



***EUROPEAN PATIENTS' RIGHTS DAY 2022***

***CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF A HEALTHY EUROPE***

***Taking part in the decision-making process on health priorities***

*20 – 21 April 2022 | 14:30 – 16:00 CEST*

Digital Conference

**Opening Remarks and Keynote Presentations**

**20th April 2022**

**Mariano Votta**

***Director Active Citizenship Network***

Good afternoon and greetings from Rome, Italy, where the headquarters of Active Citizenship Network are located. Welcome to the European celebration of the sixteenth Edition of the European Patients' Rights Day, the third one realized in digital format: we look forward to organizing the next edition again at the EU Parliament, "the house" of this celebration.

As you probably know, Active Citizenship Network, the European branch of the Italian NGO Cittadinanzattiva, has promoted this multi-stakeholder event since 2007, and as its Director, I am very honored to celebrate its anniversary.

The XVI Edition will be divided into two sessions, both linked by a single message, which I believe brings together civil society, Patients' Advocacy Groups (PAGs) and relevant stakeholders, that is the necessity to take part in the decision-making process on health priorities: tomorrow's session will offer us the opportunity to assess the "Mission of Health" provided by the National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs). Today, instead, we are invited to reflect on whether the need to build a stronger "European Health Union", as advocated by the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen in the occasion of the 2020 State of the Union Address, is a concrete perspective or just a slogan.

We will discuss about this keeping in mind what is emerging from the [Conference on the Future of Europe](#) (CoFoE) which has represented a unique and timely opportunity for European citizens to debate on Europe's challenges and priorities.

Since its launch - on occasion of the Europe Day, on 9 May 2021 – and up to today, a series of consultations across the continent were made, aiming to collect ideas for EU reform from European citizens<sup>1</sup>. All Europeans, stakeholders and civil society representatives were invited to express their expectations of the European Union.

The Conference, with its structure of the 3 "P's" (thematic Panels, Plenary sessions, and web Platform), despite its limitations, represented an exercise in civic participation with respect to which the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission - within their sphere of competences - will soon be called upon to make public commitments.

Faced with this opportunity, a movement of civic participation such as Cittadinanzattiva could not remain indifferent: we have therefore neither crossed our arms waiting to know passively the results of this work nor we have limited ourselves

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<sup>1</sup> The goals, principles, governance and methodology of the Conference are laid down in a [Joint Declaration](#), co-signed by the Presidents of the European Parliament, the European Commission and the Council on 10 March 2021.

to cross our fingers hoping to be chosen among the few citizens called to animate in first person the Conference.

On the contrary, we have launched on May 2021, as a follow up of the last European Patients' Rights Day, a cycle of EU Webinars titled "Health at the heart of the future of Europe" to highlight the priority of health as a common good in the debate of our and of the next generation, prescribing a healthier future for Europeans. Healthcare, well-being, and a healthy lifestyle are vital for all of us. The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed a need to work together to build stronger health systems and protect European's physical and mental health. While national governments are primarily responsible for healthcare and medical services, European Union health policies can support and strengthen this action.

The cycle of initiatives organized by ACN during the second half of 2021 (in [June](#), [July](#), [September](#) and [December](#) 2021), with the direct involvement of MEPs, high level experts, leader of civic organizations, PAGs and citizens, aimed to contribute to providing a multi-stakeholder vision for a Healthier European Union. By voicing their opinions, hopes and concerns, citizens can influence the way healthcare is provided in Europe. The webinars were realized in the framework of the [MEPs Interest Group "European Patients' Rights & Cross-Border Healthcare" \(2019-2024 Term\)](#) and hosted by the multilingual [FuturEU platform](#), created to enable citizens across the Union to share and exchange ideas and opinions through online events. We can therefore consider today's appointment as the natural prosecution of our commitment in this area, with the objective to send to the European Institutions the suggestions delineated today as a contribution to the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) on the discussed topics.

The Conference nears finalisation of policy proposals. The Plenary session on 8-9 April debated concrete proposals, and the final Conference Plenary session is scheduled

for 29-30 April in Strasbourg, where proposals are expected to be approved by the Plenary on a consensual basis.

We believe that among the lines of the recommendations that emerged from the Conference there is room and, before the deliberations expected in May, still time to make further suggestions to the European Institutions, for example on access to care with the objective of reducing the so-called *health inequalities*.

In particular, the European Citizens' Panel 3 on "Climate change, environment / Health" finalized 51 recommendations within its remit, then discussed in occasion of the Conference Plenary held in the European Parliament, together with related recommendations from National Citizens' Panels.

The most common themes involve the need to ensure equal access to high-quality healthcare and suggest greater harmonization and integration at the European level, also following the Covid-19 experience and its impact. Other recommendations range from calls for increased investment in the areas of mental health and medical research to address current health challenges, paying particular attention to the aging population, to calls for investment in preventive measures, including promoting healthy living and combating known causes of health problems, such as air pollution. Another topic covered - linked to the creation of a European Health Union - highlights the need for a more efficient cooperation between Member States and EU-level institutions.

Without going into the details of the recommendations that have already emerged, what else is worth highlighting? Between new challenges and gaps to fill, what is missing and what to expect? We asked this to our appreciated and qualified guests.

From my side, only 2 considerations:

1) The first is linked to the reports published following the work of the Conference: more than two years of Covid-19 pandemic, during which the health of each one of

us has been jeopardized as never before, do not seem to have been sufficient to increase among citizens the need for a “European Health Union”, if it is true that the theme of health was among the least discussed in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe<sup>2</sup>. Is this a paradox, a signal one should pay attention to, or a missed opportunity? Probably, a bit of everything. We certainly feel that we have done well both in advocating for health issues in the way I have mentioned and in dedicating to these topics today's session of the 16th European Patients' Rights Day.

2) The second is a consequence of the war in Ukraine. In order to give a strong signal of attention and closeness to the Ukrainian population, today we host two testimonies, significant even if not direct. We truly wished to host the voice of the Ukrainian patients' association, our historical partner, but unfortunately we have no news of their leaders...

The feeling is that in a global context of such continuous evolution and growing uncertainty as the one emerging from the combination of pandemic and war, certain claims, certain priorities of which we will soon speak, on the one hand seem to “be born already old”, surpassed by other priorities that until yesterday were not seen as such because we took them for granted. And on the other hand, the same legitimate claims and priorities seem to be so futuristic, so far from being realized in the short term because in the meantime we have other more pressing priorities, more basic and more vital.

In between, there is the dramatic awareness that for two years now the perception of our level of security has been considerably reduced, and that the consequences of this are, as too often happens, suffered first and foremost by the most fragile social categories: minors, the elderly, patients. It seems so banal to say it and we never would have thought that we would have to state it so forcefully in such a context that

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<sup>2</sup> Since the beginning of the Conference 215 events on the topic of health have been organized in the EU Member States, and this was one of the topics with the lowest number of related events.

peace is the main precondition to guarantee equality and the respect of all the civic & patients' rights. Thus, let us first of all wish for a future in a Europe at peace.

Finally, let me thank in advance all the panelists invited, in particular MEP Tomislav Sokol for confirming also in this occasion his interest in our initiatives, John F. Ryan – the Deputy Director-General for Health of the DG SANTE for providing us the EU Commission's perspective, and Brian Maguire, a journalist, producer and broadcaster, with great experience on European politics and business, for having agreed to chair for the third year in a row the conference.

Thank you all once again, I wish you a worthwhile and interesting event.