

Address by the French President of the Republic on coronavirus (COVID-19)

Frenchwomen, Frenchmen,

My dear compatriots,

We are living through difficult times.

We are all feeling fear and distress right now, for our parents, and for ourselves, as we face this dreadful, invisible and unpredictable virus.

Tiredness and weariness for some, mourning and sorrow for others.

This period is even more difficult to deal with when there are several of you living in a cramped apartment, when you don't have access to the means of communication necessary to learn, to have fun, to communicate. It's even harder when there is tension, when there is violence in a family's daily life and we are all aware of, in this period, the loneliness and sadness of our senior community.

And yet, thanks to our efforts, we have improved every day. Our civil servants and health personnel, doctors, nurses, nursing assistants, ambulance-drivers, paramedics, our soldiers, our firefighters, and our pharmacists are our front line, and they have put all their energy into saving lives and caring for others. Their line held. French hospitals have been able to care for all those who came through their doors. These past days and weeks are, and will remain, a tribute to our caregivers working in hospitals and in the community.

Within our second line, our farmers, teachers, truck drivers, delivery and warehouse workers, shop assistants, refuse collectors, security and cleaning staff, civil servants, journalists, social workers, mayors and local elected officials, and so many others I will have forgotten; helped by so many French people who have played their part. All have allowed life to continue.

And each of you, in what I am calling our third line, each of you by your sense of civic duty, by respecting the rules of confinement, thanks also to the vigilance of our law enforcement officers, you have ensured that the epidemic is now beginning to stall.

The results are in. Several regions have been spared. In recent days, the number of patients entering intensive care has gone down. Hope is returning.

Tonight, I want to thank you very warmly, for your dedication and to express my gratitude.

So, were we prepared for this crisis? Obviously not enough but we have faced the situation in France like everywhere else. We had to respond to the emergency, make difficult decisions on the basis of partial information,

often changing, and we had to constantly adapt, because this virus was unknown and it still carries many mysteries to this day.

Let's be honest, the moment has revealed flaws, shortcomings. Like all the countries of the world, we have lacked gowns, gloves, hydro alcoholic gels. We were not able to distribute as many masks as we would have liked for our caregivers, for staff caring for our seniors, for nurses and home helpers.

From the moment these problems were identified, we mobilised – government, local communities, manufacturers, associations – to produce and acquire the necessary equipment. But I fully appreciate that, when you're at the front, it's hard to hear that a global shortage is preventing deliveries.

Orders are now placed. Above all, our French companies and our workers responded and, like in wartime, production has been set up: we reopened production lines and we requisitioned.

Imagine, in three weeks, we will have multiplied by five the production of masks for our caregivers in France and we will have produced 10,000 more additional respirators on our soil. These respirators so precious in intensive care unit.

Thanks to these efforts, we will be able to face the situation and we will continue to distribute more equipment.

But like you, I saw failures, still too much slowness, useless procedures, and the weaknesses of our logistics. We will draw from this, in due course, when it comes to reorganising.

Let us also be fair with our country, recent weeks have been marked by real successes: the doubling of the number of beds in intensive care, never achieved before, the unprecedented cooperation between the hospitals, private clinics and the city doctors, the transfer of patients, to the least affected regions but also to Luxembourg, Switzerland, Germany and Austria – which I thank – the establishment of distance education, organisation of solidarity chains in our municipalities, the success of all those who have continued to commit to feeding us during these weeks, the repatriation of tens of thousands of French and European nationals from countries around the world and support for the French from abroad.

Very often, things which seemed impossible for years, we were able to do in a few days. We have innovated, dared, taken action on the ground, and many solutions have been found. We will have to remember this because so many strengths remain for the future.

My dear compatriots, if I wanted to address you this evening, after having consulted widely over the past few days, it is to tell you in full transparency what awaits us for the coming weeks and months.

Hope is reborn, I told you, yes, but nothing is taken for granted. In the Grand Est as in Ile de France, hospital services are saturated. Everywhere, in France as in the overseas territories, the system is under tension and the epidemic is not yet under control.

We must therefore continue our efforts and continue to apply the rules. The more they are respected, the more lives we will save.

This is why the strictest confinement must still continue until Monday, May 11. It is, during this time, the only way to act effectively.

This is the condition for slowing the spread of the virus even further, succeeding in finding places available in intensive care and allowing our carers to rebuild their strength. Monday, May 11 will only be possible if we continue to be civic, responsible, obey the rules and if the spread of the virus has actually continued to slow down.

I fully appreciate the effort I ask of you, telling you this. During the next four weeks, the rules laid down by the government must continue to be respected. They are showing their effectiveness and should not be strengthened or reduced, but fully applied. I ask all of our elected officials, whose importance I recognise during this period, I ask all of our elected representatives, to help ensure that these rules are the same everywhere on our soil. Curfews have been decided where it is useful, but further restrictions should not be added during the day.

