From the very beginning, the European project was about saving lives. When the French foreign minister, Robert Schuman, delivered his famous Declaration on 9 May 1950, he was outspoken about the importance of eliminating war in Europe. 70 years of largely peaceful development of the continent is proof that his project for peace, for saving lives, works.

The relative role of the health sector in European countries has grown in the latter half of the 20th century. The latest available Eurostat figures on the Eurozone (2018) show that employment in health is now almost twice that in the combined economic sectors of agriculture, forestry, fishing, mining and manufacturing of basic metals that dominated European policy at the start of European integration.

Unfortunately, until 2020, development goals such as promoting good health and longevity were off the radar of big European policy. For decades health-related matters were considered by the EU almost exclusively as the business of Member States or quasi markets for a number of reasons including that health policy is a national competence, the inertia of political thought (as some considered health an unproductive sector), the neoliberal approach to the EU as a common market, and opposition from traditional industries.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the limits of preparedness to mitigate the negative impact of health emergencies on economic growth, employment, fiscal balances, international trade, free movement of people and may well prove to be a game changer in the acceptance of the role health has to play in European policy. Since the early spring of 2020, health has dominated media coverage and national and international debates. During the European Health Forum Gastein 2020 the change of political sentiments was nicely described by Tamsin Rose, Senior Fellow, Friends of Europe: “Health has been the Cinderella of public policymaking for a long time, nobody would listen, and we never got to go to the ball. Now we are the equivalent of the princess at the ball and everyone wants to dance with us”.

The term “A European Health Union (EHU)” was coined in spring 2020 and a few months later was catapulted to the rank of official EU policy by the European Commission President, Dr Ursula von der Leyen, in her “State of the Union” address.

Europeans are demanding more pan-European actions for health (for example, as indicated by a 2020 Eurobarometer) and EHU may provide the answer.

Different scenarios can be envisaged to develop EHU:

a) Measures to make progress in health concentrate on what can be done with existing legal, financial, and managerial instruments, upgrading already functioning institutions, and improving implementation of already agreed policies.

b) Fine tuning of existing instruments of health policy in parallel to the development of secondary legislation and establishment of new institutions that can create added value for European health. The scenario does not foresee amendments to the European Treaties.

c) Europeans decide that in addition to “a” and “b”, a scenario “c” is needed, where the status of health policy in the European Treaties is strengthened, with provisions for a European Health Union incorporated into the Treaty on European Union, giving the European Union some competence in health policy in very concrete areas, while preserving the principle of subsidiarity as a core.

All three scenarios have their own advantages and disadvantages. None is perfect and none can be implemented immediately. A scenario “c” is, of course, the most ambitious. The best choice, in my opinion, would be to adopt this scenario. By opting for scenario “a” or “b” Europeans would restrict the benefits they would obtain from deeper cooperation on health.
The actual development depends on political choice, thus on outcomes of political debates. The European Council and the Conference on the Future of Europe are the right platforms for these debates. An agreement to consider the incorporation of provisions for a EHU into Articles 2 and 3 of a revised Treaty on the European Union, giving the EU explicit competence to take action on health policy would be the perfect outcome of the 2020–2021 political season.

The EU has potential to transform itself from being the block that cares about free movement of goods, people, services, and capital to a Union where lives and the health of all residents matter. But it will take time and efforts.

Proponents of EHU are aware that for many EHU looks like a nice political slogan that will fall out of fashion in line with the disappearance of quarantines and face masks, but they are inspired by the words of Robert Schuman: World health “… cannot be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it”.

References