

CoR INTERREGIONAL GROUP ON HEALTH & WELL-BEING

Constitutive Meeting

Tuesday, 9 February, 10h00-11h00

Online meeting

Minutes

10.00 Welcome and introduction by the Chair, Birgitta Sacrédeus

The chair, **Ms Birgitta Sacrédeus**, welcomed all the participants and explained that the purpose of the constitutive meeting was to discuss topics for the upcoming meetings. She reminded that the first meeting of the Interregional group on Health and Well-being is scheduled for the 2nd of March and that the others will presumably be held in July, October (during the European Week of Regions and Cities) and November/December.

10.05 Open debate on topics for upcoming meetings

Ms Birgitta Sacrédeus emphasized as in the last year the EU commission has worked hard on health issues because of the pandemic. Among the first issues raised, she stressed the need to discuss the possible strengthening of the mandate of the ECDC and the Pharmaceutical Strategy, topics on which the Committee of the Regions will have to express its opinion in May. According to her, other topics that could be relevant are the European Health Union and active and healthy ageing. She mentioned that EUREGHA is active in an EU-funded programme on the latter topic.

Mr Karsten Uno Petersen stressed that knowledge and awareness of health issues has grown significantly in Europe in the last year and this has led to the idea of an expansion of the European Union's competences in this regard. Despite of this, he stated that it is important that health remains a national (and regional) competence. The thing to discuss is how we can improve and strengthen cooperation between Member States. According to Mr Petersen, health inequality is a very important issue and involves several factors (social, economic, education, living places). Other important topics are the cross-border healthcare initiative, on which Commission has requested an opinion to the CoR, and EU4Health Programme, which has a very large budget and needs smart investments.

Mr Jean-Luc Vanraes stated that one of the lessons we learned from the pandemic is that we need to work together. In this sense, he did not fully agree with Mr Petersen as regards national and European health competences. According to Mr Vanraes, this is not about a transfer of competence from the national to the European level, but it is about finding the most effective way to join forces. There should be a discussion at European level on particular issues, such as the price of medicines. In order to ensure equal access to medicines for all patients in Europe, it is essential to establish a dialogue with the pharmaceutical companies at European level. Mr Vanraes then stressed the importance of two other topics: subsidiarity and benchmarking. The idea of benchmarking is trying to exchange expertise and enhance the level of healthcare in European countries.

Ms Deirdre Forde agreed with his colleagues that cooperation was a crucial point in health. There are still issues that should be highlighted, such as the availability of vaccines and health inequalities. In terms of inequality, she stressed that elderly people were the most affected by the pandemic and she wondered we should make progress in the way we approach this issue, as they represent an extremely vulnerable social category. So, she asked to take this topic into consideration for the next meetings.

On the elderly issue, **Ms Sacrédeus** stressed that the city of Cork in Ireland (Ms Deirdre is Cllr. of the Cork City Council, ndr) is a virtuous example of elderly care and she said that she would be happy to involve her in the debate if this issue will be included in the agenda.

Mr Vanraes raised the issue of keeping the elderly at home during the pandemic, which was certainly an effective approach in the short term but it is important to have a discussion on long-term efficiency of this approach and, in general, on the future of elderly healthcare.

Ms Mańska Katarzyna, on behalf of Mr. Adam Struzik, proposed the topic of the need to rebuild the ability to fight dangerous infectious diseases in the European Union.

Before listening to the other opinions, **Ms Sacrédeus** summarized the topics put on the table: the upcoming opinions on ECDC mandate and on Pharmaceutical Strategy, subsidiarity, EU Health Union, elderly, inequality and public health. Then she asked Mr Di Donato if there was more detailed information on the topics on which the European Week of Regions and Cities will focus on. **Mr Di Donato** responded by saying that two weeks earlier the kick off meeting of the EWRC had been held but no details were provided on the topics. He furthermore promised to forward further information about the event.

As regards inequality, **Ms Sacrédeus** stated that the pandemic has shown that the spread of infection tends to increase in the poorest sections of the population. There is the need to ask ourselves about providing information to these groups about public health.

Ms Forde agreed on this point and also pointed out that during the pandemic we witnessed the increase in mental health problems. This is also an important challenge for the future.

Ms Sacrédeus pointed out that the WHO, with which the CoR works closely, gives great importance to the theme of mental health and its contribution can be important in view of a meeting on this theme.

Moreover, **Mr Vanraes** also raised the issue of the economic difficulties of hospitals and the problem of the lack of care for patients with diseases other than COVID-19.

Ms Sacrédeus said that by the end of the year we will have the opportunity to see what is on the EU's agenda, also from the economic point of view. In this respect, she also said that the issues of inequality and public health can be put on the agenda for the last meeting of the year as "post-corona" themes.

Then, **Mr Di Donato** took part in the debate and raised several issues on behalf of the EUREGHA Secretariat. In line with the activity of the organization, he brought to the attention the themes of cross-border healthcare and the Europe's Beating Cancer Plan. Moreover, he stated that one topic that could be interesting concerns funding programmes, in particular EU4Health and Horizon Europe. In view of the European Week of Regions and Cities, special attention could be given also to health system transformation and COVID-19.

Ms Sacrédeus stressed that cross-border healthcare is an ongoing issue, and it is an aspect that also emerges in the EC proposal for strengthening the mandate of the ECDC. As regards cancer, she stated that the fight against cancer is a very important issue for the European Union this year and a space on this topic could be dedicated during the discussion on the European Health Union and subsidiarity, focusing on how we can work together to face this challenge. Health system transformation could be a theme to accompany elderly care topic. As regards the funding programmes, she said that it is a topic on which a part of one of the meetings can be dedicated and, in this regard, she proposed to the EUREGHA Secretariat to make an intervention to present them.

At the end of the debate, **Ms Sacrédeus** made her proposal for the upcoming meetings:

- First meeting (2 March): upcoming opinion on strengthening ECDC mandate (cross-border healthcare and the need to rebuild the ability to fight dangerous infectious disease could be part of this discussion) , upcoming opinion on Pharmaceutical Strategy and EMA
- Second meeting (July): subsidiarity issue, EU Health Union and Cancer.
- Third meeting (October, EWRC): elderly care, health system transformation
- Fourth meeting (November/December): public health, inequality and mental health (defined as "post-corona issues")

All participants agreed with the Chair's proposal.

Finally, **Mr Di Donato** drew the attention of the participants on an organizational issue, which concerned the date of the meetings. He pointed out that the EUREGHA Secretariat already has the link for the meeting of 2 March and that it was also possible to organize a meeting on 22 April. He proposed to the participants to choose, according to their needs and preferences, a single date between March 2 and April 22, and to move one of these meetings to the summer.

All participants agreed to confirm the meeting of 2 March and have the second meeting in summer.

Mrs Sacradeus reminded to the participants that the meeting of 2 March is scheduled from 10:00 to 12:00. Then, she thanked all the participants for taking part in the debate and closed the meeting.

10.50 End of the meeting