

STRENGTHENING THE EU RESPONSE IN TIMES OF GLOBAL HEALTH THREATS FROM BREMEN 2007 TO COVID-19 AND BEYOND

On 17 November 2020 AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF) Europe, with support of ProMIS (Programma Mattone Internazionale Salute) organized a webinar called '**Strengthening the EU response in times of global health threats: From Bremen 2007 to COVID-19 and beyond**'. The 1.5 hour-long event was built around contributions from **Ortwin Schulte**, Head of Division for Health Policy, German Permanent Representation to the EU; **Vytenis Andriukaitis**, Special Envoy of the WHO for Universal Health Coverage for the European Region, Former Commissioner for Health and Food Safety; MEPs **Juozas Olekas** (Lithuania, S&D), **Andreas Glöck** (Germany, RE), **Nicolás González Casares** (Spain, S&D), **Lídia Pereira** (Portugal, EPP); **Nicola Scomparin** (ProMIS), and **Anna Maria Żakowicz** (AHF Europe), and moderated by Brussels communicator **Jacki Davis**.

The discussion was lively and centred around the EU's response to COVID-19 - with explicit support of the European Parliament's role thus far. Speakers also covered a range of related topics including striking a balance between focusing on health threats such as COVID-19, while not ignoring patients affected by other infectious and non-communicable diseases and the potential for a stronger European influence on Global Health.

Juozas Olekas (MEP, Lithuania, S&D) '*COVID-19 has shown many weaknesses of national healthcare systems. In Member States there are hundreds of cases where patients didn't get the access to care they need. We can't allow patients with chronic diseases, rare and communicable diseases to be left behind due to public health threats... We have to fight for an EU that cares!*'

Healthcare models and approaches have been put under the microscope in 2020 due to the COVID-19 crisis. Stark differences in national policy have been revealed - including the shutting down of borders - partly because public health has always remained a Member State competence. However successful instances of cooperation between Member States such as opening up 'green lanes' for medical and personal protection equipment remind us that Europe is stronger when united.

The EU is in the process of creating a stronger EU Health Policy for the future of Europe and all patients. The European Commission has proposed a European Health Union package to better protect citizens in the future, strongly supported by MEPs. Focused on creating resilient health systems, the package calls for better crisis preparedness and a stronger role for key EU agencies and the European Commission to respond during crises. While there's a long road ahead, an agreement has been reached to triple the healthcare budget for the 2021-2027 financing cycle resulting in an overall amount of €5,1 billion. MEP **Lídia Pereira** (PT, EPP) stressed: '*This is a pivotal moment for EU integration. We are not allowed to fail when EU citizens are looking to trust us.*'

Andreas Glöck (Surgeon and MEP, Germany, RE): '*The Corona pandemic has shown that in the case of health emergencies, it is no longer possible to separate national health from cross-border health. It is okay that health systems are a competency of the Member States, but we have to link our health systems.*'

Taking a holistic approach to healthcare and standardising responses across countries, were widely discussed. There were calls to strengthen the **European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control** (ECDC), including expanding its geographical coverage, and to build a robust and digital epidemiological tracking system. Guidelines, harmonisation and standards in data measurements are key to scaling Europe's response. Prevention was another concept repeated several times: by focussing on prevention, there will be fewer patients to treat in the future.

At the same time, cancer was mentioned as the second leading cause of death in Europe, and support was given for continuing important work on it and other viral infections such as HIV/AIDS, hepatitis and tuberculosis as well as non-communicable diseases.

Lídia Pereira (MEP, Portugal, EPP): '*We have global health challenges that go beyond the outbreak of pandemics. COVID-19 is getting a lot of our attention, but the truth is that there are things like HIV, viral hepatitis and tuberculosis that also deserve our attention. The UNITE Network has been a great advocate for this work. It is time to refocus on this urgent work.*'

Speakers also made the case that COVID-19 revealed the importance of regional and global cooperation on healthcare issues overall. Citizens and governments have a growing understanding of the advantage and need for more cooperation on health - especially with regard to the economic and social impact we're witnessing - MEP **Pereira** argued.

Ortwin Schulte, Head of Division for Health Policy, German Permanent Representation to the EU: *'Global health and pandemics like COVID-19 can't be managed successfully without managing it across the world. The EU-27 strong need is to work closely with the World Health Organisation.'*

EU policies to manage infectious diseases over the last decade

Nicolás González Casares (MEP, Spain, S&D): *'In Europe, MEPs believed we were well-prepared to handle COVID-19. Self-confidence was our biggest enemy in this situation! The lesson: We had a poor understanding of what we thought 'prepared' meant. ... And now we need to rebuild our damaged health systems, [because while we were] focusing on fighting the pandemic, we have forgotten cancer, AIDS, and other diseases!'*

When reflections on healthcare concerns between two German Presidencies for the European Council (in 2007 and 2020) were brought into the debate, the speakers acknowledged that one of the big differences between 2020 and 2007 is the direct impact everyone feels due to COVID-19. Citizens feel and relate to this pandemic differently - whereas a smaller portion of the population feels the impacts of HIV/AIDS and other non-communicable diseases. The Bremen Declaration signed in 2007 was a political agreement which pledged political leadership on national, European and international levels and the exchange of best practices in the fight against HIV/AIDS. In 2020, immediate actions were needed to contain the spread of COVID-19 and speakers largely agreed that coordination across and beyond the EU is a key factor needed as we move forward.

The shape of this cooperation can take many forms - from the EU providing non-binding guidance to Member States to the EU having legal competence to coordinate. However, the EU taking a bigger role in health is very hard to accept for several European Member States, which has been demonstrated in several public statements. According to AHF Europe, taking a community-oriented approach would be a preferred strategy of strengthening health systems.

Anna Maria Żakowicz, Deputy bureau chief, AHF Europe: *'We see how important integrated care is in Europe - through COVID-19. When we can't see patients face-to-face, how can we still provide care? How do we shift tasks? How do we include clients into the care they need?'*

Beyond COVID-19

Final discussion points spanned how to use the €5,1 billion allocated to the EU4Health programme (2021-2027) and the role the EU can play in global healthcare.


Ideas such as strengthening the ECDC and expanding its scope to the European region because *'pandemics have no borders'*; placing doctors together to work *'across silos'* in a more integrated manner; improving resource allocation at regional and city levels; and more were given with regards as to how to spend the money.


Nicola Scomparin, ProMIS representative: *'Integrated care: we need to understand the patients' and citizens' point of view. Regions and cities are the main actors to address their needs. The Cohesion Policy helps address this, and we're trying to promote this approach at European level. We want to align the resources of the EU programme with the resources of the Cohesion Policy.'*


Juozas Olekas (MEP, Lithuania, S&D): *'We should allocate the money to the most important problem - the knowledge, capabilities, readiness for crisis and preparation for follow-up across the EU.'*

Finally, attention was given to the EU's work as a model for global healthcare cooperation. The experts saw opportunities in promoting prevention measures such as assisting immunization and eradicating diseases like HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, hepatitis, and response mechanisms - as well as exchanging best practices. Taking on a leading role within the World Health Organisation (WHO) is another way to improve global cooperation in health.

Vytenis Andriukaitis, Special Envoy of the WHO for Universal Health Coverage for the European Region, Former Commissioner for Health and Food Safety: *'The politicization of the WHO is a disaster - don't politicize science, don't politicize treatments, don't politicize cross-border healthcare threats! Otherwise you can create a mess. We need to strengthen our solidarity. Solidarity is key. Look to cooperation at the European level for an example.'*

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