

Active Citizens in Europe advocate for vaccination

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European Parliament Hosted by MEP David Borrelli, NI

Mariano Votta's speech

Dear Institutions, dear participants,

Good morning and thanks a lot for joining us today.

A special thanks to the Member of the European Parliament David Borrelli, who is hosting this event. He strongly supports the initiatives promoted by citizens organization and today we have to talk a lot about the active role of the civic society in the context of the vaccination coverage.

Last April, in occasion of the publication of the Commission's proposal for a Council recommendation to strengthen cooperation in the fight against diseases that can be prevented by vaccines, the Health Commissioner remembered us that "infectious diseases are not confined within national borders. One Member State's immunization weakness puts the health and security of citizens at risk across the European Union. Cooperating in this area is in all of our interests".

Also for this reason, we are happy to have received the support of the MEPs Interest Group "European Patients' Rights and Cross-border Healthcare", co-founded also by the MEP Borrelli. I am glad to remind you all that this Interest Group was launched in 2015 following the widespread request of almost 100 civic and patient organizations sent to the EU Parliament to officially recognize the value of citizens' initiatives involved in the promotion of health as a common good. And exactly this is the perspective of this meeting.

One of ACN commitment, as a European network, is to engage citizens and citizens associations around Europe to better implement vaccination policies, and we are here today to build close collaboration and dialogue with European institutions and health stakeholders, to determine how we can work together to valorize and build a more effective civic society engagement.

Today's meeting, (as well as the training seminar we held yesterday for our members) is part of our multi-year activity called "Action plan to improve the awareness on vaccine benefit across Europe", which involves us at the European level in line with what we have been doing in Italy for a long time. Our commitment has been appreciated by the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), that has decided, 2 years ago, to officially include my organization in the ECDC Technical Advisory Group dealing with vaccine coverage. And as members of this Advisory Group we feel a great responsibility in continuing to commit

ourselves to this issue. Indeed, we believe that a widespread vaccination culture is necessary, particularly to overcome the idea that we only get vaccinated when we are young and to, instead, shift towards a life-course vaccination approach which prevents a series of diseases even during adulthood. Please note that the ECDC estimates that at least 40.000 people die every year from influenza, partly due to low vaccination coverage.

Some figures from the “State of Vaccine Confidence in the EU 2018”, which was published a few days ago, will surely enrich today’s debate:

- “High confidence in vaccination programmes is crucial for maintaining high coverage rates, especially at levels that exceed those required for herd immunity. Across the European Union (EU), however, vaccine delays and refusals are contributing to declining immunisation rates in a number of countries and are leading to an increase in disease outbreaks. Recent measles outbreaks – the highest in the EU for seven years – illustrate the immediate impact of declining coverage on disease outbreaks”.
- According to me, one of the worst news is that “younger adults have less confidence in the safety and importance of vaccines generally than older age groups”.
- “The results of the survey suggest that a number of member states – including France, Greece, Italy, and Slovenia – have become more confident in the safety of vaccines since 2015; while Czech Republic, Finland, Poland, and Sweden have become less confident over the same period”.
- Also, the survey found “a correlation between General Practitioners’ (GP) confidence and the confidence among the general public in the survey: countries whose GPs hold higher confidence in vaccines tend to have a larger proportion of the public expressing positive vaccination beliefs”.

The Commissioner Andriukaitis, in occasion of the World Polio Day celebrated last October 24th, underlined that the European region has lower confidence in the safety of vaccines than other regions in the world; seven out of the ten countries with the lowest vaccine confidence in the world are in Europe - four of them (France, Greece, Italy, and Slovenia) are in the EU. This is partly due to the rising influence of diverse anti-vaccine groups that spread misleading information through the internet or within the political arena.

We take note of these data, as well as the fact that in all 28 EU member states the perception of citizens about vaccines is largely positive, with the majority of European citizens agreeing that vaccines are important (90,0%), safe (82.8%), and effective (87.8%).

