

Germany's six-month Presidency of the Council of the EU & Update on the COVID-19 Pandemic



The Health Link is a network of health policy and communications experts working in Europe and beyond.

Health challenges are not constrained by borders. As a result, our clients often face similar issues in different countries. The Health Link creates smart and bespoke solutions to help clients deliver a consistent approach, while

ensuring that the solutions are tailored to reflect national circumstances. Our objective: to deliver concrete change for our clients and for the patients they serve and, ultimately, play our part towards a "Europe of health". A Europe in which citizens are protected from diseases no matter where they live, where healthcare professionals receive the highest quality education and training, where shortages in the health workforce are a problem of the past, and where healthcare can be accessed equally by all Europeans.

In this fourth newsletter edition, the Sars-CoV-2 pandemic is still present. Therefore, members of

The Health Link elaborate on the ongoing challenges faced during the pandemic. Our partners of The Health Link will touch upon their countries specific responses towards the crisis as well as the resulting implications and changes for their public health systems.

Furthermore, we will assess the EU response to the crisis under German Presidency of the Council and address the implementation of the EU-HTA which has lost priority on the agenda due to the challenges the healthcare systems and the economies face in coping with the crisis.

Enjoy the read!

Contacts:

Spain - didier@marco.agency

Germany - schoenermark@skc-beratung.de

UK and EU - agnes.brandt@incisivehealth.com

Malta - jpinto@caps-solutions.com

France - olivier.mariotte@nile-consulting.eu

Austria - thomas.braunstorfer@publichealth.at

Italy - nomoscp@nomoscp.eu



France: The “Ségur de la santé” invests 27 billion euros to reform the healthcare system



The covid-19 pandemic has strengthened the Franco-German couple within the European Union and put a strain on health systems. To overcome future crises, the Minister of Health, Olivier Véran, launched a "Health Segur" in June. After a month of negotiations, 27 billions euros will finally be devoted to improving the health system and enhancing the professional careers of healthcare workers.

This is how the focus will be resolutely turned towards the territory and the resilience of the healthcare system to the ordeal of the crisis. Intensive care services and the place of local authorities in the governance of healthcare services in a given area will be transformed as a result. It is in this sense that the French hospital federation and the associations of local and regional authorities have expressed their willingness to work together.

That willingness to turn towards the territory is also reflected in the reshuffle of the government. Jean Castex, who spearheaded the drafting of the lockdown exit plan, replaced Édouard Philippe and became Prime Minister. In his speech at the signing of the "Ségur de la santé" protocols, he states that "these agreements make it possible to work better not only in hospitals and health institutions but also in health territories".

These efforts were partly made possible by the tremendous effort made by the European Union and the European Central Bank to enable the hardest-hit States to get back on their feet. The arrival of Germany as President of the European Council will be decisive for France. It comes in the first six months after the crisis, an interval chosen by the government to launch and deploy a massive investment and recovery plan, particularly with regard to the health system. Germany is likely to be a strong ally.

UK: Germany's six-month Presidency of the Council of the EU and the COVID-19 pandemic – the Brussels perspective

The conversation in Brussels at the moment has largely been revolving around the newly commenced German Presidency. This Presidency could not have come at a more difficult time, with the EU reeling from the shock of the pandemic. Germany's role will now be to navigate the Union through the aftershocks of the pandemic and towards recovery.

Unsurprisingly, the Presidency's Work Programme shows that Germany's main focus over the next six months will be on finding a way out of the pandemic and preparing the EU for the future. When Minister for Health Jens Spahn appeared in front of the European Parliament's Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI) Committee a week after the start of the Presidency, he reiterated this objective and underlined that Germany thinks the EU needs to be stronger in health. In line with this, the Presidency's main priorities in health will be: improving the EU's crisis management through strengthening European agencies including the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), increasing the EU's sovereignty in medical products, and working on digital health and data sharing.



This renewed focus on health in Brussels means that activity has been booming across the sphere. The proposed €750 billion EU COVID-19 recovery fund (Next Generation EU) includes €9.4 billion for a new Health Programme (EU4Health) which aims to, amongst others, strengthen Europe's crisis-preparedness. Negotiations are ongoing but if accepted, it could mean much more budget for health-related activities. Cancer is also centre stage

at the moment, with the Parliament's new special committee on beating cancer and the Challenge Cancer Intergroup. The German Presidency has also stated that it aims to work constructively with the Commission on Europe's Beating Cancer Planis

In terms of legislative files, Minister Spahn confirmed that the HTA file (currently blocked in the Council) will not be forgotten by the Presidency and that Germany supports its overarching goals. Could we see progress on this infamous file in the coming months? This will definitely be an interesting space to watch over the coming months.

Germany: News from the implementation of a uniform EU-HTA



It has become quiet around the plans of a European HTA (EU-HTA), which was already proposed by the European Commission in January 2018. While the implementation of a European HTA was still firmly on the EU's agenda under the German Presidency of the EU Council at the beginning of this year, the COVID-19 crisis has shifted the priorities here and everywhere else.

"An important health policy topic seems to be receding into the background due to the corona pandemic, contrary to the original planning: the EU-HTA, an European-wide standardized benefit assessment of innovative drugs and medical devices.", said the German Medicines Manufacturers' Association (BAH) in a press release with regard to the start of the German EU Council Presidency on July 1st, 2020. A similar assessment is indicated in a press release of the German Pharmaceutical Industry Association (BPI): "Due to the corona crisis, topics such as the further development of a binding HTA process on a European level are certainly not the top of the agenda."

