

**Virtual meeting of the
MEP Alliance for Mental
Health**

10 May 2022

**TOWARDS A EUROPEAN YEAR AND AN EU
STRATEGY ON MENTAL HEALTH:**

'PRIORITIES AND ACTIONS'

Report



Draft agenda

10:30- 10:40

Welcome and opening statements

- Hilkka Kärkkäinen, President GAMIAN-Europe
- Thomas Zdechovsky MEP

10:40-11:05

Mental health on the European Parliament agenda

- Report 'mental health in the digital world of work'
- Maria Walsh MEP
- Estrella Dura Ferrandis MEP

Comments/reflections from co-chairs on EU priorities and actions in the field of mental health

11:10-11:20

Mental Health on the Council agenda

- Prof Jiří Horáček, Head of Department of Psychiatry/Medical Psychology, Charles University Prague and Coordinator of Mental Health Agenda, Czech EU Presidency

11:20-11:35

Panel response:

- Prof Peter Falkai, President, European Psychiatric Association TBC
- Ricardo Fernandes, President, EATG TBC
- Prof Claudi Bockting, President, EAELIPT

11:35-11:45

Comments from participating MEPs

11:45-11:55

Comments from the audience

11:55-12:00

Conclusions and close

- Tomas Zdechovsky MEP

Report

Introduction

Tomas Zdechovsky MEP welcomed participants, underlining the European Parliament's long standing support in mental health advocacy; the Alliance is a good example of this support, having been active for almost 15 years, tabling Written Questions, amendments to relevant reports and organising topics stakeholder debates. More recently, some specific initiatives have been taken and are ongoing., such as a first-ever dedicated EP report on mental health. All these efforts are aimed towards putting mental health on the European agenda.

Interestingly, the Czech Republic will hold the EU Presidency of the Czech Republic from July. Preparations are underway and mental health will specifically feature on its agenda. This current interest in mental health is heartening and provides a boost to the MEP Alliance for Mental Health and GAMIAN-Europe's efforts to get a European Year for Mental Health as well as a comprehensive EU Mental Health Strategy.

He reminded participants of the event's objectives, i.e.

- To reflect on the present current European Parliament and Council priorities and actions on mental health
- To discuss and explore how these actions can support national-level action and efforts to ensure that a Year and Mental Health Strategy will become a reality.

Tomas then gave the floor to **Hilkka Kärkkäinen (President, GAMIAN-Europe)**. Welcoming participants, Hilkka underlined the role of GAMIAN-Europe in campaigning for EU level attention for mental health - with the current focus on the need for a Year and comprehensive mental health strategy and thanked the co-chairs and supporters of the Alliance for their continued strong involvement and support.

Mental Health on the European Parliament Agenda

Tomas then gave the floor to **Maria Walsh MEP**; she briefly introduced the background, content (key messages) and potential value of the EP report 'mental health in the digital world of work', in her role as Rapporteur.

The report is comprehensive and addresses a wide range of relevant issues – and the topic is highly relevant as 1 in every 6 Europeans is affected by a mental health problem; and apart from seriously impacting individual well-being and quality of life, it also costs society 600 billion Euro per year – over 4% of GDP.

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in challenging new realities in terms of mental health; stress, depression and suicide rates have gone up. The pandemic has also led to accelerated digitalisation and remote working as a whole; an increasing proportion of our lives is spent online and connected to work. And while there are positive aspects of digitalisation (e.g., flexibility), it also has some severe negative consequences (e.g., impinging on work/life balance).

The report therefore takes a proactive and realistic approach towards the use of digitalisation, listing opportunities as well as downsides as well as the mix of policies that are required to address this new reality.

Maria highlighted a few of the report's main issues, such as

- The need to address the risks of digitalisation, to prevent mental health problems such as stress and burn-out
- The need to update relevant EU legislation with an impact on working life and working environment. The report aims to set a blueprint for the required measures so that all businesses can play their part
- The need for the Commission to develop new psychosocial measures in conjunction with the social partners related to the management of psychosocial risk at work
- The need to equip the workforce with the required digital skills in order not to deepen the digital divide (e.g., older people, rural areas) and to avoid digital exclusion.
- The need to strengthen the role of EU-OSHA, which could play a role in providing tools for micro companies to manage their workplace and put in place mental health prevention measures and ensure well-being at work
- The need for Member States to provide technical assistance and training related to how digital application systems may affect work and the impact of work.

