



Introduction

On 16 December, the European Parliament's Kangaroo Group held a virtual event focusing on how the von der Leyen Commission plans to tackle the pressing healthcare issues in Europe, particularly the question of where the Commission's flagship health initiative, the Beating Cancer Plan, should focus its actions and attention.

On its appointment, the von der Leyen Commission announced beating cancer as a flagship initiative for its five-year term. Then Covid-19 hit, changing dramatically our European way of life and placing an unprecedented burden on the EU's healthcare resources.

Vice President Schinas' introductory speech set the scene for a debate on key questions governing success in tackling these health challenges, particularly on misinformation about Covid-19 and vaccines and how Europe's Beating Cancer Plan should tackle the over 40% of cancer cases that are preventable.

Panel

- **Margaritis SCHINAS**, Vice-President of the European Commission
- **Peter LIESE MEP**, EPP/Germany, Member of the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety and Member of the Special Committee on Beating Cancer
- **Andrea AMMON**, Director, European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control
- **Marion KOOPMANS**, Head of Viroscience at the Erasmus University Medical Center, Member of the Commission's Advisory Panel on Covid-19
- **Jindrich VOBORIL**, Head of the Institute for Rational Drug Policies and former Czech National Anti-Drug Coordinator

Chair: **Michael GAHLER MEP**, President of the Kangaroo Group

Event summary

Vice President Schinas' keynote address

Vice President Schinas introduced the virtual debate with a keynote address. His address introduced the twin health crises that Europe faces, with a particular focus on Covid-19 and the topical question of vaccines.

The Vice President stressed that there are "3 golden principles" for the EU in the case of vaccines: "equal access, affordability and safety." He said that the EU hopes to have 2 billion vaccine doses by the end of next year.

He stated that the idea of a "European Health Union is a reality, no longer a slogan," as Europe has always grown through crises and must not be afraid to learn lessons from the pandemic and "break taboos."

Addressing the topic of cancer, Schinas reiterated that cancer remains a top priority for the von der Leyen Commission, and the Commission's commitment to beat cancer is "very present, more present than ever before, despite the pandemic."



Schinas called for the Cancer Plan to “drive change through innovation, maximise the EU’s research potential and make the best use of new technologies while providing for a significant increase in research resources.” He stressed the point that the Cancer Plan must be holistic in nature and bring together patient associations, NGOs and industry together in a “whole of team approach” to fight cancer as “governments and public health authorities cannot address the cancer challenge alone.”

After his introductory address, Schinas was asked two questions by Michael Gahler, one about the European Council’s cut of the EU4Health budget and another about how the Cancer Plan intends to tackle the 40% of cancers that are preventable through healthy lifestyle changes.

Schinas answered that the Cancer Plan will place a “significant emphasis on prevention. Prevention makes a difference” and stressed that he does not want to “leave people under the impression that the plan will use prevention to get around finding resources,” as the EU has “alot of money in many other instruments that we can activate so that we can use synergies on the beating cancer plan, both in the recovery plan and the 7 year budget.”

Andrea Ammon

Andrea Ammon was next to address the virtual debate. She presented on the role of the ECDC in fighting Covid-19, the lessons learned and the importance of ensuring that the ECDC is able to combat future pandemics effectively. Ammon pointed out that there are indeed some cancers “rooted in infectious diseases”, such as hepatitis C and HPV and that it is important not to overlook these both in terms of the vaccine conversation and in the wider context of cancer.

Peter Liese MEP

Peter Liese spoke about his frustration with “Covid deniers”, particularly those who are spreading vaccine misinformation. “There are so many who do not believe we have a problem, they do not trust the media, they do not trust the doctors, they just trust their own Facebook group. That makes me angry,” he said.

On cancer, Liese stressed both the importance of cancer screening and surgeries in the context of the pandemic, particularly given that many European hospitals are currently over capacity. He also pointed out the importance of cancer prevention, particularly those cancers caused by “smoking, lack of physical activity, malnutrition and alcohol.”

Marion Koopmans

Marion Koopmans began her presentation by first praising Professor Zhang Yongzhen, the Chinese Scientist who sequenced the first Covid-19 genome. She provided expertise on vaccine development and the challenges in its rollout, explaining that Covid-19 vaccines have shown “incredible scientific progress” in being developed at “warp speed.” She also said it was important to recognise the key challenges in vaccine deployment, including fragmentation of public health responses across Europe and the “infodemic” of misinformation around vaccines

Jindrich Voboril

Jindrich Voboril used his intervention to highlight the potential key role of harm reduction in tackling preventable cancers caused by substances like tobacco and alcohol. He said Europe “must focus on the most rapid ways of reducing harms and risks in legislation, for example in tobacco policies, supporting any possibilities of alternative products to cigarettes.”



Questions

After the presentations, Michael Gahler asked questions to the panel. His first was to Peter Liese, where he asked him how he would tackle smoking-induced cancers and whether e-cigarettes should be recommended for smokers who want to quit.

Liese said that the best way is for smokers to quit, however, sometimes this is not possible and harm reduction is the solution. He said: "Tobacco is still the biggest problem, causing the most cancer cases and the most death and that's why we need to do more. It is important to stop smoking when possible and you shouldn't give up too early." However, he qualified: "It's easy to say stop smoking." He said he is lucky he is not addicted to smoking, he has only smoked once, but "other people are addicted and we need to help them."

Liese said "It's a bit strange when on the one hand, people that are addicted to illegal drugs like heroin get support with methadone, but at the same time some health experts say no, harm reduction is not a solution for smoking. I think it is."

He said "If you stop, that's the best, but if you cannot stop, e-cigarettes are a solution," finishing by asserting that "harm reduction is a solution, the minimum is that we shouldn't regulate e-cigarettes more than tobacco."

Jindrich Voboril, an expert in harm reduction policies due to his experience as Czech National Anti-Drug Coordinator, said he welcomed Liese's endorsement of harm reduction, particularly in the area of smoking. Voboril said that "8 million people die from tobacco use each year" and asserted that harm reduction policies can play a key role in reducing these preventable deaths.

Liese also answered the next question on Covid-19, once again pointing out the dangers of "reluctance against science" and welcoming the fact that there is now a new US President that is not a "science denier." Liese said this reluctance towards science is extremely dangerous, not only in tackling Covid-19 but for other health crises. Liese finished by saying: "I'm afraid it will not stop after the Covid pandemic, we have social media that provokes only like-minded people to see each other's opinion, and if you don't respect Covid warnings how can you listen to other major warnings."