For our daily life, we must continue when we go out to apply social distancing measures: to keep away and wash our hands. I also want to remind you that everyone who has a chronic illness or suffers from other illnesses must be able to continue to consult their doctor. Because it is not only the virus that kills: extreme loneliness, the cessation of other treatments can also be dangerous.

I also hope that hospitals and retirement homes can allow visits, with the right protections, from loved ones to dying relatives, so that they can say goodbye.

During this confinement phase, the country fortunately continues to live. Certain activities are prohibited because they are incompatible with sanitary rules. For all other economic sectors, when the security of workers and entrepreneurs is guaranteed, they must be able to produce and have largely done so, for a month now.

For all those who must be helped during this period, the partial unemployment measures for employees and financing for companies will be extended and reinforced. They are unprecedented and already protect more than 8 million of our employees and many of our companies.

For craftsmen, traders, the liberal professions and entrepreneurs, the solidarity funds are a first response but I understand your distress, I have heard it, I have read it: the charges that keep coming in, the bills, rents, loans – this is why I asked the Government to greatly increase the aid, to simplify it, so you can overcome this period. I hope that the banks can shift payment deadlines further than they have ever done and the insurance companies must also be a part of this economic mobilisation. I will follow it closely.

There is work to be done in the coming days to support you economically during this period.

A specific plan will be implemented quickly for the sectors which, like tourism, hotels, catering, culture and events, will be affected in the long-term. We will cancel charges and put in place specific aid.

For the most fragile and needy, these are also difficult weeks. I want to thank the mayors, locally elected officials and associations who have quickly mobilised alongside the Government. I have asked them to go further and provide immediate exceptional assistance to families with children who have the lowest incomes so that they can meet their basic needs. Students in precarious situations – sometimes living far from their families – especially when they come from overseas, will also be helped.

As of Wednesday, the Council of Ministers will decide on new financial measures and the government will provide all the necessary answers.

May 11, my dear compatriots, will be the beginning of a new stage. It will be progressive, the rules may be adapted depending on results because the primary objective remains the health of all French people.

From May 11, we will gradually reopen nurseries, schools, colleges and high schools.

This is a priority for me because the current situation is deepening inequalities. Too many children, especially in working-class neighbourhoods and in our countryside, are deprived of schooling without having access to digital technology, and cannot be helped by their parents in the same way. During this period, housing inequalities and inequalities between families are even more pronounced. This is why our children must be able to get back to school. The Government, through consultation, will have to develop specific rules: managing time and space differently, protecting our teachers and our children, all with the necessary equipment.

For students in higher education, classes will not resume physically until the summer. The Government will specify the organisational requirements, in particular, for assessments and competitive exams.

11 May will also be when as many people as possible will be allowed to return to work and when our industry, our businesses and our services will be restarted. The Government will start preparing immediately for these reopenings with industrial partners so that rules can be established to protect employees at work. This is the priority.

Public places, restaurants, cafes and hotels, cinemas, theatres, performance venues and museums, however, will remain closed at this stage. Major festivals and events with a large audience will not be able to take place at least until mid-July. The situation will be collectively assessed each week from mid-May in order to make adjustments and to give you visibility.

For their protection, we will ask the most vulnerable people, the elderly, those with severe disabilities, people with chronic illnesses, to stay

confined even after the 11 of May, at least initially. I know it is a major constraint. I appreciate what I am asking you to do and we will, between now and the 11 May, work to make this time more bearable for you. But you will have to try to stick to it to protect yourself, in your own interests.

From 11 May we will have a new way of organising things in order to succeed in this step. The widest possible use of tests and detection is a favoured weapon for exiting confinement at the right time.

Until then and in the next few weeks, we will continue to increase the number of tests done each day. This is what has been done for the past fifteen days. During the weeks to come, I have asked that these tests first be performed on our elderly, our caregivers and the most vulnerable. And we should continue to mobilise all means of carrying out these tests, everywhere, that is to say in all public and private labs.

On May 11, we will be able to test anyone with symptoms. We are not going to test every Frenchwoman and Frenchman, that would make no sense. But anyone with symptoms should be able to get tested. People with the virus will then be quarantined, taken care of and followed by a doctor.

To support this phase, we are working on several innovative projects with some of our European partners, including a digital application which, anonymously and only for volunteers, will allow people to know whether they have been in contact with someone carrying the virus or not. You've probably already heard about it.

The Government will have to work on this possibility; we must not neglect any option, any innovation. But I hope that before May 11, our Assemblies can debate this subject, and that the competent authorities can enlighten us. This epidemic cannot weaken our democracy, neither can it diminish our freedom.

Until further notice, our borders with non-European countries will remain closed.

We will deploy all the necessary means to protect the population. In addition to the social distancing measures that you know well and that you will have to keep practising, from 11 May the State, from May 11, together with mayors, will have to allow each French person to obtain a mask for the general public. For the most exposed professions and in some situations, such as in public transport, its use may become systematic.

