COVID-19 has already become the most devastating pandemic of the century, with an enormous impact on the health and wellbeing of citizens across Europe and the world.

Unfortunately, it is possible that the worst may be yet to come. Nevertheless, many other pandemic threats should also concern us. Since the revised International Health Regulations (IHR) entered into force in 2005, the World Health Organization (WHO) has already declared six Public Health Emergencies of International Concern (PHEIC) including the influenza H1N1 pandemic in 2009, Polio in 2014, the Ebola epidemic in West Africa in 2014, the Zika virus epidemic in 2016, the Ebola epidemic in the Democratic Republic of Congo and COVID-19 in January 2020.

In the light of these, and the catastrophic health and socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19, policymakers and public health experts should be prioritising the revision and improvement of all our pandemic preparedness plans in the EU. We need updated health policy that can regulate, support and contribute to the early detection of epidemic threats, rapid control of outbreaks, and elimination of pandemic threats at international, national and sub-national levels. We should start effectively applying the lessons learnt from COVID-19 and developing strategies for a rapid and robust public health response to epidemics in Europe in a coordinated way.

Pandemics know no borders, therefore the scope for EU coordinated action on epidemic preparedness, pathogen research and promoting a multisectoral response mechanism has become more relevant than ever.

Many international public health organisations such as WHO, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN) have contributed remarkably to support all EU Member States in the fight to tackle this pandemic. However, there is much more that we should be doing. In view of the current situation, we need to develop stronger cooperation in the area of pandemic preparedness that could be prioritised by a potential European Health Union. We ought to set out the principles of the EU’s future public health strategy. This is a call for action for solidarity, cross-border collaboration and united coordinated action in Europe to prevent and control further epidemics. This is also a call to ensure we reorganise the health agenda to prioritise public health and epidemic research in the EU research agenda, the development of vaccines, improved diagnostics for infectious diseases, and better overall pandemic preparedness and emergency plans. The time for action is now.

References