

Decoding EU policy trends



Comparative analysis of European parties' manifestos – **Health**



Red Flag Insight
June 2024

As EU citizens prepare to elect a new European Parliament, all major political groupings have launched their manifestos. Red Flag has examined these election programmes and compared policy positions. This analysis zooms in on the health policy landscape, shedding light on the diverse approaches advocated by different parties.

Over the past five years, the EU has grappled with various threats in health policy. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed weaknesses in healthcare systems and highlighted the need for coordinated EU-wide responses. The pandemic strained healthcare infrastructure, led to shortages of medical supplies and raised concerns about vaccine distribution equity.

Antimicrobial resistance necessitated concerted efforts to combat the rise of resistant infections. Mental health also emerged as a pressing issue, exacerbated by the pandemic's social and economic impacts.

Health inequalities persisted during the entire mandate, with rising concern over limited access to healthcare and higher rates of chronic diseases. Environmental factors, such as air pollution and climate change, increasingly influenced the public health agenda, with greater calls for sustainable policies to protect health.

These challenges are each addressed to different degrees in the manifestos, which generally underscore the importance of collaborative approaches, innovation in healthcare delivery, and investment in resilient and adaptable healthcare systems.

Health policy trends

Building resilience and ensuring EU competitiveness

Enrico Letta's report on the future of the Single Market and Mario Draghi's report on the future of European competitiveness both pointed out that Europe needs to strengthen its health resilience. Similarly, the manifestos of the mainstream parties address the need for the EU to strengthen its health systems. This involves bolstering infrastructure, improving coordination between member states, and enhancing supply chain resilience. The Left wants to create a European public pharmaceutical/medical hub to ensure resilience, while EPP and PES are both calling for an European Health Union to be prepared and equipped to deal with cross-border threats and prevent medicine and medical devices shortages, making them accessible to every citizen.

Additionally, PES is calling for a Critical Medicines Act, "to actively support the production of active pharmaceutical ingredients and finished medicines within the European Union," which would include fair pricing mechanisms. This has a very high likelihood of success as the European Commission said the recently-launched Critical Medicines Alliance could pave the way for a possible Critical Medicines Act in the future.

Mental health and wellbeing top of the agenda

With the psychological impact of the pandemic likely to linger for years, mental care has risen up the public health agenda. Political parties are advocating for a European Mental Health Strategy that promotes mental well-being, prevents mental health disorders, and ensures equitable access to mental health services. A European action plan that addresses children's mental health in the digital age has a strong likelihood of success. The Greens are advocating for the integration of mental health into universal health coverage without any additional costs to individuals. However, they also aim to promote more strategies for preventing poor mental health, including social, cultural, creative, and sporting activities.

Emphasis on citizens rights and care

All political parties focus on improving access to treatment, whether it be for cancer, rare diseases, or sexual and reproductive health issues. The rights of patients with disabilities is also a shared focus. The centre-left group wants to address gender inequality in research, diagnostics and treatment options by putting forward an EU Women's Health Strategy. Renew Europe is calling for strengthening the quality of healthcare with affordable care for all.

Despite the ID warning that healthcare is a national competence and that the role of the EU must be complementary, they stress the need to support people with disabilities. The Left, Greens, Renew Europe, PES and EPP all support measures to enhance sexual and reproductive health and rights, making it very likely that this will be high on the political agenda next term. As the EU Beating Cancer Plan does not have a dedicated action area for rare diseases, EPP, PES and the Greens advocate for new measures to be taken for supporting people with rare diseases, including children. This has also been recently endorsed by the Belgian Presidency.

The overlooked necessity of digital transformation in health

As Europe prepares for the AI Act's implementation this summer, artificial intelligence and digital transformation are becoming a top priority in Brussels and other political capitals. However, all manifestos overlook the health aspect of the digital transformation. The European Health Data Space, which is a crucial element of the current EU health policy, is absent from all manifestos. Similarly, there is no mention of topics such as telemedicine, e-Health or digital health tools. The EPP briefly mention a Proposal for European Workers' Guarantee for the Digital Market, but without any focus on health.



Takeaways for business

The next mandate is likely to start with a more pragmatic policy approach

Recently, the Commission summed up all its work over the last five years as 'The European Health Union: Acting together for people's health'. Even if the EU went "from firefighter to architect" as highlighted by Commission Vice President Margaritis Schinas, the current health budget took a 20% cut earlier this year and it seems it will be shrunked further in the next mandate. This could reduce the overall ambition of the EU on health policy and affect the funding of many new initiatives, especially those that were set up during the COVID period.

The implementation of legislation originating from the experience of COVID-19 is going well but much more remains to be done to secure supply chains. Letta warns in his report that to date, there is no real Single Market for pharmaceuticals as some marketing authorisations for medicines are granted at the national level. This is something that the industry needs to take into consideration in the next mandate.

The new intakes will be more pragmatic and will look closer at taking concrete actions in order to develop the EU Beating Cancer Plan. This means looking very closely at the impact of lifestyle choices, as well as of chemicals in the environment and food chains.

Euroscepticism will not affect health policy

A surge of support for Eurosceptic and far-right parties in the European Parliament after elections could strain the grand coalition of centrist parties. Normally, this should not derail key health policies such as the European pharmaceutical package which have already been discussed in the European Parliament. However, there might be difficulties in establishing majority support for some files in the Council. This means that many trade-offs might take place in the new mandate for high-stakes files.