She thanked her colleagues (Shadow-Rapporteurs and their offices) for the positive cooperation on the report, and then underlined her personal interest and efforts in campaigning for a comprehensive EU Mental Health Strategy and dedicated European Year for Mental Health. The latter should be in place in 2023 and should address all aspects of mental health, ensuring that mental health is on the agenda in a cross-sectional way.

The next speaker, **Estrella Dura Ferrandis MEP**, Shadow Rapporteur of the report entitled 'Mental Health in the digital world of work', stated that this document is key; it is timely as it focuses specifically on the mental health of workers in a digitalised context. It needs to be emphasised that concerns about workplace mental health existed before the pandemic: work overload and intensity, job instability and precarious working conditions have had a negative impact on the mental health of workers before and during the pandemic – and most likely, this will continue after the pandemic.

Digitalisation and the implementation of sophisticated Artificial Intelligence systems at work can have and are indeed having dire consequences on the mental health of workers. Notably, there is

- increased control and surveillance because of automated and algorithmic systems
- an increase in the number of working hours and amount of pressure on workers.
- less social interaction and greater labour complexity.
- a lack of transparency and clarity in labour relations.
- the absence of a healthy 'work-life' balance.

According to Eurofound and the EU-OSHA, 51% of workers say that stress is common in their workplace. In addition, some 80% of managers are concerned about work-related stress. The above has provided the rationale for the S&D group to include calls for legislation in the Parliament report, since concrete solutions to solve mental health issues at work are required – and this goes beyond teleworking.

Estrella summarised the S&D group's main points for inclusion, and stated that the report needs to include:

- A Directive on psychosocial risks at the workplace, not only addressing prevention mechanisms but also catering for the reintegration of workers after suffering from work-related mental ill health.
- Revision of the 2003 recommendations regarding occupational diseases, to include mental disorders generated at work (e.g., anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, burnout), as well as a legislative initiative that sets minimum requirements for the recognition of occupational diseases. This proposal will guarantee that workers receive adequate compensation when they are on sick leave because of a mental illness due to work and get the necessary support to find a new job or return safely to their previous job.
- A Directive on the right to disconnect, and a legislative framework on telework to establish minimum standards.
- A Directive regulating the use of artificial intelligence, specific for workplaces. This would protect workers against health and safety risks. Safeguards against the adverse impacts of algorithmic management on the health and safety of workers should also be included.

The final MEP speaker in this session was **Radka Maxova MEP**, who presented her comments and reflections on EU priorities and actions in the field of mental health, highlighting the need for a European Mental Health Year and a EU Mental Health Strategy. She stated that the measures taken to protect the physical health of the citizens in the context of COVID pandemic have had a significant mental health impact. The MEP Alliance on Mental Health has, therefore, worked and pushed even harder to strengthen the EU mental health dimension, especially through promoting a European Mental Health Year and comprehensive EU Mental Health Strategy.

Such a Strategy represents an opportunity to come out of this crisis stronger, investing in our future. It would help to boost jobs and growth, as well as the resilience of societies. It would strengthen governance for mental health, improve mental health services, implement strategies for prevention in mental health and strengthen information systems.

Radka underlined her conviction of the benefits of a comprehensive Strategy, providing for a much needed coherent action at the EU level and unite the fragmented efforts which have been fragmented until now. She welcomed the fact that the Czech EU Presidency will address mental health as one of its health priorities and informed participants of a recent meeting with the Czech Minister and his delegation in which he informally confirmed his support for a EU Mental Health Strategy. However, she also told the meeting that Member States want to know the position of the EP's Parliamentary Groups before they commit to the Strategy. It is therefore important for all Members of the Alliance to put and push this topic on the agenda of their respective EP political groups. This was one of the reasons for her to take the initiative to develop a S&D position paper on mental health, calling for an EU Mental Health Strategy.

This position paper is timely – not only because of the aftermath of the covid pandemic; it also comes in the wake of the influx of Ukrainian refugees to Europe, putting further pressure on health and social security services. A European Year for Mental Health would help to provide visibility to the need to prevent poor mental health as well as it would help to fight stigma. In conclusion, Radka welcomed the fact that the work of the Alliance is paying off – and stated that it must continue.

Mental Health on the Council Agenda

Tomas then invited **Prof Jiří Horáček (Head of Department of Psychiatry/Medical Psychology, Charles University Prague and Coordinator of Mental Health Agenda, Czech EU Presidency)**.

