

Health is the most important, also in the European Parliament

When people wish somebody all the best for his birthday or the New Year, even before the Corona-Crisis, the last sentence was always: "Above all, health".

In times of Corona, this is even more important. Unfortunately, member states and also many European politicians did not reflect this priority when it comes to EU-policy. It was always said that health is a national competence, but this is absolutely not true, because the treaty not even allows, but obliges us to act on health, for example in article 114 and 168. Even though the Commission under President Juncker only made one concrete proposal in the area of health (health technology assesment- HTA), and this is still stuck in the Council.

The Corona-Crisis shows that this was a completely wrong decision to not priorities heath. Health must be on the top of the agenda, because we see how many people are dying, among others due to the lack of coordinated action, and how dangerous it is for the economy, when a health threat is underestimated. EU Commission president Ursula von der Leyen has admitted that she underestimated the threat of the virus and she apologized that Europe did not show enough solidarity to Italy in the beginning of the crisis. We think this has to be acknowledged, while other politicians still underestimate the threat, she and her team are now working day and night to fight the crisis, not only economically but also in the health area. Together with the European Parliament and the support of the member states, we have already achieved a lot. The European Medical Agency has sped up the process for approving a vaccine or a drug, the European Commission funds more than 100 research teams all over Europe, including supporting the first approval for a clinical trial on the vaccination against Covid-19 in the European Union. Monday, May 4th a successful fund raising convened by the EU for the development of treatments and vaccines almost reached the targeted sum of 7,5 billion. We have reacted flexibly and mobilised all the remained money to fight the crisis. The European Parliament agreed on a change of the medical device regulation in less than two weeks after this proposal by the European Commission. This will enable companies to produce ventilation machines and other necessary equipment with less bureaucratic burden. The European Commission has implemented guidelines and financial support for the treatment of Covid-19 patients in other countries when domestic capacities are exhausted and the European Commission has mobilised two mechanisms (RescEU and Joint Procurement) to get more equipment in the member states most needed. It is also noteworthy that the proposal for the European instrument for temporary Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE) now includes the financing of health-related measures at the workplace as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak.

However, we all agree that this is not enough. Much more needs to be done in this acute crisis and to be better prepared in future crises. That is why we ask our colleagues in the European Parliament, European Commission and in the member states to join us with the following demands.

1. We fully understand the wish of many citizens to open up our society and abolish the restrictions that have been implemented to limit the spread of the coronavirus. While some of the measures to ease the lockdown are not only acceptable but justified, for example to protect children that don't get a proper education at home, we are very

concerned that in many countries, many measures are lifted at the same time. We ask all those responsible to be careful. The threat of the corona virus is not over and a second wave is very likely. We should not test the capacity of our healthcare system, because even if the cases don't completely exceed the capacity, there is a lot of suffering for the patients. Many people die much earlier than under a more careful scenario and the healthcare workers are pushed to the limits. That's why the lifting of containment measures should only be lifted step by step and with strong implementation of social distancing, personal protective equipment and always be with the immediate possibility to reverse the measures if needed to protect health.

2. The new MFF that will be presented by the European Commission in the coming days should focus more on health. In all related budget lines, like structural funds, ESF and research, health must also become a priority. The decision of the European Commission and the Council to merge the health action program with the ESF was already wrong in the past and now it needs to be reverted immediately. We need a separate health action program, which is much better financed than in the past.
3. When it comes to a vaccine and a therapy against Covid-19, we need to further strengthen the support for science and further speed up the approval system without compromising safety. We need to use all our power in the European Union, including trade policy, to avoid that President Trump, China or others reserve any kind of vaccination or drug for themselves.
4. The staff and the competence of the relevant agencies such as the European Centre for Disease Control (ECDC) and the European Medical Agency (EMA) must be strengthened immediately.
5. Digital solutions to fight the Corona-Crisis must be encouraged and focus on the health benefits while respecting the EU Law for privacy and personal data, in particular GDPR and e-privacy directive. It is also high time to deliver on the creation of a European Health data space as committed by Commissioner Kyriakides.
6. Europe must immediately establish an action plan to address shortage of life-saving medicine and to avoid further shortage in the future, by reinforcing all initiatives already in place and take necessary actions such as the relocation of key pharmaceutical industries, in order to build European sovereignty in this matter.
7. All institutions, European Commission, Council and Parliament must give absolute priority to health issues, when meeting capacities are limited. Under no circumstances, the discussion on the above-mentioned issues should be limited or put at a second priority. Health issues have to be placed on the top of the agenda of all the institutions during but also after the crisis, as it is the only way to prevent a future crisis.
8. In particular, all institutions must strive to kick-off the implementation of a European Health response mechanism as approved by the European Parliament in its 16 April resolution, to respond adequately to future health or sanitary crisis. This mechanism constitutes the first step for a common and innovative European health policy, ensuring operational coordination, restoring European autonomy on medical goods and enhancing cooperation on research. The European Parliament should create a dedicated body to health issues.

The crisis shows what healthcare workers and many, many citizens already knew before. Health is not everything, but everything is nothing without health. A healthy society is the

base for a good economy, a strong role of Europe in the world and for much more. It is high time that politicians at all levels, including the European Union, understand this message and live the consequences day by day.

Peter Liese, EPP, Germany

Chrysoula Zacharopoulou, RE, France

Manuel Pizarro, S&D, Portugal