



Deutscher Bundestag

Europe in the pandemic: research and innovation for a more resilient health system

Summary of the Chair

On 7 September 2020, the chairpersons of the committees on health, research and digital affairs of the national parliaments and the European Parliament took part in a video conference as part of the parliamentary dimension of the Presidency of the Council of the EU. In the two conference sessions, the participating Members of Parliament discussed the subject of “Europe in the pandemic: research and innovation for a more resilient health system”.

Thomas Oppermann, Vice-President of the Bundestag, opened the conference and welcomed the participants. By way of introduction, he emphasized the seriousness of the health-related, economic, social and financial challenges with which the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic had confronted Europe and the whole world. The most important political task for the EU and its Member States, he said, was to do everything in their power to ensure that Europe emerged stronger from this crisis and to cooperate even more closely so as to be better prepared for similar situations in the future.

In the **first session**, entitled “**Solidarity and sovereignty for a more resilient health system in Europe**”, the focus was on the following key questions: What lessons should be learned from the COVID-19 pandemic for the health policies of the EU and its member states, and what could be done better in response to a “second wave”? What specific action can be taken to improve cooperation among EU member states in health matters? How can the EU and its member states improve the supply of important medicinal products and make themselves less dependent on imports? How can digital options be more effectively harnessed for crisis management?

Sandra Gallina, Deputy Director-General in the Directorate General for Health and Food Safety at the European Commission, reported on the progress made by the Commission towards ensuring access to safe and effective vaccines against the SARS-CoV-2 virus as well as on other measures that were being taken to improve health care and the provision of medical devices and protective equipment. She also outlined a number of measures that were planned or had been introduced to make the EU as a whole more resistant to health crises and to ensure cooperation and exchanges of views, ideas and information in the field of health policy.

Dr Peter Liese, a member of the European Parliament’s Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety, emphasised in his keynote speech that the European Union – not least in light of the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic – must treat health policy as a top priority so as to protect the health of its citizens.

Dr Andrea Ammon, Director of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), reported on the responsibilities of the agency and on the current health situation. She also

stressed that reinforcing the ECDC and integrating it into a uniform EU-wide reporting system could play a vital part in ensuring the analysis of future risks to public health and, in the long term, the development of better defence mechanisms. At the same time, she said, such action was one of the main keys to shaping future cooperation among member states in the health sector so as to make it more effective. She also emphasized that it was essential not to lose sight of flu vaccinations in autumn and winter, because they would prevent additional pressure on health systems. There was still a long way to go, she said, in the fight against the epidemic.

The **conference presidency** emphasised that the interoperability of tracing apps was a major building block in an effective strategy against the COVID-19 pandemic, since chains of infection did not end at national borders, while EU citizens, of course, had still been crossing borders between member states during the pandemic. The interoperability of these apps was a key to their effectiveness and to their acceptance and use by the general public.

Dr Manuel Pizarro, a substitute member of the European Parliament Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety, argued that existing COVID-19 measures should not be hastily revoked if a second wave was to be prevented or curbed. Europe, he said, must also be sovereign in matters concerning the procurement of medical materials and equipment. He commented positively on the cooperation taking place with regard to a vaccine.

The lively **discussion** that followed focused on the identification of lessons that could be learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. There was agreement that the health sector in the EU should receive more financial resources and that digital strategies to combat the COVID-19 pandemic must be promoted. The participants also expressed support for closer cooperation and better exchanging of information among member states. In particular, it was agreed that solidarity among member states was needed in dealing with the pandemic. Individual member states going it alone and pursuing purely nationally focused policies would only make it more difficult to combat the virus.

In their closing remarks, the **conference presidency** reaffirmed these expectations regarding the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was the task of policymakers in the EU and the member states, they said, to ensure, even in crises, that the population were supplied at all times with important medicinal products and medical equipment. A common European Health Data Space would make it easier to coordinate responses to pandemic developments in the EU and to exchange knowledge about the virus. To this end, the spread of digital technology must be accelerated. The opportunities offered by digital resources such as tracing apps and their usefulness were heavily dependent on whether the EU member states managed to harness the existing technological options and to use them for cross-border cooperation.

Accordingly, the **participants** expressed support for better preparation and coordination of joint crisis-response actions and for reinforcement of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and its integration into an EU-wide reporting system. European cooperation to combat the pandemic was important, but it was up to the member states first and foremost to reshape their own health systems.

The **second session**, devoted to **cross-border cooperation in health research and European research funding to support sustainable crisis management**, addressed the following key questions: What measures can help to enhance health research in the EU? Are the existing research networks in Europe adequate as channels of knowledge exchange on COVID-19 and as weapons in the fight against future pandemics? Which fields of research should be prioritised for support, given the need to combat COVID-19 and future pandemics? How can better use be made of digital solutions in this area?

Jean-Eric Paquet, Director-General in the Directorate General for Research and Innovation at the European Commission stressed in his keynote speech that a global answer to the COVID-19 pandemic had to be found. In particular, he said, closer cooperation was needed between science and business. Knowledge had to be exchanged in an interdisciplinary framework, and the potential of artificial intelligence, analytics and digital data collection as well as the existing European networks and expert groups had to be fully utilized. On the positive side, he emphasized that Europe had been better prepared for the pandemic in the realm of research than in other fields. In particular, he said, groups of experts and research platforms had been created to seek ways of dealing with the virus.

Professor Christian Drosten, Director of the Institute of Virology at the Charité university hospital in Berlin, addressed the question of how existing research networks in the EU could be made even better at exchanging information on COVID-19 and at combating future pandemics. To this end, he said, there was a particular need for incentives from the EU to use these networks and to present member states' research findings in a transparent and accessible way. It was important that research findings should be comparable, he said, so that member states could exchange data. He also urged that a portion of European research funding should be invested in the Global South, particularly for the training of medical staff. Communication between scientists, the public and politicians played a crucial role, he said, while emphasizing that further improvement was needed in communicating with and informing the public so that people understood the nature of political decisions, as scientists only made proposals but politicians took the decisions.

In the subsequent **discussion**, the parliamentarians exchanged views on the measures they believed would enhance health research in the EU and on the fields of research they thought should be prioritised in the light of COVID-19 and potential future pandemics. The participants also discussed ways in which cooperation could be pursued with non-EU countries.

The **concluding remarks** highlighted the importance of the role played by research and innovation, as well as cross-border cooperation, in guaranteeing a resilient health system. The conference presidency also emphasised that only joint action could meet challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The conference, they said, sent a signal to the member state governments and MEPs involved in the negotiations on the Multiannual financial framework urging them not to cut the funding of programmes for research support or for scientific and educational exchanges in Europe, for every euro invested in research, science and personal exchanges as part of the educational biography of Europeans paid multiple dividends. It was there, they said, that the

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foundations were laid for a stronger sense of European identity and for a responsible and internationally competitive research sector, which was important when it came to developing a common preventive strategy for future crises. The conference presidency emphasized the need for a European strategy and national strategies. As originally laid down in the Lisbon Strategy, they stressed, over and above EU research funding, each member state must devote an amount corresponding to 3% of its GDP to research, and it was more urgent than ever that this target be pursued, in some cases with the assistance of the private sector.

For the core tasks and objectives that were debated at the conference, please see the conclusions of the presidency.

For the conference presidency

Erwin Rüddel

Chair of the Committee on Health

Dr Ernst Dieter Rossmann

Chair of the Committee on
Education, Research and Technology
Assessment

Manuel Höferlin

Chair of the Committee on the
Digital Agenda