

What role for health in the new Commission?

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The Juncker Presidency came to an end two months ago, giving experts the chance to analyse the achievements of EU action in the field of health over the past five years and speculate on what Europe's health policy will look like in the future. Despite little space for manoeuvre, the past European Commission mandate did gain some significant wins. Nevertheless, more efforts are needed if Europe is to tackle the unprecedented challenges affecting people's health, such as demographic changes, environmental degradation and the rapidly changing world of work.

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On 1 December 2019, the baton of the Commission leadership passed on to Ursula von der Leyen, who set up what could be considered a policy triad built around three major priorities: economic growth fuelled by technological innovation and environmental protection. These three priorities all have strong interlinkages with health and at the same time President von der Leyen entrusted Commissioner Stella Kyriakides with the responsibility of delivering on the EU's health priorities, assigning her with a strong mandate for this plight.

To successfully address the challenges ahead and deliver on health priorities, the EU and its member states must recognise the centrality of people's health and well-being vis-à-vis economic growth; implement a multisectoral, holistic and comprehensive approach to health; and deliver on their promises of social fairness, equality and inclusion. The time for a change of pace has never been more favourable than now.

BACKGROUND – A LIMITED MANDATE, SOME PROGRESS

Health was not a prominent priority on the previous Commission's agenda, which was evident in the rather limited mandate assigned to former Commissioner for Health and Food Safety Vytenis Andriukaitis. The latter focused on crisis preparedness and the Union's response to the Ebola crisis, genetically modified organisms, pharmaceuticals (in cooperation with the Commissioner for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs), and health system performance assessments. Despite the limited room for manoeuvre, some important results were achieved during the last handful of years. They should not be overlooked as they offer a valuable foundation for future action.

- ▶ **Firstly, EU action has pushed for greater social progress with the launch of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) in November 2017.** Designed as a set of 20 principles, it aims to support well-functioning welfare systems, fair labour markets and resilient economic structures across Europe. Among other priorities, the EPSR specifically proclaims the right to access affordable quality care – both preventive and curative – and addresses

the social determinants of health comprehensively. If executed effectively, the initiatives taken to implement the Pillar will ultimately have positive spillover effects on health, living conditions and the well-being of European citizens.

- ▶ Secondly, **EU action has proved its added value in boosting cross-national cooperation in the field of health, benefitting information sharing and mutual learning across countries.** This was especially the case with the creation of the European Reference Networks¹ in March 2017 that connect health professionals and facilitate knowledge-sharing on diagnosis and treatment of rare and low-prevalence complex diseases, and the State of Health in the EU initiative² launched in 2016 that makes relevant expertise and information on health systems and best practices available to policymakers across Europe.
- ▶ Thirdly, **the EU has also demonstrated its leadership at the global level in protecting the health of its citizens by committing to the fight against vaccine-preventable diseases.** Major steps have been taken in this regard, including the world's first Global Vaccination Summit organised by the European Commission, in cooperation with the World Health Organization, in Brussels last September.³

These achievements are important yet insufficient in light of the unprecedented challenges of our times. There are megatrends at work which have an impact on the health status of Europeans, the sustainability of health systems, and the European society and economy at large. The population ageing and increasing burden of chronic conditions challenge the sustainability of pension and healthcare and long-term care systems. Large inequalities in access to care, life expectancy⁴ and health status still persist across Europe, while the changing world of work and other megatrends (e.g. urbanisation, climate change, environmental degradation) trigger new socioeconomic and health risks for individuals.⁵ If the EU and its member states are to ensure the health and well-being of their citizens while simultaneously striving for economic, social and environmental prosperity – as President von der Leyen advocates –, a change of pace in addressing these challenges is required.

STATE OF PLAY – A FAVOURABLE TIME FOR HEALTH

When presenting her political guidelines, the then President-elect von der Leyen stated that Europe is “a unique aspiration” for the new generations. An aspiration “of living in a natural and healthy continent”, an aspiration of a society that “takes the global lead on the major challenges of our times.”⁶ How is this aspiration translated into policy priorities, and what place is reserved for health?

Health within the policy triad ‘Environment-Economy-Technology’

The first three priorities of the new Commission form what could be identified as the new strategic paradigm:

a policy triad where the environment, the European social market economy and technological innovation are closely interconnected.

The climate emergency and degradation of the natural environment are weakening the very fundamentals of good health by affecting the quality and safety of food, water and air. Against this threat, President von der Leyen wants Europe to become the first climate-neutral continent. As the new EU's growth strategy, the European Green Deal follows a cross-cutting approach to protecting citizens' and the planet's health while ensuring a thriving and future-ready European economy.

