

Statement of the 19th cohort of Young Forum Gastein on health for a stronger Europe

On behalf of the 19th cohort of Young Forum Gastein, we share this statement outlining our priority actions to achieve health for a stronger Europe. We represent 60 young professionals from 30 nationalities that reside in 22 countries and work across the WHO European Region (herein after referred to as 'Europe') in the public and private sector, science and academia, and civil society.

At a time when strength is conceived through Europe's defence capabilities and industrial competitiveness, we underscore that Europe's true strength comes from a healthy, productive, and engaged society. Competing political agendas must not override Europe's legal, democratic, and political mandates to deliver healthcare as a public good for all. Europe meanwhile faces an increasingly complex policy landscape of converging challenges within and beyond its borders, from climate-related emergencies, geopolitical instability, and workforce shortages to ageing populations, mental ill health, and widening inequalities. This requires Europe not only to respond to existing health pressures, but also to anticipate and prevent emerging risks wherever possible. Together, we call upon European leaders and decision-makers to prioritise health as a shared political commitment across governance levels and policy sectors, and a strategic, long-term investment in Europe's unity, prosperity, and resilience.

Calls to action

We outline the following calls to action to fulfil the promise of health for a stronger Europe.

We call on Europe to strengthen and preserve its welfare and social protection systems through the design and implementation of equitable, inclusive, sustainable and solidarity-based policies, services, and interventions to maintain Europe's global competitive edge and advance health for all. Commensurate investments are essential to ensure these systems respond to the needs of all who call Europe home to ensure universal, sustained and affordable access to appropriate, needs-based and high-quality healthcare. Dedicated, ringfenced health budget lines must be secured at the national and European levels to prevent the dilution of funding under broad umbrellas, including in the forthcoming Multiannual Financial Framework for 2028–2034 and European Competitiveness Fund. Access can further be supported by attaching conditions to all publicly funded research to more efficiently translate public investments into tangible returns for people and health systems. Importantly, decision-making must be in consultation with all relevant actors, including young professionals and underserved populations, and operating grants for civil society organisations must be restored and protected. Doing so is critical to catalyse public trust and citizen engagement amidst today's divisive politics and shrinking civic space.

We call on Europe to measurably advance its health in all policies (HiAP) approach through expanded political support, institutional capacities and resources, and intersectoral collaboration to drive improved health outcomes throughout the region with major, tangible benefits for other sectors. While health should remain a standalone objective, it should also be systematically integrated across policy areas, from digitalisation and competitiveness to climate and security, to efficiently advance shared agendas and maximise cross-cutting impacts. We must move decisively from policy ambition to implementation, with clear accountability and responsibilities across policy sectors and governance levels, streamlined directives, and measurable outcomes, including through integrating health, social, and economic impact assessments to evaluate *ex ante* broader policy benefits and risks.

We call on Europe to integrate long-term priorities in health policies, investments, and incentives to ensure Europe's health systems are resilient and fit for the future beyond a single electoral cycle. Europe should strengthen sustained investment in prevention, preparedness, and health promotion as a long-term

strategy to minimise avoidable health burdens, including non-communicable diseases, antimicrobial resistance, and climate-related health threats, while improving the efficient use of finite public resources. Such investments must similarly train, upskill, and retain Europe's health workforce to shore up the capacity and quality of our health systems. Sustainable incentive mechanisms are likewise critical to secure strategic autonomy across pharmaceutical research and innovation, manufacturing, and supply to provide uninterrupted, equitable access to essential health products. Policies must also support the safe adoption of digital health solutions and technological breakthroughs. With alarm growing on the risks of unregulated and rapidly advancing artificial intelligence (AI), Europe must urgently redouble its support and leadership to advance the safe, ethical, and equitable use of AI in Europe and globally, including through the rigorous application of the AI Act and related policy tools, to ensure genuine benefits for people and society.

We call on Europe to strengthen cross-border and multilateral collaboration across the European and global neighbourhoods to effectively address shared health threats and priorities, driven through steadfast leadership and enhanced technical support and investments. Europe must accordingly act in genuine partnership across countries, regional and international partners, and across sectors and industries. Coordinated investments in interoperable health data, surveillance, and knowledge exchange infrastructure are essential, including to cultivate pan-European healthcare and research capabilities and accelerate the implementation of the European Health Data Space. Proportionate and needs-driven support for underdeveloped regions is similarly critical to empower national health systems and achieve parity in healthcare quality and outcomes across Europe and beyond. In the face of weakening multilateralism, Europe must also reinforce its global health mandate through sustained international partnerships and the preservation of instruments of global solidarity, such as the European & Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership and EU-Medicines For All.

We call on Europe to remain resilient in the face of internal and external pressures and fulfil its obligations under international law to take all measures within its power to prevent and respond to health and humanitarian crises and protect the rights of all populations, including vulnerable and marginalized groups. The need for Europe to champion human rights and diplomacy has never been greater. Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine has laid bare the broader implications of health emergencies for neighbouring countries and the European region as a whole. The lack of proportionate action by the EU and its Member States against Israel's unlawful attacks on health workers, civilians, and medical infrastructure in Palestine risks undermining the very ideals Europe purports to champion. Aggressive trade and global health policy from the USA poses new risks to Europe's health security and threatens to worsen and delay access to essential health services and innovations in Europe. Recognising the increasingly protracted nature of many health and humanitarian crises, Europe should link rapid emergency responses with predictable long-term support and investment in resilient health systems. Europe's international policy trajectory will ultimately determine whether we have the financial capacity and political and moral legitimacy to effectively address these decisive agendas to the betterment of European society, with profound implications for health in Europe and around the world.

As we look to the future, we strive for a Europe where all countries, people, and future generations can attain the highest level of health possible. This will be the foundation of a strong and resilient Europe for decades to come. Achieving this ambition requires coherent action across health, social, economic, environmental, and other policy areas that shape health outcomes. We must ensure that health in Europe is prioritised through ambitious, ringfenced budgets and bold, people-centred policies, with sustained investment in prevention, health promotion, preparedness, and resilient health systems. This is a generational opportunity for Europe's leadership to protect people, improve health, and build systems that are fair, future-proof, and accessible to all.

Signed,

The 19th cohort of Young Forum Gastein