

EU leaders urge booster shots, seek coordinated travel rules

December 16 2021, by Samuel Petrequin



European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen arrives for an EU Summit at the European Council building in Brussels, Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021. European Union leaders meet for a one-day summit Thursday that will center on Russia's military threat to neighbouring Ukraine and on ways to deal with the continuing COVID-19 crisis. Credit: Johanna Geron, Pool Photo via AP

European Union leaders agreed Thursday that administering booster shots is "urgent" and "crucial" to tackle the surge of coronavirus infections across the continent and the emergence of the new omicron variant.

With the [festive season](#) looming, the bloc's leaders also stressed the importance of coordinated action to avoid a confusing cacophony of rules in the 27 member states, and ensure that COVID-19 certificates continue to guarantee unrestricted travel.

In their summit's conclusions, leaders gathered in Brussels insisted on the need for a harmonized approach to avoid limitations to free movement between [member countries](#) or hamper travel into the region.

But alarming rises in infections have already prompted many European governments to implement [public health measures](#) and new restrictions in recent weeks.

France will restrict arrivals from Britain because of fast-spreading omicron cases, putting limits on reasons for traveling and requiring 48-hour isolation upon arrival. The new measures will take effect first thing Saturday.

Italy this week required negative tests from vaccinated visitors, raising concerns that similar moves elsewhere will limit the ability of EU citizens to travel to see friends and relatives over the holidays.



A woman carries a tree for a customer at a small Christmas market in the center of Brussels, Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021. Several EU countries are accelerating vaccinations against the coronavirus before Christmas as infections surge and more people with COVID-19 seek medical attention. Credit: AP Photo/Olivier Matthys

Portugal adopted a similar measure on Dec. 1, requiring a mandatory negative test for all passengers on arriving flights, regardless of their vaccination status, point of origin or nationality. Greece announced Wednesday that all arriving travelers must display a negative test starting Sunday unless they have spent less than 48 hours abroad.

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said additional restrictive measures, like extra testing for visitors, should only apply during the

Christmas period "in order for us to gain additional time to boost as many people as possible. It's a battle against time."

He said that booster doses are key to counter the spread of the new variant.

"The one answer to the omicron right now is the acceleration of our vaccination program, with a particular emphasis to the booster shots," Mitsotakis said. "In Greece, we are one of the first European countries to open booster shots to the entire population."



Belgium's Prime Minister Alexander De Croo arrives for an EU Summit at the European Council building in Brussels, Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021. European

Union leaders meet for a one-day summit Thursday that will center on Russia's military threat to neighbouring Ukraine and on ways to deal with the continuing COVID-19 crisis. Credit: Johanna Geron, Pool Photo via AP



Finland's Prime Minister Sanna Marin speaks with the media as she arrives for an EU Summit at the European Council building in Brussels, Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021. European Union leaders meet for a one-day summit Thursday that will center on Russia's military threat to neighbouring Ukraine and on ways to deal with the continuing COVID-19 crisis. Credit: Kenzo Tribouillard, Pool Photo via AP



German Chancellor Olaf Scholz speaks with the media as he arrives for an EU Summit at the European Council building in Brussels, Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021. European Union leaders meet for a one-day summit Thursday that will center on Russia's military threat to neighbouring Ukraine and on ways to deal with the continuing COVID-19 crisis. Credit: Kenzo Tribouillard, Pool Photo via AP



People shopping for trees are reflected in a mirror at a Christmas market in the center of Brussels, Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021. Several EU countries are accelerating vaccinations against the coronavirus before Christmas as infections surge and more people with COVID-19 seek medical attention. Credit: AP Photo/Olivier Matthys



Ireland's Prime Minister Micheal Martin speaks with the media as he arrives for an EU Summit at the European Council building in Brussels, Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021. European Union leaders meet for a one-day summit Thursday that will center on Russia's military threat to neighbouring Ukraine and on ways to deal with the continuing COVID-19 crisis. Credit: Kenzo Tribouillard, Pool Photo via AP

Irish Prime Minister Micheál Martin said that leaders have significant concerns about omicron's capacity to spread rapidly and create pressure on health systems.

Omicron is expected to be the dominant coronavirus variant in the European Union's 27 nations by mid-January, according to European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. She said the bloc is well

prepared to fight it, with more than 66% of the EU population now fully vaccinated.

But that figure doesn't offer a clear view of the contrasted EU picture. While nations like Portugal and Spain have immunized the vast majority of their people, other countries lag way behind. Bulgaria, for example, has just 26.6% of its population fully vaccinated, according to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control.

Leaders also pledged to continue to export doses outside the bloc to achieve global vaccination. With more than 1 billion doses sent to the rest of the world, the EU is the largest exporter of COVID-19 shots.

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Citation: EU leaders urge booster shots, seek coordinated travel rules (2021, December 16) retrieved 25 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-12-eu-leaders-urge-booster-shots.html>

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