeting: Discussion for restoration of full free travel inside the EU

*Source: European Council Meeting calendar*

The first half of 2021 consisted of the purchase and distribution of COVID vaccines, as well as finding a way back to a full functioning single market, with its full freedom of travel. On the one hand the EU was widely criticized because at the start of the vaccination process, it lagged behind the USA and UK considerably. The EUCO tried to work against this trend through EU-wide purchases of vaccinations and negotiations with the manufactures of the COVID

vaccinations. On the other hand, the EU was praised for the EUCOs unified approach and its “fair” distribution of vaccines inside the EU, namely distributing vaccines relative to national population numbers. Since spring 2021 the EUCO shifted its focus to the travel restrictions and the single market. Central in this aspect is the idea of a vaccination card that is valid in all of the EU. At the same time the appearance of new virus variations concerned political actors and people called for a unified response and an end of single-handedly national responses.

A unified response was made more difficult through the necessity of video conferences. Participants of those conferences regularly emphasized the fact that one could not achieve the same kind of confidentiality here. Also, some major parts of the EUCOs approach towards consensus were missing, like tactical interruptions and small discussions in little groups. For especially important reasons, the EUCO tried to meet in person.

### The European Council in external relations

*Table 2: The European Council Meetings and topics regarding external relations*

21 January 2021	Video conference: Condemnation of the detention of Russian opposition politician, Alexei Navalny
25 – 26 February 2021	Video conference: Exchange of views on EU-NATO relations, strengthening of partnerships with southern neighbors
25 March 2021	Video conference: EU-US relations: Meeting with Joe Biden, de-escalation of eastern Mediterranean conflict, relations to Russia, international role of the Euro
7 – 8 May 2021	Informal meeting: Meeting with India’s leaders
24 – 25 May 2021	Special meeting: Condemnation of the forced landing of a Ryanair flight in Minsk, Belarus, Debate about Russia, EU-UK relations, Middle East and Mali
24 – 25 June 2021	Meeting: Discussion about the migration situation, Turkey, Libya, Russia, Belarus, Sahel and Ethiopia

*Source: European Council Meeting calendar*

With the election of US-president Joe Biden, which many EU states explicitly welcomed<sup>4</sup>, transatlantic relations became a topic again. In June 2021, the first visit by an US-president since

<sup>4</sup> Thomas: Gutschker: Biden beim Europäischen Rat, In: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 26.03.2021.

2017 was massively covered by media outlets. Besides the EUCO continued to speak up in international conflicts. It condemned the illegal oil drillings in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea by Turkey and stressed the sovereignty and internal integrity of Greece and Cyprus. The EUCO called for a cease fire in the Armenian/Azerbaijan conflict. Notable here is the personal engagement of EUCO president Michel, in direct concurrence to the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borell. Much international attention was on a jointly visit of EU representatives in Turkey where the Turkish president only brought one chair for a private meeting with the presidents of the European Council and Commission. Because of that van der Leyen had to sit on a couch with some distance to the others (“Sofa-Gate”). These two incidents show the open question of who represents the EU in Foreign Affairs. Additionally, the EUCO condemned the forced landing of a Ryanair airplane in Minsk, Belarus with EU-citizens on board and the following detention of a political opponent, Roman Protasevich. Though sanctions against Belarus were delayed through a veto by Cyprus since it wanted similar sanctions against Turkey. The poisoning of Putin’s political opponent Alexei Navalny and possible cyber-attacks by Russia on EU territory worsened the relations to Russia.

Bulgaria vetoed against accession negotiations with North-Macedonia which again showed the proneness to blockades in questions of accession because of the rule of unanimity in the EUCO. Especially Germany calls for a new majority-based approach for external affairs in the EU. One unlikely solution would be a change in the treaties, another option would be if states would express their opinions in such matters but would formally stop to use their right to veto. Generally, this opens the question if the EU would overvote concerns of a member state in questions of external relations.

### **The European Council’s agenda for intra EU topics**

After some major decisions in regard of the climate crisis were made in December 2020, the EUCO shifted its focus to the single market, security policies and social rights. For the single market the heads of states or government agreed to increase EU-wide competition policies, especially due to the digital revolution. Those talks went in a similar direction as the talks about security policies since both advocated some sort of strategic autonomy or economic sovereignty. Part of this is the aim of the EUCO to reinstall critical infrastructure inside the EU<sup>5</sup>. In questions

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Hanke: Wie erfolgreich ist die Idee der europäischen Souveränität?, in Handelsblatt, 02.04.2021.



of migration, progress was tried but not achieved. The EUCO expressed its will to distribute refugees internally but could formulate nothing concrete. Events like the migration towards the Canary Islands in Spring 2021 and the gathering of refugees at the border between Belarus and Poland show that this will remain an open political question for the years to come. The EUCO should use its position as impetus to reform the EU-system of asylum.

In spring 2021 the EUCO discussed the implementation of the European pillar of social rights at EU and national level. Part of this plan is to achieve an employment rate of at least 78% in the EU and a reduction of at least 15 million in the number of people at risk of social exclusion or poverty by 2030. In June the EUCO also discussed the EU fundamental value of LGBTQI non-discrimination.

### **Intra- and interinstitutional dynamics**

With the high stakes in its decisions and the formal right to veto for every member state it can seem surprising that the EUCO regularly manages to achieve consensus. In the first half of 2021 one could observe certain patterns in decision-making again. The president of the Council made use of its role as the “honest broker” at meetings. While this helps to find consensus, it is often not enough to integrate member states preferences that sometimes seem contrary to each other. The German French tandem was also observable when the member states fought for a response for the corona crisis. These two countries gave impulses in the meetings and became the motor for decisions. Just as in former crises, the EUCO functioned as the crisis manager for the EU. What is sometimes neglected is how the national leaders additionally strengthened other EU institutions - such as the powers of the Commission in the governance for the Recovery and Resilience facility. Also, the role of the European Court of Justice as the final authority was explicitly confirmed in the rule of law conditionality.

### **Conclusions and lessons**

In the light of those decisions future historians might view this crisis as the start of a new period in European history. In retrospect, one could understand the difficult process of responding to the corona crisis and simultaneously modernizing European nation states. After the repayment of the last credit in 2058, historians might also discuss how those decisions formulated a next step towards a strengthened and deepened political and fiscal union or if those decisions only gave the illusion of progress but could not break the dominance of national interests.



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A person that will most likely be connected to this period is the German chancellor, Angela Merkel. As the most experienced head of state of the Union by now and with high international reputation, she played a key role to find consensus in the EUCO, especially in the second half of 2020 when Germany assumed the role of presidency of the Council of Europe but also in the first half of 2021. To understand her impact and that of the European Council overall we might refer to Monnet method: In times of turmoil and crisis it's the role of key institutions to formulate real steps towards strengthened instruments and institutions of the Union, even if there are limited. Thus, we see the continuity and evolution of the European institutions since 2005.

Reicht die Länge der Conclusion oder muss hier noch mehr hin??

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