This will be possible thanks to our imports and thanks to the tremendous mobilisation of entrepreneurs and employees all over France to massively produce this type of mask.

The Government will present within fifteen days, on the basis of these principles, a post-11 May plan and the details of the organisation of our daily life.

Regular meetings will be held so that we can adapt to the measures taken and decide together, on a regular basis, how to adjust things.

So when can we expect this hardship to end ? When can we get back to the lives we used to have? I know your questions, I share them. They are legitimate. I wish I could tell you everything and answer each of your questions. But frankly, in all humility, we have no definitive answer to this.

Today, according to the first data which will soon be refined by so-called serological tests, a very small minority of French people have contracted COVID-19. This means that we are far from what specialists call collective immunity, that is to say the moment when the virus stops its circulation by itself because enough of us have been infected.

This is why the first way out of the epidemic is vaccination. The world's best talents, and researchers are working on it. France is recognized in this area and has excellent resources, because it is undoubtedly the safest solution, even though it will take at least several months to implement it. Our country will invest even more massively in research and I will carry in the coming days an initiative with many of our partners on your behalf to accelerate the work in progress.

The second path is treatment. We've been working on it from day one. I know there have been many debates in the country. All options are explored and our country is the one that has launched the most clinical trials in Europe. I myself wanted to understand each of the possible options, to make sure that everything was tried as soon as possible and rigorously. It is not a question of giving a treatment if one is not sure about it. It is about carrying out all the clinical trials so that all the options are tested. And believe it, our doctors, our researchers are working hard. No option is overlooked, no option will be overlooked. I commit myself to this.

Tonight, I share with you what we know and what we don't know. We will eventually prevail, but we will have several months to live with the virus. With humility, today we have to decide and act with lucidity. Yes, because look at Asia, where the virus seemed to have been defeated and it is coming back in many countries which consequently again, decide to shut their economies down. We must therefore proceed with calm and courage.

But what I know, what I know right now, my dear compatriots, is that our Nation stands strong, united, with a common goal.

It was said that we were people lacking discipline, and now we respect some of the most rigorous rules and disciplines ever imposed on our people in peacetime.

It was said that we were an expended people, set in our ways, far from the passions of our foundations, and lo and behold, so many of you are acting with dedication and engagement in the face of this unexpected threat.

We stand together, brothers and sisters, united, fellow citizens of a country. Citizens of a country which debates, which discusses, which continues to live its democratic life, but which remains united. And I want to share my pride with you this evening.

This idea that made France what it is today remains, alive and creative. And that should fill us with hope.

During the coming weeks, the Government, the Parliament, our administration, with our mayors and local elected representatives, will have to prepare the next steps. As far as I am concerned, I will try to use our voice to encourage a more united Europe. The first decisions went in the right direction and we pushed a lot for that, whether it was about the European Central Bank, the European Commission or governments.

But we are at a moment of truth which requires more ambition, more daring, a moment of refoundation.

We must help our neighbours in Africa to fight the virus more effectively, and to help them economically by massively cancelling their debts.

Yes, we will never win alone.

Because today, in Bergamo, Madrid, Brussels, London, Beijing, New York, Algiers or Dakar, we mourn the dead from the same virus. So if our world as it will undoubtedly, fragments, it is our responsibility to stand together and find new ways to cooperate. It will also be up to us, in the coming weeks, to prepare for the aftermath.

We will have to rebuild our economy stronger in order to produce and give full hope to our employees, our entrepreneurs, and keep our financial independence.

We will have to rebuild French agricultural, health, industrial and technological independence and more strategic autonomy for our Europe. This will require a massive plan for our health, our research, our seniors, among others.

We will also have to remember that our country depends entirely today on women and men whom our economies recognise and pay so poorly. "Social distinctions can only be based on common utility". These words, the French wrote them more than 200 years ago. Today we must take up the torch and give full force to this principle.

We will have to build a strategy focused on long term, the possibility of planning, low carbon emission, prevention, resilience which alone can make it possible to face the crises to come.

These few obvious statements are clear to us today, but they will not suffice. I will therefore come back to you to talk about the "after." The moment we are living through is a personal and collective shock. We should live it as such. It reminds us that we are vulnerable, something we had probably forgotten. Let's not try and use this moment to confirm immediately what we had always believed. No. We must, in this moment, think outside the box, outside ideologies and reinvent ourselves – including me.

There is an opportunity in this crisis: to reconnect with each other and prove our humanity, to build a new project in harmony with each other. A

French project, a common foundation for our lives together.

In the coming weeks, with all the composing elements of our Nation, I will try and create a path which makes this possible.

My dear compatriots, we will have better days. I believe that truly.

And the virtues which, today, allow us to keep going, will be those which will help us to build the future, our solidarity, our confidence, our will.

So take care of yourself, let's take care of each other.

We will hold firm.

Long live the Republic.

Long live France.

ENDS