This circumstance is also illustrated by the key

themes of the conference on the future supply of medicines in the European Union (November 30th and December 1st, 2020 in Berlin), which is being organised in the framework of the German EU Council Presidency and which will be attended by political decision-makers as well as national and international healthcare institutions. Indeed, in contrast to the items on the agenda, which were strongly influenced by the corona pandemic, the implementation of an EU-HTA will not play a crucial role at this stage.

Finally, both institutions BAH and BPI continue to emphasize their interest in continuing this project as well as the great importance of an EU-HTA. According to the BAH, the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the need for a faster and more efficient exchange of information. Nevertheless, a rapid development of the HTA dossier seems unlikely at present. There are many controversies and overcoming them is a time-consuming task. According to the Tagesspiegel magazine, the step-by-step introduction of an EU-HTA, which is desired by some member states, starting with the uniform benefit assessment of novel cancer drugs, would also delay the complete process by further years.

Malta: Claiming victory too soon?



Before the beginning of the summer season, Malta was a clear role-model in Europe for what had to be done in the battle against COVID-19. Being a small insular State, Malta's implementation of health policy measures has been, indeed, very much effective.

Malta has done its homework on the sanitary aspect: with more than 25% of its population tested for coronavirus, the island is one of the world's top performers. Additionally, with only 9 deaths during the beginning of the crisis until today, Malta has one of the lowest ratios of deaths per population in the European Union. Another aspect to highlight is the fact that the healthcare system always responded promptly and was

never overwhelmed. The government even stopped the construction of an additional healthcare facility for treating COVID-19 patients, as the current capacity was never used near its limits and very few patients have been on intensive care since the beginning of the crisis.

This is why in early June, Malta's Minister of Health, Chris Fearne, declared that Malta *had won the war against coronavirus* and the government started to lift sanitary measures with a critical milestone ahead: the reopening of Malta's ports and international airport. June was indeed a very optimistic month in Malta and people started to regain the streets while restaurants, bars and gyms were gradually reopening. On July 15th, when the airport re-opened to virtually all European destinations plus the international "safe countries" list drafted by the EU - the initial thought was to open to all destinations worldwide, idea later restrained by the EU - , there were only 4 active cases left in the entire country, with the prior week having had zero new cases.

Concerned by the economic and social effects of the crisis and with an economy heavily dependent on tourism, the Maltese government aimed to re-fuel the economy with incoming tourists from the selected countries, allowing mass events and lifting almost every restriction. The result was a rapid spike of active cases, first coming from a cluster detected at a weekend party in a renowned hotel which then sparked new clusters, most of all related to nightlife and popular *festas*. In addition, as ports were re-opened, migrant refugees started to be rescued and brought ashore, as it normally happens in Malta. However, this time most of rescued migrants were infected. Nearly a hundred migrants were rescued from Maltese waters last week, 85 of which were tested positive to COVID.

In total Malta has 213 active cases as of today (04/08/2020), with an infection rate of 28,4 over the past two weeks, which has resulted in a travel ban in Lithuania for Maltese visitors and a mandatory quarantine if going to Estonia and Latvia from Malta. Ireland could also ban travellers from the Mediterranean Island.

Facing a second wave and significant pressure from national stakeholders, the Maltese government has implemented new restrictions on mass events, triggering a spate of cancellations of international festivals there were expected to be held in Malta over the summer. Malta's Prime Minister, Robert Abela (Labour), is still reluctant to impose new measures as he bets on the capacity of the Maltese health system to handle the situation, considering the Maltese economy is already suffering from a slow summer season. New restrictive measures would further affect an economy already weakened by the first COVID-19 measures.

Still, not everything is dark clouds for the sunny island: the Maltese government has responded with an unprecedented reactivation package, accounting for 22% of the country's GDP, one of the most ambitious in the world. While the contraction of the economy is expected to reach 6% of the GDP in 2020, the European Commission has promising predictions for Malta in 2021 with a 6% estimated growth.

Italy: An update on the current situation in Italy



After the pandemic shock, Italy is re-gaining a sense of normality after having been the first EU country hit by Sars-CoV-2. Institutions are working non-stop to secure an adequate answer to the needs of workers, families, citizens and industries.

The Italian Government and Parliament have approved an unprecedented set of measures to strengthen hospitals and local healthcare assistance, as well as to hire additional healthcare personnel. The other pillars of the legislative and financial responses include financial support to enterprises and workers. But Italy's own resources are not enough: the ESM and the Recovery Fund (Next Generation EU) are key to boost the economy, simplify public administration and reform the National Health Service. The two political parties which make up the Government majority (5-Star Movement and Democratic Party) have opposite views on the ESM: the first is firmly against using those resources, and the latter is in favour.

The Government is currently discussing if establishing a task force with the competent ministers will be enough or if a greater involvement

by the Parliament is needed. The other option on the plate would be the creation of a special "dual-chamber" parliamentary Committee in charge of planning the use of EU resources.

The healthcare investments arising from the Next Generation EU resources will amount to more than 20 up to 36 billion €. As to how the fund will be used, Health Minister Speranza has set some priorities: healthcare assistance, digital health, investment attraction from the pharmaceutical industry and a relation between healthcare and the environment.