COVID-19 as Catalyst for Change in European Health
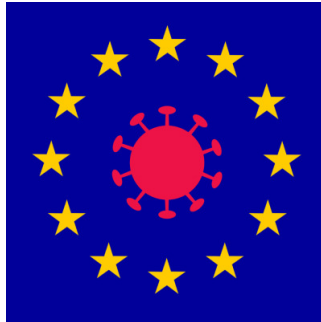

Currently, Europe is leading the COVID-19 pandemic by the numbers of confirmed cases and deaths. Despite the region being tightly interconnected, its response to the disease has varied greatly from country to country. What conclusions can be and are made from this situation? And how will the EU act upon them?

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Drawing its lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Union leadership intends to increase its influence in health policies across the block, especially during emergencies, Science|Business reports based on a leaked version of the EU's multiannual financial framework redraft.

According to the document, "the EU would benefit from an ambitious stand-alone Health Programme," the website writes, noting that such a move would cancel the previous EU administration's plans to create the European Social Fund through health spending consolidation. The proposed Health Programme would concentrate on continuing with "better prevention, access and treatment" and see the EU "with greater capacity to act in health emergencies."

It is noted that before the revised financial framework is presented on May 6 by Commission president Ursula von der Leyen, the draft will likely be changed.

On May 4, the EU and its partners are hosting an international pledging conference, Coronavirus Global Response, aimed to raise €7.5 billion in initial funding to kick-start the global cooperation on COVID-19. (*Updated*: More than 30 countries along with various organisations and individuals have donated over $8 billion for this cause. The European Commission and Norway have pledged $1billion each, Japan over $800 million, while France, Saudi Arabia and Germany €500 million each. Of the money raised, $4.4 billion will go on vaccine development, about $2billion on the search for a treatment and $1.6 billion for producing tests.)

In the EU health is a national-level policy, and Brussels is mostly involved in coordinating cross-border health threats. However, the current pandemic has uncovered the lack of centralised response to the emergency. Several entities have already called for a European-wide approach to deal with the COVID-19 crisis and its consequences.

The European Committee of the Regions' Conference of Presidents has issued a joint statement, saying that "it is key for us to create an EU Health Emergency Mechanism as a synergy tool to integrate and streamline EU, national and regional/local resources in order to fund the purchase of medical equipment and facilities, deepening the efforts the European Commission has already done on the matter." The members also argue that the EU must finance "a regional health and hospitals programme to assess, refit and monitor regional health systems' capacity on the ground and invest to ensure healthcare sustainability." They suggest that an EU Pandemic Coordination Centre should be created to directly involve regions and cities, and invite the EU constituents to "assess ways of rebalancing their health competences in line with the subsidiarity principle."

Similarly, sete.gr reports that the European Partnership**,** an informal cooperation of umbrella tourism federations of the private sector, has requested an EU-wide health and safety travel-and-tourism protocol that will be followed by all member states. "The alternative, i.e. where each country develops its own protocols, as already planned by some member states, will only lead to a fragmented European market and the increased uncertainty among potential travelers will be a heavy impediment to opening-up travel," the letter sent to Thierry Breton, European Commissioner of Internal Market, said.

The benefits of access to the European-wide health-related facilities seem to now also interest the British government, despite early reluctance to cooperate on health after Brexit. As the Guardian reports, the UK is seeking "something akin to membership" of the EU's early warning and response system (EWRS), an online platform for public authorities to share information about health emergencies. EWRS has been crucial in coordinating Europe's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the paper's sources, the EU is not prepared to offer the UK full EWRS membership and suggests instead limited participation during a pandemic.

According to Alexandre Lourenço, President of Portuguese Association of Hospital Managers and Hospital Administrator at Coimbra University and Hospital Centre, increased cooperation and consistency at the European level and strengthening of institutions such as the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control could be one of the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis for healthcare. Considering that EU countries have been mostly unprepared for an emergency of this scale, this might be a positive development, he said in an interview to HealthManagement.org, with which he is EXEC Editor-in-Chief.

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