Of course, passing on the message that today European citizens only raise doubting or skeptical voices about vaccines is misleading for those (like most of the organizations here today) who are instead daily committed to increase confidence, knowledge and consequently vaccination coverage.

One thing must be clear from the beginning: today we are not here to discuss whether vaccines are safe and effective as we take this for granted; we are convinced of it and we work so that they are considered as an extraordinary instrument of prevention.

Today we want to determine how we can work together to valorize and build a more effective civic society engagement.

- First, by taking into consideration the commitment of the EU (Commission and Parliament) to the topic of vaccination, currently and for the forthcoming legislation
- Second, by sharing some examples of the civil society work, and its impact on the topic so far, discussing the barriers and the opportunities.
- Third, by discussing with the chair of the joint action on vaccination how they integrated this notion of civic engagement
- Also, how can academia/health care professionals contribute to this?

To sum up, how is this civic society engagement supported?

In the last period many other things have happened besides the publication of the previously mentioned data.

Just a few months ago, the Joint Action on Vaccination was officially launched to address vaccine hesitancy and to seek to increase vaccination coverage in the European Union.

Going into the substance:

- 1) Point n.1: We would like that the participants in this Joint Action includes also the civil society representatives, starting for example from those yet accredited and involved by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), and from those NGOs' initiatives that have received the "Health Award 2017" for their commitment to ensure high vaccination coverage in the EU. At least, we would like to know how the Joint action aims at guaranteeing the highest participation of organized civil society which consist of the rules of engagement, if any. Otherwise, from our point of view, it is a "halved" Joint Action, a contradiction in terms.
- 2) Point n.2: In order to commit to delivering accurate information to the public, combating myths and exchanging best practices, we hope that the **Coalition for Vaccination**, one of the 20 concrete actions included in the "Proposal for a Council Recommendation" published by the EU Commission last April, will soon extend to all the representatives of the civil society engaged on the topic, and not only, as we read in the document, be open
to the European associations of healthcare workers as well as relevant students' associations in the field.

The Commission's proposal focuses on 3 main pillars of action: tackling vaccine hesitancy and improving vaccination coverage; sustainable vaccination policies in the EU; and EU coordination and contribution to global health.

We would like to know clearly what role the institutions consider to be able to attribute to the representatives of civil society committed to these issues.

The Commission's proposal for a Council recommendation is a call for joint action to increase vaccination coverage and to ensure that everybody in the European Union has access to vaccination bridging inequalities and gaps in immunisation. The genuine questions and doubts surrounding vaccination, expressed by citizens throughout Europe, signal the urgent need for Member States and for the health community to recognise and respond accordingly. Giving answers to doubts and countering vaccine hesitancy is more than right, but doing so without considering that there may be allies within society would be a serious mistake.

We strongly believe that there is clear added-value to strengthen cooperation among all relevant actors at EU level, including health authorities, the vaccine industry, research and innovation, the healthcare sector and others, but we need to guarantee the involvement of the civic society and advocacy groups.

A few months before the election of the new EU Parliament, the event today aims also to reflect, in a multi-stakeholder environment, on the commitment of EU Institutions to the topic before and after the elections, and to keep the attention on the topic of vaccination high: vaccination must be at the top of the EU Health agenda and priorities.

I hope that these suggestions will be taken into consideration by the precious guests present today, experts who I thank in advance for accepting the invitation and for the contribution they will be able to give to the debate.

Well, my turn is over, I just want to thank again in advance all the panelists, and a special thanks to Suzanne Wait who accepted the role of moderator today. She is Managing Director at "The Health Policy Partnership", a London-based health policy research consultancy.

Suzanne has worked on a wide range of topics, including most recently life-course approaches to vaccination, viral hepatitis, oncology, and mental health, so she is the right expert to chair today's event.

Thanks again for the attention. I wish you a fruitful meeting.

Mariano Votta

Director Active Citizenship Network