



### **Statement by President von der Leyen on facing current and new COVID-19 challenges**

Brussels, 1 December 2021

On the Communication on COVID-19: Allow me to start with an update on the health situation. We are facing at the moment being a severe double challenge. On one hand, we are amidst the fourth wave. If you look at the global numbers, we have now 250 million cases and more than 5 million deaths. And we know that by experience now, here in Europe, that we have seen, or we are amidst a strong resurgence of the Delta virus variant across Europe. And this comes along with an increase in illness, increased hospitalisation and a higher death toll – which unfortunately is concentrated mostly on those who are not yet fully vaccinated. That is the one scenario – difficult enough.

Now, on the other hand, we have or we are now facing a new threat that is the new variant: Omicron. And before I go in depth on what Omicron means, I want to thank South Africa, really commend them on their transparency, the speed with which they have informed us. They are, we know, brilliant what tracing and mainly sequencing is concerned. So this is outstanding what they have done, because they gave us the opportunity to act immediately and fast. And they gave our scientists a head start to find the answers that we need. Because we all know that every single day counts in such a situation. And if you have the information immediately, the work can start immediately.

WHO considers Omicron as high-risk. And I want to repeat that, at this point, we do not know all about this variant, but we know enough to be concerned. You have read about the multiple mutations and what that might be. And we know from our experience with the Delta variant that it is a race against time. Therefore, until we know what is going on – and this will take two to three weeks, that scientists tell us – we have to do everything possible to make the best out of the time we have until we have certainty about the characteristics of transmissibility and severity of Omicron. Our best scientists are working day and night on that. And what they tell us, we share with you. But what science tells us already is that full vaccination and boosters provide the strongest protection against COVID-19 that is available now. So we are in kind of a tug of war: On one hand, you have the virus and the variants. And on the other hand, we have vaccination and boosters. And I want the second part to win.

We are lucky because this time we have HERA up and running. HERA is our operational tool in place to fight variants with all the necessary networks and connections and tools that are spot-on now working on Omicron. And there is a second part I want to emphasise, it might be boring, it might be well known, but we have also other measures. And these are: Masks, hand hygiene, social distancing, and it is contact tracing, it is sequencing. These are the best protection against any kind of variant. So we should really, really use it.

Finally, what vaccination is concerned, we have delivered to the European Union so far more than 1 billion doses of vaccines. We are glad to see that booster campaigns have started in many Member States now. Here also the good news is: You might recall that, during summer, the Commission concluded the third contract with BioNTech-Pfizer, about 1.8 billion doses of vaccines. Now overall, Moderna and BioNTech, from these, we will have 360 million doses of mRNA vaccines that will be delivered by the end of the first quarter 2022. This is sufficient for all fully vaccinated Europeans to get a boost. That is good news, so go get it. And I have spoken to BioNTech-Pfizer again about the children's vaccines. And here since yesterday also good news: They are able to accelerate. In other words, children's vaccines will be available as of 13 December.

Last but not least, in case of a situation where we see that Omicron is no more fully responding to vaccination, we have also precautionary measures in place. Scientists are working on that already. We have in the contract the possibility to update the vaccine. The scientists tell us that they need round about 100 days. We have, as I said, HERA in place with all the necessary network that is necessary from the lab side, the science side, but also from the clinical trials side. And of course, we are working very closely with EMA to speed up the process of authorisation. What is the bottom line? Hope for the best, prepare for the worst.

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