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The ‘climate-neutral and healthy planet’ goal is inextricably entangled with a strengthened European social market economy. On 14 January, the Commission announced EU level initiatives and launched a broad discussion to build an action plan to fully implement the EPSR and reconcile the *social* and the *market* dimensions of the European economy.⁷ Addressing the social and economic determinants of health appears to be a prominent feature of this strategy, with attention paid to the fast-changing world of work, the fight against poverty and social exclusion, the promotion of a better work-life balance, the improvement of working and living conditions, and, not least, a dedicated plan to fight cancer (one of the leading causes of death in the EU).⁸

Finally, the third ambition set out in von der Leyen's political guidelines is a “Europe fit for the digital age”, a society and economy able to reap the benefits of the unparalleled digital transformation currently unfolding. Artificial intelligence and the data revolution are considered major ingredients to boost innovation and tackle societal challenges, particularly in the field of health.

There is little doubt that economic growth and the digital and climate transitions received the lion's share of the new Commission's political commitment. Health considerations hold a strong place within the Environment-Economy-Technology triad, as all of these policy priorities are ultimately linked to the objective of protecting and promoting people's health.

A strong mandate for health and food safety

Compared to the mandate of her predecessor Commissioner Andriukaitis, Commissioner for Health and Food Safety Kyriakides received a meatier package of responsibilities validated by the “need to support the

health sector and the professionals working within it, to invest in new technologies, to promote healthy lifestyles and to cooperate better within the EU.”¹⁰

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Commissioner Kyriakides’ mission letter lists 12 priorities in total: half on food safety and animal and plant health, and the other half regarding human health. At the top of the latter is the supply of affordable medicines and effective implementation of the new regulatory framework on medical devices. Responsibility for medical products is returning to the health portfolio and DG SANTE, following the Juncker Commission’s decision to assign it to the then DG Enterprise and Industry.

Besides pharmaceuticals and medical devices, the new Commissioner is tasked with addressing three major public health challenges: the fight against antimicrobial resistance, vaccine hesitancy and cancer. Additionally, she will be overseeing the creation of a ‘European Health Data Space’ to promote the exchange of health data and boost medical research, while ensuring that EU citizens maintain control over their data.

The food safety and animal and plant health portfolio includes leading the new ‘Farm to Fork’ strategy for sustainable food, and, among others, responsibilities on reducing dependency on pesticides and protecting consumers from exposure to endocrine disruptors. The whole package is inextricably linked to the European Green Deal, and the Commission has committed to presenting the strategy by spring 2020.

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On top of these responsibilities, Commissioner Kyriakides – like all of her colleagues – is expected to deliver on the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). An arduous task which makes the health portfolio even more substantial. In fact, to deliver on the health-related SDG 3 and “ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for

all at all ages”,¹¹ action is needed to achieve universal health coverage, reduce the burden of non-communicable diseases, promote mental health, ensure access to safe and quality healthcare services for all, and more.

PROSPECTS – THE TIME HAS COME FOR POLICYMAKERS TO BE BOLDER

For EU action to leap forward in the promotion and protection of the health of its citizens, a systemic change in how health challenges are addressed is needed, shifting from a sometimes patchy to a more consistent approach. The time to change pace has never been more propitious than now. The concerns expressed before the allocation of the portfolios about reduced EU involvement in health did not materialise in the end. Instead, a favourable environment for health topics to rank high in the political agenda is taking shape. The new EU leadership has put on the table a reinvigorated commitment to health while also designing a stronger mandate for health, as compared to the previous Commission.

Although a strong mandate is a good starting point for a successful term, significant steps still need to be taken for a more comprehensive and effective approach to health to take shape.

- ▶ Firstly, **health must be embedded in the broader concept of well-being, and the link between people’s well-being and sustainable economic development must be clearly stated.** Good health is a tremendous asset for people, society and the economy. Together with education, social protection and gender equality, it is a pillar of the virtuous circle in which people’s well-being and economic prosperity mutually reinforce.¹² Well-being as a fundamental factor driving economic growth has also gained sheer momentum thanks to the Finnish Presidency of the Council of the EU that highlighted the ‘economy of well-being’ and called for action at the EU and national levels.¹³

Now is time for the Commission and the member states to translate political commitment into concrete action and mould their policymaking process in light of a ‘well-being’ perspective. It is particularly imperative to strengthen the impact assessment of policy initiatives on well-being while also developing methods to measure and monitor people’s well-being to better inform the decision-making process.

- ▶ Secondly, **the time has come to implement a multisectoral, holistic and comprehensive approach to health and well-being.** The policy priorities identified by President von der Leyen – Environment-Economy-Technology – all have intrinsic linkages to health and well-being. Concrete actions to harness and steer the “twin ecological and digital transition”¹⁴ must integrate health considerations with a specific attention to environmental determinants of health. Starting from the European Green Deal, health and well-being must be mainstreamed into all EU

policies, thus accomplishing the Health in all Policies approach properly.

