



# Beyond Covid-19: Strategic Priorities for a European Health Policy

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## **Abstract:**

The COVID-19 crisis has revealed the fragility of the European Union in terms of public health. Limited EU competences and perilous dependencies on third countries exposed our weaknesses and the need for coordinated responses to health crises. This position paper outlines a set of strategic priorities to guide our work in strengthening EU health policy.

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**renew europe.**

## About Renew Europe Group

The Renew Europe Group is a coalition of progressives, liberals, democrats and reformists, that make up the largest centrist group in the history of the European Parliament. Brought to you from the European Liberal Forum, this new reference series aims to disseminate Renew Europe Group positions to the wider liberal family, policymakers and industry stakeholders, civil society and the general public. While, at the same time, the position papers will raise awareness on a number of issues and policy sectors, from sustainability and climate change, to democracy and the rule of law, human rights and fair competition.

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## About ELF

The European Liberal Forum (ELF) is the official political foundation of the European Liberal Party, the ALDE Party. Together with 47 member organisations, we work all over Europe to bring new ideas into the political debate, to provide a platform for discussion, and to empower citizens to make their voices heard. Our work is guided by liberal ideals and a belief in the principle of freedom. We stand for a future-oriented Europe that offers opportunities for every citizen. ELF is engaged on all political levels, from the local to the European. We bring together a diverse network of national foundations, think tanks and other experts. In this role, our forum serves as a space for an open and informed exchange of views between a wide range of different EU stakeholders.

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# Never Again - Lessons To Be Learned

**The COVID-19 crisis has revealed the fragility of the European Union in terms of public health.**

Its limited competences and its perilous pharmaceutical dependence on third countries such as China and India have hampered the reactivity of its responses. This crisis has exposed several weaknesses in terms of coordination of epidemiological data collection and reporting.

New evidences of health, social and geographical disparities in Europe have emerged, and the exposure on vulnerable groups to public health risks has increased, in particular for the elderly, people with disabilities, migrants and refugees and homeless people.

Even if it is still early to evaluate the management of this crisis at EU level, **Renew Europe can already draw some lessons learned.**

The new **EU4Health Programme** constitutes a major opportunity to overcome the shortcomings identified during the crisis and to strengthen the European Health Policy.

# Our Strategic Priorities

## Strengthen operational coordination at EU level

Renew Europe would like to learn from the crisis and **seize the opportunity to set up an effective system to coordinate the EU's response to any type of future public health threats** (infectious diseases or others, such as environmental, food, biological, chemical, nuclear ...).

The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated the important need for Member States to **organize stress tests to assess the resilience of their national health systems to any health crises**. These tests should be carried out on the basis of precise evaluation criteria set by the Commission. The results of these tests could help to determine any weaknesses of national health systems and the areas to target specific financial support from the EU4Health Programme.

**European health agencies**, in particular the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and the European Medicines Agency (EMA), should be granted strengthened competences, resources and personnel to allow them to carry out their duties more quickly and efficiently to the benefit of European citizens. To anticipate any types of crises, the European Commission should also evaluate the needs of **other European health agencies** such as EFSA, ECHA and EU-OSHA.

As adopted in the EP resolutions of 17 April and 10 July 2020, Renew Europe calls for the creation of a **European Health Response Mechanism (EHRM)** to respond to all types of health crises, to strengthen operational coordination at EU level and to monitor the creation and the triggering of the strategic reserve of medicines and medical equipment.

Renew Europe believes that the **EU Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM)** and its instrument **RescUE** should be strengthened to ensure a truly common, coordinated and effective response at EU level avoiding single and uncoordinated actions at national level, like uncontrolled stockpiling of medicines and medical equipment.

The EU should also be able to rely on the mobilization of health professionals through the **"European Medical Corps"** created to enable the provision of quick medical assistance and public health expertise to all EU Member States.

Renew Europe supports the **EU-wide mobility of healthcare professionals**, during both their education and in their professional careers through Erasmus +, and of their role in improving knowledge, expertise and exchange of best practices on health threat across the EU.

In the framework of the EU4Health Programme, we call for the expansion of the **European Reference Networks (ERNs)**, while strengthening the 24 preexisting ERNs on rare diseases, to also cover complex communicable as well as non-communicable diseases.

We also need to collect large clinical and biological databases to better understand emerging health threats, rare and low-prevalence diseases. Health data is critically

important to fight a health crisis and to improve disease management. In this regard, the future **European Health Data Space** will be a crucial step in supporting patients and their health providers directly, in ensuring that citizens have control over their personal data, in facilitating research and supporting the development of treatments, diagnostics and services. In the framework of the European Health Data Space, Renew Europe calls for patient data to be protected and secured through the requirements of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

**A digital exchange platform**, such as the COVID-19 Data portal, could facilitate exchanges on epidemiological data, science-based practice recommendations to health professionals and hospitals, and the exact state of mobilization capacities and medical products stocks.

