

## Main theme – EHFG 2026

### **Health for a stronger European Union – high time for action!**

Europe stands at a pivotal moment for health and well-being. Health is not only a social good but a strategic pillar of European unity and resilience. As a continent, Europe's strengths lie in its diversity and commitment to collaboration over competition, solidarity and shared values, democracy and freedom. As we face growing political turbulence that threatens these principles, strengthening health systems is both a political necessity and a democratic imperative.

From the COVID-19 pandemic to the climate crisis and demographic and technological change, transitions and challenges have exposed the limits of fragmented national responses and the shortcomings of isolationist agendas. As far-right, anti-EU rhetoric gains ground, scientific evidence and multilateral cooperation are increasingly undermined in favour of short-term nationalism, weakening Europe's capacity to ensure long-term health security. This erosion of trust threatens cross-border cooperation on issues such as pandemic preparedness, antimicrobial resistance, and chronic disease prevention, ultimately putting the equitable access to care and the rights of vulnerable communities at risk.

Europe is also navigating growing geopolitical fragmentation. War on its eastern borders risks escalation amid widespread hybrid attacks, while traditional alliances are crumbling. The return of "might is right" politics has undermined the rules-based order and multilateral cooperation, fuelling a polarised, zero-sum world. Rising defence spending and a focus on competitiveness are diverting resources from health and social programmes.

Despite the challenges, we must put the doomsday scenarios aside and spotlight Europe's strengths, including social protection, public health excellence, and evidence-based science and research. EU-level health action amplifies Member States' power by pooling demand, harmonising regulation, coordinating crisis response, and leveraging the world's largest integrated market—advantages no Member State can achieve alone. The building blocks of the European Health Union are already in place, and there are many opportunities to build upon them.

A stronger European Health Union must be part of a broader vision that counters divisive politics, reinforces shared values, and safeguards the EU's capacity to act collectively for the well-being of all citizens. As we negotiate the next Multiannual Financial Framework, now is the time for stakeholders to champion health, solidarity and equity not as costs but as investments for a resilient future. Strengthening health systems and embedding health in all policies is not just good policy—it is a defence of democratic values and European unity itself.

A Europe fit for the future begins with healthier people, and the time for action is now! Join us in Gastein and online from 29 September - 2 October 2026. Through collaboration and solution-oriented dialogue, the EHFG will provide a dose of sanity in this polarised world. We call on all stakeholders to become agents of change and transform today's challenges into opportunities for a healthier, more resilient Europe for generations to come.