Jiri informed the meeting of the plans of the upcoming Czech Presidency to organise a High Level event entitled 'Resilient Mental Health in the EU Amid Covid 19 and Other Challenges', taking place in Brussels in 11 November 2022. The inspiration for this happening came from the COVID-19 pandemic, migration, climate change and Ukraine war – all these urgently underline and call for an EU Mental Health Strategy.

While mental ill health represents 12% of the EU's overall burden of disease, but only 5% of biomedical research focuses on this topic. Financing innovative approaches to treatment and improve resilience and ways of coping with stress (depression, anxiety d., PTSD, tolerance of uncertainty...) are urgently required. Apart from this main event, in which some 100 participants will be present, 2-3 follow-up roundtables will be held in Prague, attended by some 20-40 participants, addressing some of the key issues identified in the main event.

The event will address the following key topics:

- Mental Health Pandemic in Europe: Covid-19 and other upcoming challenges
- Towards EU Strategy on Mental Health
- Mental Health as one of the key EU Initiatives
- Supporting cutting-edge EU research in mental health (Horizon Europe, funding)
- Drawing inspiration from best practices across the globe
- Cooperation with the upcoming Swedish Presidency

One of outcomes will be a joint memorandum of leading EU scientists and decision-makers on key mental health challenges in EU and impacts these are having on the well-being of the EU citizens, resilience of healthcare systems and public budgets.

Another outcome relates to the formulation of a 'Roadmap for a Coordinated Action in Mental Health in the EU' that is to be shared with the European Commission, the European Parliament and representatives of Member States, including those responsible for the healthcare agenda of the upcoming Swedish Presidency.

The audience will consist of European and national policymakers (Commission, Council, European Parliament) as well as leading experts and health care professionals.

The Czech Presidency will work closely with the European Parliament and relevant stakeholders and will also seek media coverage, e.g. European Parliament Magazine.

Tomas thanked Jiri, underlining the historic importance of this event and the Czech Presidency commitment to putting mental health on the EU agenda and expressed his interest in close cooperation with the MEP Alliance for Mental Health.

Panel Response

Tomas then gave the floor to the panel participants, who had been invited to prepare short statements based on the following questions:

- According to you/your organisation, what should the EU-level do in the short term at EU level to ensure more attention for mental health?
- What do you think a European Year for Mental Health and Mental Health Strategy should primarily address, considering the limited EU health remit?
- How do you think can organisations such as yours contribute to promoting and implementing such a Year/Strategy?

The first panellist, **Prof Peter Falkai (President, European Psychiatric Association)** briefly introduced his organisation, which works towards the improvement of care and clinical excellence in mental health, representing over 78 000 European psychiatrists. The EPA's activities address the interests of psychiatrists in academia, research and practice throughout all stages of career development.

He underlined the importance of the MEP Alliance and its work, as this platform provides a powerful voice for the mental health sector as a whole - and as this voice is often underrepresented, this platform is badly needed.

According to the EPA, a European Year and EU Mental Health Strategy would be crucial, if only to make clear that mental health is an important part of everybody's life.

A Year – and Strategy – should focus on increasing and improving the knowledge with respect to mental health. Furthermore, access to treatment and the visibility of mental health should be improved.

Another important issue is the urgent need to reduce the persistent stigma surrounding mental health, often standing in the way of access to treatment. There is also a need to improve the response of health systems when there is a crisis – the COVID-19 pandemic and the current war in Ukraine highlighting the need for increased attention, care and resilient health care systems. There also needs to be more research in the field of mental health as well as a clear roadmap to make sure research is relevant to current and future needs.

As a last point, Peter underlined the need for a universal and mutually recognised training curriculum, as well as stronger mental health advocacy.

The second panellist, **Prof Claudi Bockting (President, EACLIPT and director Centre for Urban Mental Health University of Amsterdam)** underlined that common mental health disorders (depressive and anxiety disorders) are a worldwide epidemic and that there is no evidence that the epidemic is subsiding. The COVID-19 pandemic further increased the prevalence substantially worldwide, with estimated adverse lifelong effects. Other pandemics or societal crises such as war and economic instability will amplify the adverse effects on mental health. Effective psychological and pharmacological interventions do exist; some 50% of persons living with mental ill health respond positively to these treatments. However, the effect of these interventions has not increased in the past four decades; the sustainable impact of current preventative interventions is less convincing.

