

# COVID-19: a wake-up call for Europe and the world

The current attempts to reshape the European Union Health policy are going to the right direction but still need firm support from Member States to implement people-centered, need driven health services, writes **AHF Europe**.

AIDS Healthcare Foundation Europe is part of the global nonprofit organization aiming to rid the world of AIDS by providing cutting-edge medicine and advocacy to over 1,000,000 people in 43 countries. 1 December is World AIDS Day.

**W**ith the WHO leading the global response to the Coronavirus, former EU Health Commissioner, Dr Vytenis Andriukaitis, criticised recent attempts to politicise the institution, saying, “The politicisation of the WHO is a disaster - don’t politicise science, don’t politicise treatments, don’t politicise cross-border healthcare threats. Otherwise you can create a mess.” The now WHO Special Envoy for Universal Health Coverage instead calls for healthcare professionals and policymakers to “strengthen our solidarity.”

At EU level, this solidarity is taking shape in the form of a ‘European Health Union’, with ambitious proposals and on-going debates focused on protecting citizens with a more resilient health system that offers high quality care, stronger coordination and better preparation for future crises.

‘Striking a balance’ was the key message of a recent online event “Strengthening the EU response in

times of global health threats: From Bremen 2007 to COVID-19 and beyond”, hosted by AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF) Europe and the European Parliament and with support from Italian interinstitutional regional health organisation ProMIS, on 17 November. Politicians and health experts agreed that a balance must be struck between efforts spent in the fight against COVID-19 as well as other infectious and non-communicable diseases such as cancer, tuberculosis

**“We can’t allow patients with chronic diseases to be left behind due to public health threats”**

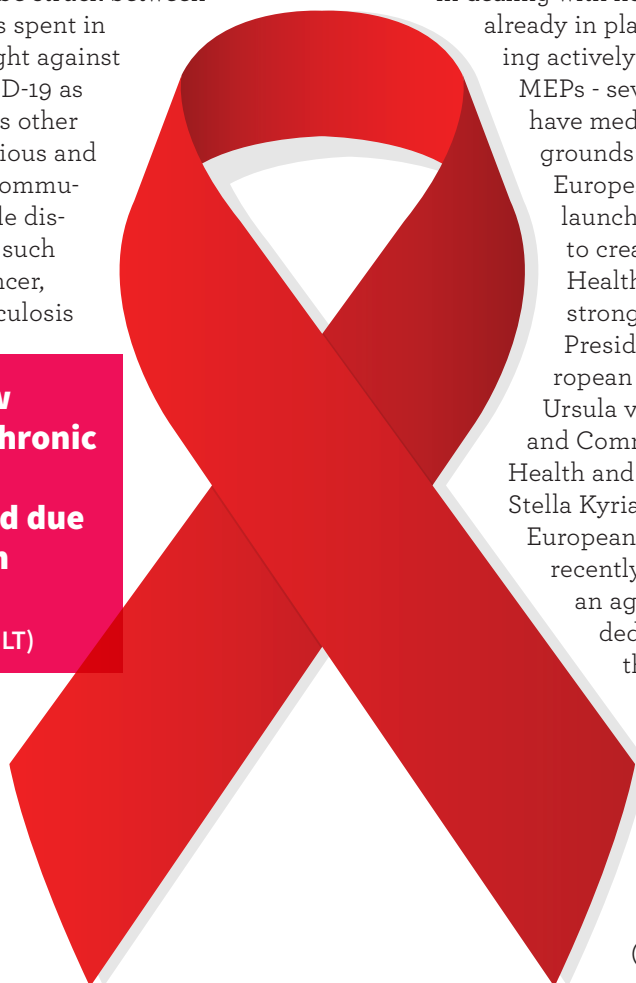
Juozas Olekas (S&D, LT)

and HIV/AIDS, while also balancing national and regional health policies and budgets.

Every European citizen is a (potential) patient that leaders are responsible for protecting, argued MEPs Juozas Olekas (S&D, LT) and Lída Pereira (EPP, PT). “We can’t allow patients with chronic diseases to be left behind due to public health threats,” added Olekas.

Subheading: A Stronger European response

The first building blocks for strengthening the EU’s competence in dealing with health crises are already in place and are being actively supported by MEPs - several of whom have medical backgrounds - and by AHF Europe. Following the launch of proposals to create a European Health Union with strong backing from President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen and Commissioner for Health and Food Safety Stella Kyriakides, the European Parliament recently achieved an agreement to dedicate €5.1bn to the EU4Health Programme. Where and how this money is spent is of great debate: preparation (consolidat- →





ing the knowledge, capabilities and readiness to respond); prevention (strengthening a European regional approach because pandemics don't have borders); integrated care; implementation of people-centred care approaches; stronger agencies and more are all part of budget negotiations taking place in the remainder of 2020.

Subheading: Reaching for global impact

Europe's position in the world offers its leaders and health experts a unique opportunity to manage global pandemics and infectious diseases, including HIV/AIDS, with more transparent, inclusive and responsible policies. There were several calls to look beyond the EU and include neighbouring countries in a European regional healthcare approach.

There are also those who want the European Union to assume more

responsibility and take the lead on global health efforts: "AHF advocates for a Global Public Health Convention: either under the auspices of a separate body or the WHO following governance reforms. It is very important for EU countries, under German

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leadership, to request to look at the WHO governance and response structure - how decisions are made," said Anna Maria Żakowicz, Deputy Bureau Chief at AHF Europe.

Opportunities for the EU to take

on a global role are numerous. As Ortwin Schulte, Head of Division for Health Policy, German Permanent Representation to the EU, pointed out, EU leaders will have an important opportunity to demonstrate strengthened solidarity and a more holistic approach to healthcare leading up to the WHO's annual World Health Assembly.

Additionally, a Global Health Summit, led by the European Commission, is planned to accompany the Italian G20 presidency in the summer of 2021. As leaders, healthcare professionals and civil society agree to create a stronger European Health Union and strengthen the EU's voice in global health contexts, we at AHF Europe hold a steadfast willingness to contribute to this Global Health Summit by keeping patients at the centre of the care they need.★

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