### Restore European independence on medicines and medical products

We need a strong **EU Pharmaceutical Strategy** to strengthen our **European Medicines Market** to speed up sustainable and equitable access to medicines, make healthcare more affordable, maximize savings in national health budgets and avoid obstacles for generic and biosimilar use as well as increase their update.

In order to **fight shortages of medicines and medical devices**, it will be essential to organize the repatriation of the manufacture of active ingredients on European territory (80% currently outside the European Union) and encourage pharmaceutical industries to relocate some production sites to Europe while promoting innovative and reactive technologies.

The EU Pharmaceutical Strategy should address the problems in EU and global pharmaceutical chains, by including legislative measures, policies and incentives to encourage the production of Active Pharmaceutical Ingredient (API) and medicines in Europe to guarantee supply and affordable access at all times in compliance with our environmental and rule of law values.

In view of the future pharmaceutical strategy, Renew Europe asks for the evaluation of root causes of medicine shortages and a clear plan to address them, the revision of the existing legislation on access to medicines, the creation of a European list of medicines of major therapeutic interest, the elaboration of national strategic plans to fight shortages, a European drug shortages catalogue and a pan-European single notification and reporting system to encourage national authorities to exchange information on shortages.

**EU joint procurements** are also one of the tools to secure access to important medical products. To make this instrument more efficient, we call for a specific regulation on EU joint procurements to promote their use to buy vaccines and treatments, to guarantee the efficiency and the transparency of the process and to ensure an equal and affordable access to medicines, medical devices, protective equipment and other relevant health products.

The **increasing price of certain innovative medicines** also needs to be addressed. Inflated prices put the financial sustainability of public healthcare systems under



pressure and limits the accessibility of medication. By sharing expertise on evaluation of the medical value of new available drugs and joining forces in the discussions, Member States would gain new leverage over the pharmaceutical industry.

## Promote solidarity in the European Union and beyond

The **cooperation and the coordination between national health systems and a close and structured dialogue with all stakeholders** are essential to guarantee solidarity within the European Union.

In times of crises, joint procurements, coordinated sourcing of equipment, reserving and circulating blood products and organs, and the transport of patients for cross-border care should be better anticipated.

Our priority will be to guarantee **“Solidarity in Health”** through the reduction of health inequalities between Member States and within a Member State.

In view of achieving this priority, the Commission should evaluate the effectiveness of measures resulting from social, economic and environmental health determinants.

To protect **vulnerable populations**, including children, the elderly, pregnant women, LGBTI people, refugees and migrants, people belonging to ethnic minorities, people affected by a disability, and patients with chronic diseases, Renew Europe will promote actions to address specific health issues of people belonging to such vulnerable groups and actions to ensure non-discriminatory and equitable access to health services.

The EU4Health Programme shall support **integrated healthcare at local and regional level**, and mobilise funding in a proportionate way according to the needs identified, including the facilitation of partnerships in border regions in order to share the cost of infrastructure and personnel.

**Our values of solidarity towards equitable and universal coverage of quality health services should be promoted beyond Europe.**

Renew Europe considers that **cooperation with third countries** on the exchange of knowledge and best practices in health systems preparedness and response should be strengthened. We need to build a strong and effective partnership between the European Union and African countries and to prioritize strengthening health systems, taking into account the role of communities universal access to adequate and affordable health services and global health research and development in the framework of the **EU-Africa Strategy**.

## Enhance health promotion and disease prevention

For Renew Europe, Health should not be limited to sanitary aspects.

We promote **“Health in all policies”** and **“Health in all funding”** approaches. The Commission should proceed to a systematic health impact assessment, built on cross-sectorial indicators, of all EU policies and funding in order to evaluate their impact on improving health and well-being of our citizens. Health impacts of

future programs or legislation such as the EU Green Deal, Farm to Fork strategy and Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability have to be considered and evaluated.

Renew Europe supports the **One Health principle**, which connects human health, animal health and environmental protection and calls for the Commission and the Member States to reinforce its application both within the European Union and outside.

Renew Europe also promotes the **Environmental Health** of European citizens in the framework of the European Green Deal. Environmental pollution factors, such as air, water and soil pollution, chemical exposures, climate change, and ultraviolet radiation, contribute to more than 100 diseases and injuries.

Renew Europe will intensify its action to ensure that the EU puts in place a policy framework against the spread of vector borne diseases, which are becoming more predominant due to warmer climate and other environmental changes.

