

EU to ban most foreign travelers for 30 days to curb virus

March 17 2020, by Lorne Cook



Photographers move around in a nearly empty press room as European Council President Charles Michel, right, and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, left, speak after a video-conference with G7 leaders at the European Council building in Brussels, Monday, March 16, 2020. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen wants the European Union to put in place a 30-day ban on people entering the bloc for non-essential travel reasons in an effort to curb the spread of coronavirus. For most people, the new coronavirus

causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/Olivier Matthys)

The leaders of European Union nations have agreed to institute a travel ban that prohibits most foreigners from entering the bloc for 30 days to discourage the spread of the new coronavirus.

EU leaders agreed on Tuesday to shut down the 27-nation's bloc's external borders immediately.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said the proposal by EU officials "got a lot of support by the member states. It's up to them now to implement. They said they will immediately do that."

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said late Tuesday that European leaders agreed in a conference call to the Commission's proposal for an entry ban with "very, very limited exceptions."

Merkel says citizens of Switzerland, Liechtenstein, the United Kingdom and Norway are exempt.

The EU leaders also agreed to coordinate the repatriation of EU citizens stranded outside the bloc, she said.

THIS IS A BREAKING NEWS UPDATE. AP's earlier story follows below.

European Union leaders are set to hold their second summit in two weeks on Tuesday, a fresh attempt to forge a joint response to the novel coronavirus as Europe takes over from China as the front-line in the

fight against a disease claiming thousands of lives.

The virus case count in Europe has climbed to over 50,000 and more than 2,000 people have died. The inexorable spread of the disease has roiled markets and sown public fear, but nervous governments have introduced quick-fix measures - partial border closures or quarantine - with little consultation.



A man wearing a protective mask waits for a train at the nearly empty Central station in Brussels, Monday, March 16, 2020. Belgium has closed schools, restaurants and bars as well as cancelled cultural and sporting events in an effort to stem the spread of the coronavirus. For most people, the coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/Olivier Matthys)

After Italy, ground zero in Europe's battle with COVID-19, Spain and now France have imposed lock-downs, confining citizens to their homes except for urgent business like buying food or heading to any hospital that might still have the capacity to treat them.

Seven countries have informed the European Commission, the EU's executive body, that they've reintroduced ID checks inside Europe's passport-free Schengen Area. Among them are Austria, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland, which all took unilateral action to halt the influx of migrants in 2015.

Indeed, it is a similar challenge that leaders are grappling with as they confront the coronavirus—how to ensure that the fraying solidarity among partners in the same European club does not completely unravel as the crisis deepens.

Asked Monday whether Europe can ever return to real ID-check free travel after this, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said: "I hope so. But it's been shown that coordination didn't work well everywhere the way one would have hoped."



A man looks at departure boards at the main hall of the nearly empty Central train station in Brussels, Monday, March 16, 2020. Belgium has closed schools, restaurants and bars as well as cancelled cultural and sporting events in an effort to stem the spread of the coronavirus. For most people, the coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/Olivier Matthys)

The main problem confronting the leaders, as they meet in a virtual online video-conference from their offices in the bloc's 27 capitals, is to halt the arrival of more virus cases, coordinate any border closures and guarantee that vital medical equipment and food can reach those in need.

They are expected to endorse a 30-day travel ban on people wanting to

come to Europe for tourism or non-essential business. Long-term EU residents, diplomats and members of European families would be exempt. Health care and transport workers could escape the ban too.

Separately, so-called "green lanes" would be set up at the internal borders of the 26 Schengen countries, allowing fast-track access for trucks ferrying essential supplies to defy the traffic jams that have begun forming at some crossing points.



German Chancellor Angela Merkel speaks during a news conference, where journalist placed in distance, about the novel coronavirus outbreak and the German government measure to curb it at the chancellery in Berlin, Germany, Monday, March 16, 2020. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness,

including pneumonia.(AP Photo/Markus Schreiber, Pool)

The aim, according to EU Council President Charles Michel, who will chair the summit, is "to reduce unnecessary movement but at the same time to ensure the movement of merchandise, of goods, so that we can guarantee as much as possible the integrity of the single market, guarantee the deliveries that are needed."

