



*Campaigning for a European Year and Strategy  
for Mental Health*



## HYBRID MEETING OF THE MEP ALLIANCE FOR MENTAL HEALTH

PREPARING FOR DEDICATED EU LEVEL ACTION ON MENTAL HEALTH

**25 October 2022, 11.00 – 12.30**

**Radka Maxova MEP** welcomed participants and underlined

- The aim of the meeting, i.e., to discuss the current momentum and explore the development of meaningful EU-level action.
- The MEP Alliance's long-standing advocacy for EU-level action on mental health, with a specific emphasis on the efforts to obtain a European Year for Mental Health and a comprehensive EU Mental Health Strategy.
- Ms von der Leyen's State of the Union address, announcing a 'comprehensive approach to mental health', which is also part of the Commission's 2023 work programme.
- The recent, first-ever dedicated European Parliament report on mental health, which was well received in the European Parliament and beyond.
- The upcoming Czech EU Presidency conference, to be held on 14 November, will provide an opportunity to explore concrete EU-level action, providing content for the future Commission's initiative.



She then gave the floor to **Péter Keri (President, GAMIAN-Europe)**, who expressed his thanks to the MEP Alliance for their ongoing and indispensable support. He also emphasised that

- This is a dynamic and interesting time, with concrete opportunities for advocacy and the need to capitalise on these.
- There seems to be a real possibility for dedicated EU-level action and the time is right for organisations to work together, make their voices heard and shape what will happen in the future.
- GAMIAN-Europe is dedicated to facilitating a strong patient voice as well as to bringing together important organisations for cooperation.
- We can change the future and this Alliance meeting can support that.

**Radka Maxova MEP** then introduced **Stefan Schreck (Advisor on Stakeholder Relations, European Commission, DG Santé)** as the next speaker. He noted that

- The Commission already has a history of action on mental health, highlighting the 2005 Green Paper on Mental health, the 2008 Mental Health Pact, the 2016 Framework for Action on Mental Health and the EU Mental Health Compass.
- There is political momentum now to build on this background.
- The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health has been substantial (social isolation, personal loss and financial insecurity have taken their toll).
- However, already before the pandemic millions of people were affected by mental ill health, as outlined in the 2018 'Health at a Glance report'; one in every 6 citizens was affected by mental ill health, with related economic costs estimated at 4% of GDP.
- Apart from the COVID-19 pandemic, the current war in Ukraine, the increasing cost of living and the consequences of climate change are having an impact on mental health.
- The younger generations seem most affected, with an estimated 20-25% of young people suffering from mental ill health (NB this was 10 -20% before the pandemic).
- The above calls for swift and coordinated action.
- The Commission has already allocated €28 million for actions on mental health under the EU Health Programme during the past three years. Moreover, it has invested in neurological research, is supporting the collection and transfer of best practices and has recently committed 11 million for urgent psychological and trauma support for people fleeing Ukraine.



- Support for best practices in migrant and refugee populations as well as in the area of children and young people will start before the end of 2022 through projects.
- With respect to President von der Leyen's reference to a comprehensive approach to mental health, the Commission has started preparatory work.
- In all the work on public health, stakeholders have a key role, and this was demonstrated in the 'Healthier Together' – EU NCDs initiative.
- The Czech Presidency conference will be a principal element for the Commission to have a first impression of the views and priorities of stakeholders.

**Radka Maxova MEP** then gave the floor to **Professor Jiri Horáček (Head of Department of Psychiatry/Medical Psychology, Charles University Prague and Coordinator of Mental Health Agenda, Czech EU Presidency)**, who shared information about the aims and programme of the conference, stating that

- Work is ongoing on the organisation of the Czech Presidency conference on mental health, entitled 'Resilient Mental Health in the European Union' taking place in Brussels on 14 November.
- The programme is coming together well, with all MEP Alliance co-chairs attending, as well as the Czech Minister of Health and Czech Ambassador. Other speakers representing key players such as the European Commission, the EMA, the OECD, the WHO, GAMIAN-Europe, MHE, EPA and EFPA will also attend.

The event will consist of three main panels:

1. The general state of mental health in Europe
2. EU approach to mental health in the future
3. Innovative approaches to mental health

- The meeting will be hybrid, with some 100 participants attending in person.
- Work is being conducted on the development of a 'blueprint' for EU action on mental health, which will be adapted to the discussions at the conference; this should support concrete plans for future action.

The draft blueprint focuses on 4 major streams of action, i.e.

1. Mainstreaming;
2. Awareness raising and good practice exchange;
3. Putting in place national action plans for mental health;
4. Funding of actions in mental health, for instance for capacity building.

- Registration for the conference is open.
- The conference will be a useful opportunity to push for concrete EU-level action and will help to put and keep mental health on the Commission agenda.

**Radka Maxova MEP** then invited the MEP Alliance co-chairs to provide their views on what a future EU-level initiative should entail.

**Maria Walsh MEP** stated that

- This is the time to make our voices heard as there are concrete and welcome opportunities for EU-level action.
- Mental health may not be an EU competency, but it does have an impact on a wide variety of policy areas, particularly in the social domain.