In our parliamentary work, we constantly insist on the **need to prioritize prevention**. The European Union must continue, in parallel with the policies of the Member States, to raise awareness on healthy lifestyles and to put in place a coherent and binding framework against individual health risk factors such as smoking, alcohol abuse and unhealthy diet and encourage policies to promote physical activity.

**Vaccination** prevents an estimated 2,5 million deaths each year worldwide and reduces disease-specific treatment costs. The introduction of large-scale protective vaccination campaigns in Europe has significantly contributed to the eradication of, or decline in many infectious diseases. Nevertheless, Renew Europe considers that the worrying phenomenon of vaccine hesitancy and the disinformation on vaccination should be addressed to reassure European citizens. In the case of pandemics, the EU should act with the WHO in favor of worldwide accessibility to vaccination.

Renew Europe supports EU recommendations for **the promotion of effective prevention and hygiene measures** to prevent and control infections, reduce the burden of resistant infections and healthcare-associated infections and fight against antimicrobial resistance in order to secure the availability of effective treatments. Important habits, including hygiene practices, should be developed from an early age and we support **educational prevention programmes on health for youth**.

Renew Europe also fights for **healthy and safe workplaces** across the Union. We call for the revision of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA)'s mandate to support its activities and analysis on occupational safety, health (including mental health) and well-being at work. The Commission should propose a new EU Strategic Framework on Occupational Safety and Health for the period 2021 – 2027 and make a legislative proposal to include substances that are toxic for reproduction within the scope of the Directive 2004/37/EC on carcinogens and mutagens at work to align it with the way CMRs are treated in other EU chemicals legislation. In addition, as levels of work-related mental diseases are rising in Europe, promoting mental health and well-being at work should be a public health priority.



Renew Europe welcomes the Commission's commitment to present **an EU Action Plan against Cancer**. In the framework of this foreseen strategy, we will call for the establishment of a **European Cancer Institute (ECI)**, which would provide a platform for the implementation of the best standards of practices through European Reference Networks, the collection of clinical data from hospitals and from national cancer registries and the prioritization of large European clinical trials.

For Renew Europe, a similar focus should be put on patients living with other major chronic diseases defined by the World Health Organization, such as cardiovascular disease, chronic respiratory disease, diabetes, mental health, chronic neurological disorders, in particular neurodegenerative diseases. More generally, it is the multi-faceted and preoccupying impact of the health of our ageing European populations, which should be closely monitored and addressed.

Sociocultural factors and biological differences rooted in gender should also be increasingly recognized and taken into account in our public health policies. Renew Europe considers that safe and timely access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), including access to contraception and the right to a safe abortion, must be guaranteed and must be considered as essential healthcare services to be maintained in times of crisis as well.

### Intensify European cooperation in research and innovation

For Renew Europe, **research and innovation** could play an important role in the prevention, detection, treatment and post critical reintegration of communicable and non-communicable diseases with a special attention to sanitary crises in the framework of **Horizon Europe**.

**The funding of European research consortia** on medicines, vaccines and biological tests designed for specific infectious and transmissible diseases should be adequately increased through the EU4Health Programme.

Renew Europe welcomes the Commission's investment in research and innovation for HIV/AIDS as part of Horizon 2020 and calls on the Commission to further increase its response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic by investing in research for available and affordable cures and treatments

Renew Europe calls on the Commission to take concrete actions against **rare, complex and low-prevalence diseases**. Early detection must be facilitated and projects such as "Rare 2030" - with the objective to set up concrete and innovative policies for developing research and improving the lives of patients are encouraged.

Renew Europe calls on the Commission to consider allocating funding to research projects on alternative forms of palliative treatment and end-of-life care, in order to exchange information and best practices.

In addition to an increased budget for European research and innovation programs, Renew Europe encourages multidisciplinary research on solutions to different types of sanitary crises based on **artificial intelligence tools** in prevention and management.

Backed by existing structured networks, the EU could also facilitate the pooling of **European multicenter clinical trials** and promote the research and training actions of future European universities networks.

The growing emergence of **innovations in the area of digitalization**, will bring concrete benefits to patients and healthcare professionals, and provide cost-effective high-quality healthcare whilst reducing inequalities. Important steps must be taken in developing digital skills, both for healthcare professionals and patients and for training, especially in rural and sparsely populated areas.

Renew Europe calls for the reinforcement of e-health and incentives such as joint actions in the use of telemedicine and remote monitoring of patients, mainly for patients with chronic diseases and patients at risk especially in times of sanitary crises.

## Way Forward

Renew Europe considers that the lessons learnt from the COVID-19 crisis should be addressed in the framework of the **Conference on the Future of Europe**, which could come forward with clear and ambitious proposals on how to strengthen the European Health Policy.

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