The proposals are relatively modest, but Europe's powers in this crisis are limited. While it may be a Union, the world's biggest trading bloc remains an accumulation of 27 individual countries, some with populist and far-right governments that reject orders from Brussels.

"In recent days, European countries failed to coordinate their approach," Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis said Saturday as he announced the closure of retail businesses in his country. "We didn't need to wait for Brussels to give us any advice."



A patient in a biocontainment unit is carried on a stretcher at the Columbus Covid 2 Hospital in Rome, Monday, March 16, 2020. The new Columbus Covid 2 Hospital, an area fully dedicated to the COVID-19 cases at the Gemelli university polyclinic, opened today with 21 new ICU units and 32 new beds, in order to support the regional health authorities in trying to contain the pandemic. Sign at top in Italian reads "Admission COVID 19". For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness, especially in older adults and people with existing health problems. (AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino)



A woman watches French President Emmanuel Macron addressing the nation Monday March 16, 2020 in Paris. France is imposing nationwide restrictions on how far from their homes people can go and for what purpose as part of the country's strategy to stop the spread of the new coronavirus. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/Rafael Yaghobzadeh)



An empty courtyard is seen at a closed school in Paris, Monday, March 16, 2020. France plans to close all creches, schools and universities from Monday until further notice to limit the spread of the novel coronavirus, President Emmanuel Macron says. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness, especially in older adults and people with existing health problems. (AP Photo/Thibault Camus)



Maja, second name not given, is sitting at Tegel Airport wearing a breathing mask and use her phone as she waits for a bus to leave for Poland in Berlin, Germany, Monday, March 16, 2020. She says that it is no longer possible to return to Poland by plane. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (Christoph Soeder/dpa via AP)



A nurse in protective headgear with documents and patient waiting for his coronavirus test at the contagious diseases hospital in Warsaw, Poland, Monday, March 16, 2020. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/Czarek Sokolowski)



A young man wearing a face mask poses for a photo for his friend while walking across an empty Charles Bridge in Prague, Czech Republic, Monday, March 16, 2020. The Czech government has imposed further dramatic restrictions on the movement in efforts to contain the outbreak of the coronavirus. Prime Minister Andrej Babis said the government is declaring a quarantine for the entire country, an unprecedented measure in his country's history that became effective on Monday. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/Petr David Josek)



Health workers react as people applaud from their houses in support of the medical staff that are working in COVID-19 outbreak in Barcelona, Spain, Monday, March 16, 2020. Spain is restoring border controls and severely restricting who can enter the country. Interior Minister Fernando Grande-Marlaska announced Monday that from midnight only Spaniards or residents in Spain, people who work just across the border or who have a compelling need will be allowed through. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/Joan Mateu)



Undertakers carry a coffin out of a hearse at Bergamo's cemetery, northern Italy, Monday, March 16, 2020. Bergamo is one of the cities most hit by the new coronavirus outbreak in northern Italy. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness, especially in older adults and people with existing health problems. (Claudio Furlan/LaPresse via AP)

When President Emmanuel Macron declares that "we are at war" with an invisible enemy, every French citizen from Marseille to Metz understands. The democratic legitimacy conferred on him at the polls gives Macron the freedom to mobilize resources, money and quick policy fixes with public backing.

In times of crisis, Europe's machinery is painfully slow. Like a super-

butler dealing with an unpredictable 27-headed master, the EU's massive bureaucracy offers ideas, proposes plans and occasionally cajoles but often it must wait for approval.

And what's good for the people of Portugal, might not suit those in Poland; what seems logical to people in wealthy Germany, could feel poisonous to the long-suffering citizens of Greece, who've barely emerged from an economic crisis and still require help to manage migrant tensions with Turkey.

When nations are under pressure and their citizens are nervous, Europe is an easy target. Blame routinely focuses on the "unelected officials" said to be earning lucrative salaries. But in these times of the coronavirus, only individual nations can police public health and safety.

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Citation: EU to ban most foreign travelers for 30 days to curb virus (2020, March 17) retrieved 18 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-03-eu-imposes-entry-days-merkel.html>

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