- The European Parliament Report 'Mental Health in the Digital World of Work' was widely supported in the Parliament and garnered a strong mandate on what we, as a European Parliament, would like an EU Mental Health Strategy to address (e.g., a Psychosocial Directive at Work).
- Mental health is everybody's business and should be considered and addressed as such.
- An EU Strategy should incorporate robust governance, legislative initiatives and appropriate financing.
- It should be inclusive, cross-sectoral and cross-generational.
- It should take a cross-functional approach, throughout the various Commission Directorates, if a balanced approach is to be ensured and if the cross-sectoral impact of mental health is to be done justice.
- An EU-level conference, attended by Ministers or persons responsible for mental health should be organised in the European Parliament to ensure recognition of the urgency of the topic and to enable the sharing of good practices and solutions. This conference should include the candidate countries as well as the UK as cooperation and exchange are required for a strong European-wide approach.
- The Strategy should call for national plans on mental health; more resources will need to be spent on the development of clear benchmarks and indicators as well as on data collection, monitoring and assessment.
- Raising awareness continues to be important as stigma remains to be addressed. A European Year for Mental Health should be part of the initiative.



**Tomas Zdechovsky MEP** stated that

- The Alliance's spirit of cooperation and the progress made in terms of mental health momentum and initiative is much appreciated.
- Current developments show that mental health is becoming a top priority for the European Parliament and European Commission.
- However, the MEP Alliance and mental health stakeholders must continue to spur the Commission into action – an action which is concrete and meaningful to those on the ground.
- It is imperative to have a well-managed Strategy on Mental Health, with an appropriate budget, linked to the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Semester Process, the European Social Fund, Horizon Europe and the EU4Health Programme.
- The Czech Presidency conference on mental health will be a crucial moment to push for action, and the fact that the Czech Health Minister will attend is a strong signal of the importance attached to the topic.



**Estrella Dura Ferrandis MEP** reminded participants of the S&D's position paper on mental health and noted that

- This moment in time represents a crucial point of reflection. As the Commission representative said, steps have been taken, there is background, and there is information – this should now inspire us, be brought together and be put to beneficial use. We should push for action, now more than ever.
- The structural nature of mental health should be the basis of all action, as so many factors influence the state of mental health of a person, e.g., education, health, employment, environment, housing...
- An EU Strategy on Mental Health should be horizontal and cross-cutting, and comprise national plans, with clear recommendations for action. Examples of useful EU action plans exist and can serve as examples.
- A Strategy should stimulate legislative proposals in those areas where the Commission has the competency, e.g., in the area of health and safety at work.
- Another important topic to be addressed is the abusive use of technologies and their impact. Social media and social networks are a double-edged sword; they can be useful but also destructive, e.g., cyberbullying.
- The Strategy should include a European Year for Mental Health.
- The best way to 'treat' mental health is prevention – and the solution for this lies to a considerable extent in the 'well-being' of the welfare state, providing for good education, employment, housing and environment.

**Alex Agius Saliba MEP** stated that

- The Commission's announcement regarding a comprehensive approach to mental health is a boost to the MEP Alliance's campaign for an EU Mental Health Strategy and European Year
- Nevertheless, as a cross-party Alliance, we should continue to put pressure, raise awareness and speak with one voice on what is required as mental health can be seen as another pandemic that needs addressing.
- The Commission's future initiative should be ambitious, and holistic and reflect the priorities of citizens, as indicated by the Conference on the Future of Europe.
- It should focus on mental health promotion and prevention of mental ill health in all domains of life. It should consider different societal groups and address the entire life span.
- Promotion of healthy lifestyles, in general, would be another essential element as physical and mental health are two sides of the same coin.
- A European Year for Mental Health should be part of the future programme, to boost awareness of mental health and its importance.
- The Commission should propose a Directive on the Right to Disconnect without delay as well as present a Directive to regulate the use of AI technologies at the workplace, to protect workers' mental health.
- There is a need to build equal, inclusive, sustainable economies and societies to become more resilient against pandemics and other global challenges that affect mental health. Estrella Dura Ferrandis MEP reminded participants of the S&D's position paper on mental health and noted that A



**Radka Maxova MEP** then invited stakeholders to share their views on a future EU-level mental health initiative. The following issues were raised:

- A Strategy is needed, which has a focus on mental health promotion and the prevention of mental ill health. Clear benchmarks would need to be part of the Strategy to measure progress and implementation.
- The initiative would need to be cross-sectoral, with the various Commission departments working together.
- Stakeholders will need to be involved in the development, implementation, monitoring and assessment of the initiative.
- There is a need for real dialogue between the various stakeholders involved in mental health, as a basis for relevant action.
- The importance of brain health – ‘brain capital’ – and brain research was underlined as a fundamental element in mental health treatment and management.
- The importance of a psycho-social approach was referred to.
- Any future EU-level initiative would have to be ambitious and based on a clear vision, consistent with other actions in the brain space.
- Stakeholders now clearly expect concrete action – how can we hold the Commission President accountable to her words?
- We need to take account of innovative solutions and ongoing research, such as ‘precision psychiatry’, and build bridges between research outcomes and their implementation in the health policy space.
- The crucial role of families should not be forgotten.
- The role of all health care providers – e.g., physiotherapists – needs to be explored and considered.
- It may be too early to have a European Year for Mental Health in 2024, as called for by the Alliance co-chairs. Aiming for 2025 might be more realistic; if such a Year is to have an impact, it needs to be well prepared.

In his response to stakeholders, **Stefan Schreck** underlined his appreciation for the opportunity to have this first exchange with stakeholders. It will be important to continue the identification and exchange of best practices; participants were invited to share their best practices, which will be shared and which will help effectuate change ‘on the ground’.

**Peter Keri** expressed his gratitude concerning the meeting and underlined that GAMIAN-Europe collects best practices in the work with its members. He stated that the voice of experts by experience is growing stronger and will be indispensable in any future EU action.

**Radka Maxova MEP**, in her conclusions, supported the statements made by her colleagues and reiterated the need for a European Year for Mental Health in 2024; the current momentum should be seized and capitalised upon.



