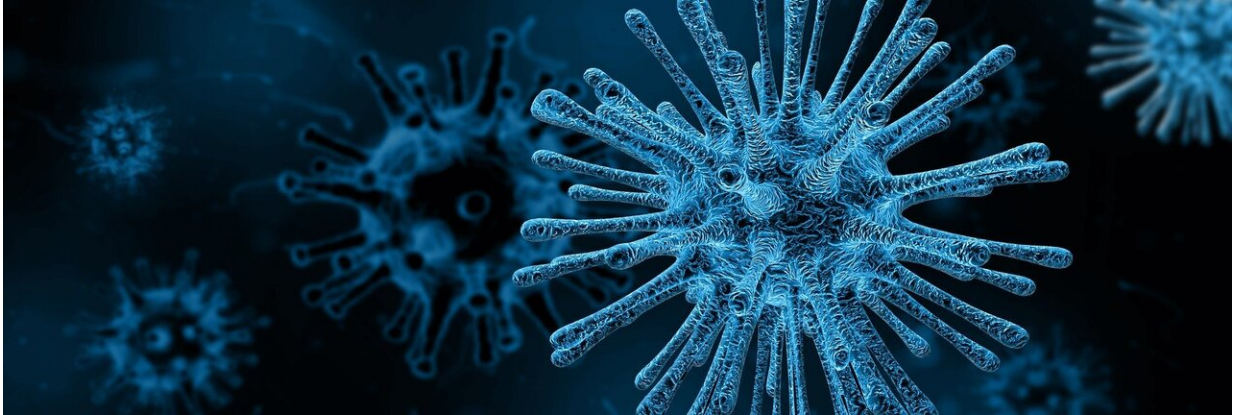# EU leaders hold virus crisis videoconference

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Credit: CC0 Public Domain

EU leaders held emergency talks by videoconference Tuesday as they scrambled to coordinate a Europe-wide response to the coronavirus epidemic, which has roiled markets and put Italy on lockdown.

As some Asian nations voiced hope their outbreaks were abating, the virus still appears to be on the up in Europe, with Italy—the worst affected country outside China with more than 9,000 infections and more than 450 deaths—forced to take drastic measures to try to slow the spread of the disease.

Ahead of the video summit of the 27 leaders, the European Commission praised Italy for taking "bold" steps to counter COVID-19, which

include telling its 60 million citizens to stay at home and travel only for the most urgent health or work reasons.

The emergency summit comes with Europe struggling to agree a unified response to the virus, with smaller countries accusing France and Germany of going it alone by banning exports of some medical supplies.

"To meet the challenge of #COVID19 we need more Europe, mobilised alongside the member states to contain the virus spread, guarantee medical equipment and agree on measures to reduce the negative economic & social impact for our citizens," tweeted EU Council President Charles Michel, the summit's virtual host.

European Central Bank chief Christine Lagarde joined the talks, as the EU mulls what financial interventions may be needed, after markets plunged on Monday, suffering their biggest one-day losses in more than a decade as virus fears combined with Saudi Arabia's decision to slash crude prices amid a row with Russia.

'Just the beginning'

Ahead of the call, Valdis Dombrovskis, the European Commission's executive vice president, hinted that a European response on the economy would focus on helping smaller companies in Italy and across Europe, perhaps with special loans.

On the health front, Michel's office said the meeting would allow leaders to understand the epidemic's progress in each country, try to coordinate the supply of medical resources as well as containment measures.

President Emmanuel Macron warned that France—Europe's second most acutely affected country with more than 1,400 infected and 25 dead—was "just at the beginning" of its outbreak.

With travel restrictions coming into force in Europe and passenger numbers dropping off sharply, a slew of airlines have slashed flights to hotspot Italy.

The European Commission is proposing new legislation to help struggling carriers by freeing them from the need to run "ghost flights" with few or no passengers just to hold onto valuable take-off and landing slots.

"The coronavirus outbreak had a major impact on European and international aviation industry. We see that the situation is deteriorating on a daily basis and traffic is expected to decline further," commission President Ursula von der Leyen said.

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