

Wednesday, December 15, 2021 - Strasbourg

Ursula von der Leyen, President of the Commission. – Mr. President Sassoli, Mr. Minister Logar, ladies and gentlemen, today we meet in plenary session for the last time this year, and I must say that I address you with a mixture of concern on the one hand, but also confidence on the other. These mixed feelings are, of course, primarily due to the pandemic. Like many of you, I am saddened that this Christmas will once again be overshadowed by the pandemic. But on the other hand, I am also very confident because we now have the strength and, above all, the means to end this long-term pandemic and overcome it. We have worked very hard this year to provide precisely these resources and, above all, to build better and new structures to respond to the pandemic. What is the situation? Today we are facing a double challenge. First, we see that COVID-19 cases have increased rapidly in Europe. There are some Member States experiencing the highest rates of new infections they have ever seen, and this, of course, is accompanied by an increasing number of cases and a growing burden on hospitals. We deplore the rise in deaths. It is very important to always keep in mind that this high increase in new infections is almost exclusively due to the Delta variant. What worries me is that we now also see Omicron, the new variant, on the horizon, which is obviously even more contagious. If you look at the time it takes for the number of new infections to double, it's only two or three days. That's fast. Science tells us to expect Omicron to be the new dominant variant in Europe by mid-January. But we have worked hard over the past year and achieved a lot. That is why Europe is now better prepared to fight this virus, for two key reasons. First, this year we have had enough vaccines for all Europeans—more than one billion doses in total. **As of today, more than 66% of the European population is doubly vaccinated, i.e., fully vaccinated. That's more than 300 million people. In addition, 62 million people have already received the booster shot.** We know that science tells us that the initial data with Omikron show that this triple vaccine is the best protection against Omikron currently available worldwide. Of course, we still need to do much more research on Omikron. But thanks to the work of our health authority HERA, we now

have a wide network of scientists and laboratories with whom we gain new knowledge about the new variant and, above all, the danger it poses every day. Secondly, our starting position is also better because we can now produce 300 million vaccine doses every month here in Europe. We now have resilient supply chains. We have contracts that guarantee that we will also receive vaccines adapted to the new variants immediately. Companies tell us—focusing now on Omikron—that they need about 100 days to adapt the vaccine. And we are working closely with the European Medicines Agency (EMA) so that, in parallel with the development of the Omicron-adapted vaccine, --1

The approval process is already underway, so to speak, so that the adapted vaccine can be approved as quickly as possible. This means we remain vigilant. We planned it carefully, and now both are bearing fruit. The most important thing now is to continue increasing vaccination rates in Europe as quickly as possible, across all age groups, including children. To do this, we need to reach people better. We need to offer more vaccination appointments, we need to create more walk-in vaccination opportunities, and, in particular, we need to help those Member States that are still lagging behind in the pace of vaccination. In some Member States, the Commission has begun launching targeted social media campaigns simply to improve information in Member States about the effectiveness of vaccines. This means that we will also do everything we can to help overcome vaccine hesitancy. Because, ladies and gentlemen, the price we are all paying for excessively low vaccination rates is getting higher and higher. The people pay this price, society pays this price, our healthcare system pays this price, our economy pays this price. But this also applies to the many older citizens who will not be able to see their grandchildren this Christmas. This applies especially to children who They can't go back to school. My God, how much of their life, friendship, and learning time are we taking away from them? This means we have an obligation to all of them to get vaccinated and to fight this pandemic with all our might. Furthermore, **Europe has delivered vaccines to the rest of the world on an unprecedented scale. If we look at the global figures, 44% of the world's population is now fully vaccinated, and Europe accounts for a huge proportion of that population. We have delivered more than 1.4 billion vaccine doses to 150 countries. We are now also the world's largest vaccine supplier. To date, we have transferred 377 million vaccine doses**

from Europe, mainly to COVAX, and this includes 50 million doses we have administered bilaterally to the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries. Yet billions of people around the world have not even received their first vaccine dose. The continent that needs our support most is Africa. There, only 7% of the population is vaccinated. For this reason, we are working intensively on a package for Africa, also with a view to the EU-Africa Summit we will hold in the spring. Not only do we want more vaccines available, but—and this is often an obstacle—we want to work more on infrastructure, more on medical training, more syringes available, more infrastructure that is necessary for vaccination opportunities. All the medical equipment, all of that needs to be stepped up. In addition, as Team Europe, we are working with our partners in Senegal, Rwanda, and South Africa and together with the private sector to enable the development of mRNA production capacities. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, this pandemic is unprecedented in our history, but so is our response. In addition to the pandemic, we will also discuss other important issues at the European Council, from energy prices and the general economic situation to the hybrid attack by the Belarusian regime against our Member States, Lithuania, Poland, and Latvia. The attempt by the autocratic regime to destabilize our Member States has completely failed because our Union reacted firmly and with great solidarity and unity. We mobilized humanitarian assistance, introduced a targeted set of sanctions, supported voluntary returns, and, as a result, in just one month, more than 3,500 migrants have returned safely from Belarus to Iraq. However, The situation on our border with Belarus must be seen in a broader context, primarily the deliberate attempt to destabilize the security of our democracies and those of our neighbors, and that's what I want to focus on now. We've all seen the reports of Russia's massive military buildup along Ukraine's eastern border and also the attempt to destabilize Ukraine from within. I want to reaffirm our unwavering commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as the right of any sovereign state to determine its own future. We also see the blatant attempt to intimidate Moldova's reformist government by pressuring it to supply gas at a time of high energy prices. We must protect our societies and our democracies from this kind of cynical geopolitical game. Of course, we want to have good relations with Russia, but whether this is possible depends, first and foremost, on Russia's behavior. Right now,

Russia is adopting an aggressive stance toward its neighbors, and, as the European Union and its G7 partners have made abundantly clear, future aggressive acts against Ukraine will have massive costs for Russia. In June, the European Council tasked us with developing options. Since then, we have been working on them in close cooperation with the United States and other partners. We are prepared. There is a whole set of economic sanctions in place targeting the financial and energy sectors, dual-use goods, and defense. Our response to any further aggression may take the form of a sharp increase and expansion of existing sanctions, and we are, of course, ready to take additional, unprecedented measures with serious consequences for Russia. But above all, I call on Russia to de-escalate the situation, resort to diplomatic channels, and respect its international commitments. Conflicts must be resolved peacefully. Ladies and gentlemen, with our united response to external threats and our European vaccination campaign, we demonstrate to you every day: our Union and our democracy hold their promises. Today, we have all particulièrement à remercier la présidence Slovène. This is a fact to advance our coordination work on COVID-19 with important files for our lasting and numerical transitions. The French president has a maintenant profile on the horizon. Elle affiche de grande ambitions: de la lutte contra le bouleversement climatique et la révolution numérique jusqu'à la lutte contra les inégalités mondiales et le renforcement de nos démocraties. I want to know our cooperation and take everything into account to continue the advancement of our great chantiers. Ladies and gentlemen, our news is a new year. Merci beaucoup for your soutien sans faille. Je sais que, comme moi, you vous réjouissez de passer un peu de temps avec votre famille et vos amis, c'est pourquoi je vous souhaite un joyeux Noël, Merry Christmas.