The new direction of travel offers opportunities to shape how legislation will be implemented

Stakeholders should adapt their advocacy approach and narrative to capture the new focus: evidence-backed proposals calling for simplification, efficiency and reduced administrative burden.

The institutional transition offers ample engagement opportunities

The next few months will define the policy priorities for the next term. Moving the needle on priority issues will require complementary engagement with the European Commission and the new European Parliament, as well as targeted outreach in key Member States.

Influencing the Commission transition

An important part of the transition within the European Commission takes place through handover briefs, prepared mostly by relevant Directorate-Generals (DGs). These handover briefs are quite influential in forming the position of new Commission cabinets on specific dossiers. Engaging with key officials from relevant DGs (in addition to the new cabinets) as they work on the briefs could significantly influence how a specific issue is approached by the next Commission. Another key moment will be immediately after the appointment of new Commission cabinets, likely to happen in early Q4 2024.

Engaging with the new EP

New MEPs will be taking office in July. Getting in front of new, relevant MEPs early on will be highly beneficial, particularly given the crucial role that MEPs will be playing during the appointment of new Commissioners, including by grilling them on their policy plans during confirmation hearings, due to take place in autumn.

Shaping the EU agenda through national governments and parties

The EU agenda is heavily influenced by formal and informal interactions between member state governments and EU institutions. In addition, national parties have a significant influence on the positioning of European parties through their delegations. Carrying out targeted outreach with key government and party officials will be very important to complement Brussels engagement.



Annex – Manifestos highlights



- Want to create a true European Health Union to be prepared and equipped to deal with cross-board threats, improve the resilience of health systems and their interoperability, train the best doctors and nurses, diversify supply chains and create strategic inventories to prevent medicine and medical device shortages.
- Want Europe to become the world leader in medical research and pharmaceutical innovation while increasing access to clinical trials, especially to fight rare child diseases such as cancer. Support harnessing the potential of big data and AI for the technological discoveries of the future.
- Propose to double the EU's research budget for the period 2024-2027 while setting a target of 4% of European GDP devoted to research and innovation by 2030.
- Ensure the full implementation of the Beating Cancer Plan and take it to the next step by launching European plans to address Alzheimer, dementia and Parkinson, as well as a European Cardiovascular Health Plan. The latter would feature the creation of a European Knowledge Centre and promote joint cardiovascular and diabetes health checks.
- Committed to the launching of a EU Action Plan for Mental Health.



- Call for strengthening the quality of healthcare with affordable care for all.
- Defend women's access to sexual and reproductive health.
- Call for better supervising the health and nutritional benefits of foods by tackling misinformation.
- Call for a strong European Mental Health Strategy.



- Want a European Health Union that manages cross-border pandemic responses and supports and respects public healthcare at national level.
- Defend a public healthcare that creates quality jobs.
- Call for a strong European Mental Health Strategy.
- Support fair and transparent medicine pricing to prevent shortages and support timely access and innovation, including for rare diseases.
- Support initiatives for common European public research on vaccines, life saving medicines and AMR.
- Call for women to be given full access to their sexual and reproductive health and rights.



- Warn that healthcare is a national competence and that the role of the EU must be complementary.
- Call to improve communication between Member States on science and technology.
- Support safe and healthy food that respects cultural traditions.



- Warn that healthcare is a national competence and that the role of the EU must be complementary.
- Stress the need to support people with disabilities.

- Ensure universal and free access to health care and the strengthening of public health systems, including contraceptive services and safe abortion, guaranteed by EU primary law.
- Make the ECB an instrument that provides direct financing to the states to strengthen public institutions and bodies in meeting the needs of public rights and services - propose the creation of a European Fund for public services, financed at 0% by the ECB, with democratic governance for investment, massive recruitment and training, on a range of issues including health.
- State that social protection covering health should be universal for all people in the EU.
- Propose the creation of a European public pharmaceutical/medical hub.
- Propose a EU Directive requiring Member States to provide access to antenatal and maternal health services, voluntary family planning and free, safe and legal abortion.
- Call for a European Health Union that ensures Member States provide everyone in Europe with universal health coverage.
- Push to eliminate health inequalities and guarantee access to affordable medicines and treatment, including for cancer and rare diseases.
- Call to integrate mental health in universal health coverage with no additional costs for individuals. Propose to tackle the mental health crisis using preventative and healing strategies such as culture and sport as well as social and creative activities.
- Propose the creation of a EU Health Force for Cooperation on health emergencies and disaster response.
- Call to integrate sexual and reproductive health and rights within the EU treaties and in the directly applicable Charter of Fundamental Rights.
- Link NCDs like cancer to dietary choices.



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[Red Flag](#) is a multi-award-winning strategic communications and public affairs agency. We have mounted some of the strongest and most impactful EU affairs campaigns in recent years, helping to shape debates around a wide range of EU policy areas, including Europe's Beating Cancer Plan, EU Pharma Package and wider health policy.

Should you wish to discuss how Red Flag could support you in navigating the EU political transition and influencing the long-term policy agenda, please get in touch with Roxana Moldovan.

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