Mental health conditions are the result of the interplay of mental-, biological, stress related- and societal factors that can change over time. In order to improve the effects of interventions, an interdisciplinary approach will be required. Moreover, mental health needs to be prioritised, to tackle the enormous consequences of the increase in common mental health disorders.

Claudi emphasised the need to invest in improving the effects of preventative interventions and treatments. The best way forward would be to launch and invest in a ‘European Organisation for Nuclear Research (CERN)’ for mental health to improve the effects of treatment. What is needed is a long-term investment that is sustainable, instead of project based investments (such as Horizon Europe). A first step has been taken to launch the Centre of Excellence in Mental Health Sciences[1]. Its principal objective is to unravel new pathways to improve mental health by means of interventions and policy development, which take into account the complexity and dynamics of mental health problems and conditions in their environment.

Claudi invited participants to come forward with any suggestions and ideas for partnership[2]. The next step will be to find sustainable funding for this excellence centre which will be fully committed towards improving mental health outcomes.

[1] <https://www.cemhs.org/#partners>) including not only EACLIPT (among other organisations), but also the prestigious European Academy of Sciences and Arts (EASA).

[2] c.l.bockting@amsterdamumc.nl or sign up at <https://www.cemhs.org/#partners>.

Comments from the audience

Tomas first invited comments from Christoph Steinebach (President, European Federation of Psychologists' Associations) to speak. Christoph thanked the Alliance and GAMIAN-Europe for the event and expressed his organisation's strong support for a European Year for Mental Health. A Year is a strategic issue for EFPA as it connects to several of its core activities, such as:

- A focus on youth mental health (EFPA has recently set up a Task Force on this issue), which would recognise the importance of the peer perspective and peer support
- EFPA's active partnership in the WHO's Mental Health Coalition, which is addressing eMental Health, also in relation to developing caring communities for people of all ages as well as in the workplace
- The cooperation with the MEP Alliance for Mental health and GAMIAN-Europe
- Promoting the notion of psychologists not only being health professionals, but their role in acting like a bridge between various areas of society (work, schools, organisations, sports...)
- Research activities, as part of Horizon Europe projects

Tomas then invited **Nick Morgan (President, Europe Youth Mental Health)** for a short commentary; he explained that his organisation work with and for young people to promote mental health and support those impacted by mental ill health. EYMH has a role in empowering young people to be co-producers of the actions and outputs coming out of meetings and groups like this, also educating policy makers and health professionals about what they need to know about mental health.

One of Nick's points related to the need to include a specific youth element in this type meetings. Another concern relates to mental health related to work and the workplace; during the covid pandemic large numbers of young people lost their jobs; job loss and not being able to find a job can have a huge impact on mental health.

Nick warmly invited all participants to an event organised by EYMH later in the week, where a three-year strategic plan would be launched, with the aim to strengthen the voice of young people in relation to mental health policy.

Other participants raised the following points:

- There is a need for more involvement of experts by experience in mental health systems and mental health care. Peer support is an indispensable element in care provision, both in hospitals as well as in the community. This type care and support should be recognised and facilitated, making use of the large resource represented by patients.
- The voice of patients should be heard more strongly in any initiative which is aiming to address mental health policy or services.
- Both the EU Year and a EU Mental Health Strategy should have a strong focus on prevention and early intervention. Teaching mental health literacy in schools is a useful example of an action that could support prevention.
- There should be more attention of the mental health of refugees (from Ukraine and elsewhere)
- Promoting mental health in the workplace is crucial, not least because it takes the topic beyond the realm of health services. There needs to be investment in good mental health at work, not just for the benefit of the individual employees, but also for the company and society as a whole.
- The European Parliament – an employer itself – could consider putting in place a scheme to promote good mental health at work. This would have the added advantage of raising awareness of the MEPs, as policymakers.
- It would be useful to develop a set of standards for mental health care which would be applicable across the EU, e.g. criteria for acceptable delays in access to care.
- A EU Year and Strategy should take a strategic as well as a grassroots approach, if those living with mental ill-health are to benefit from these initiatives.
- It would be good to set up a representative platform where all that needs to be done in the field of mental health could be prioritised (for instance, develop a 10-point programme) in order to make it easier for policymakers to implement change.

Conclusions and Close

Tomas Zdechovsky MEP closed the meeting, informing participants that a comprehensive meeting report will be prepared within the next two weeks. He underlined that the views of participants are always welcome, to the co-chairs as well as to GAMIAN-Europe in its role as coordinator.

CONTRIBUTORS

MEETING COORDINATION AND
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