- ▶ **Thirdly, it is imperative to move forward in the implementation of the EPSR.** There is no mention of it in the mission letter to Commissioner Kyriakides, demonstrating a missed opportunity to reinforce the multisectoral nature of the principles enshrined in the Pillar and to closely tie health actions to the efforts towards building a stronger and more effective social Europe. While Commissioner Kyriakides committed to delivering on the health-related principle of the Pillar, she should also highlight the major interconnections between the implementation of the EPSR and the promotion and protection of people's health.

The occupational safety and health policy, for example, offers a perfect opportunity to do so. Last December, the Council adopted conclusions on health and safety at work (14630/19), calling for concerted efforts to tackle the challenges posed by the fast-changing world of work and promote the health and well-being of all workers. It called on the Commission to work on a new “EU Strategic Framework on Occupational Safety and Health” and a “Mental Health Strategy” that takes into account the impacts of different policies on mental health. This political direction offers the perfect opportunity to reinvigorate the linkage between good health and well-being on the one side, and job satisfaction, improved performance and increased productivity on the other. It also offers the chance to design a far-reaching strategy on mental health, which, if neglected, would have dramatic consequences on the well-being of the EU population, economy and society.

The new agenda for a “Union that strives for more” presents renewed momentum for building a strong case for health and well-being at the centre of the policymaking process.

For this approach to be successful, it should also be adequately reflected in the new EU long-term budget and backed with resources. The Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) is a central instrument in mainstreaming health and well-being across EU action and ultimately delivering on citizens' expectations. In this context, member states must agree on a bold budget that would allow for sustained investments in the different areas impacting health and well-being. However, the ongoing negotiations over the upcoming MFF are proving difficult, with member states disagreeing on figures and priorities.

The risk of ending up with a ‘lighter’ long-term budget is becoming increasingly plausible.

The new agenda for a “Union that strives for more” presents renewed momentum for building a strong case for health and well-being at the centre of the policymaking process. It can act as a catalyst to achieve policy coherence in health and deliver on the needs and expectations of European citizens. This is an opportunity that the EU and its member states cannot afford to miss.

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- ¹ See European Commission, “[European Reference Networks](#)” (accessed 7 January 2020).
- ² See European Commission, “[State of Health in the EU](#)” (accessed 7 January 2020).
- ³ See European Commission, “[Global Vaccination Summit](#)” (accessed 7 January 2020). In line with the World Health Organization's Global and European Vaccine Action Plans, EU institutions have set activities to eliminate vaccine-preventable diseases and counter the spread of vaccine misinformation into motion. See e.g. European Commission (2018), [Communication on strengthened cooperation against vaccine preventable diseases](#), COM(2018) 245 final, Brussels; European Joint Action on Vaccination, “[EU-JAV](#)” (accessed 7 January 2020).
- ⁴ Across EU countries, people with a low level of education can expect to live an average of six years less than people with a high level of education. This ranges from around four years for men in Italy or UK to more than ten years in Hungary or the Slovak Republic. See Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the European Union (2018), “[Health at a Glance: Europe 2018. State of Health in the EU Cycle](#)”, Paris.
- ⁵ The potentially negative impact of the changing world of work on workers' (good) mental health – which adds to the already heavy burden of poor mental health across Europe – is a clear example of the scale of the challenge. See Dhéret, Claire; Simona Guagliardo and Mihai Palimariciuc (2019), “[The future of work: Towards a progressive agenda for all](#)”, Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- ⁶ von der Leyen, Ursula, [Political Guidelines for the next European Commission 2019-2024. A Union that strives for more: My agenda for Europe](#), 16 July 2019a, p.3.
- ⁷ See European Commission (2020), [Communication on a strong social Europe for just transitions](#), COM(2020) 14 final, Brussels.
- ⁸ Eurostat data shows that in 2016, diseases of the circulatory system and cancer were the leading causes of death in the EU. In the EU28, 1.3 million people died from cancer in 2016, accounting for 26% of the total number of deaths. See Eurostat, “[Causes of death statistics](#)” (accessed 13 January 2020); Eurostat, “[Cancer statistics](#)” (accessed 13 January 2020).
- ⁹ von der Leyen (2019a), *op.cit.*, p.13.
- ¹⁰ von der Leyen, Ursula, [Mission letter to Stella Kyriakides](#), 01 December 2019b, Brussels: European Commission, p.4.
- ¹¹ Sustainable Development Goals, “[Sustainable Development Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages](#)” (accessed 07 January 2020).
- ¹² Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2019), “[The Economy of Well-being: Creating opportunities for people's well-being and economic growth](#)”, Paris.
- ¹³ Council of the European Union (2019), [The Economy of Wellbeing – Draft Council Conclusions](#), 13171/19, Brussels.
- ¹⁴ European Commission (2020), [Communication on Commission Work Programme 2020: A Union that strives for more](#), COM(2020) 37 final, Brussels, p.1.