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## Health in All Politics

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### **Helmut Brand sets the scene for the upcoming European Health Forum Gastein 2017: Health in All Politics – a better future for Europe**

How many of today's biggest trends and challenges have no implications for human health? Globalisation, the financial crisis, climate change, ageing demographics – you would be hard pressed to find one major political, economic, or social phenomenon that does not concern our physical and mental wellbeing.

Increasingly, decision makers across sectors know that health matters, coining the term ‘health in all policies’ about a decade ago. But there appears to be a lack of will to turn health in all policies into a reality that lives up to its potential. The reasons for this are unclear, and solutions are therefore hard to find. This challenge forms the basis for the European Health Forum Gastein 2017: Health in All Politics – a better future for Europe.



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### A politicisation of health policy

I will set the scene. 20 years ago: the world is on the cusp of the new millennium; France is hosting the World Cup; and we’ve just agreed to the single currency of the euro. At this moment, a group of technical and political experts in Bad Hofgastein, Austria, are exploring what health and social benefits European integration could bring to people living across the region, marking the first European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG).

Since then, the EHFG has developed into a key annual event, bringing together politicians, senior decision makers and representatives from the private sector, civil society, and science and academia to share their specific health policy perspectives and knowledge, and improve the cross-border exchange of experience,

information and cooperation.

Fast forward to today, when it feels like the role of Europe is being questioned like never before: at the regional level, increasing populism, a rise in support for authoritarian politicians and the post-truth era challenge the EU’s very existence; at the local level, public services struggle to cope with the social and welfare expectations of their citizens, and many inequalities remain unaddressed. Often, these issues do not stem from EU policies, but that does not protect the EU from having to shoulder the blame.

Against this backdrop, it is no coincidence that health has entered the stage of political rhetoric, used, and perhaps even abused in political debates. Health arguments – often untrue or shaped for a populist discourse – are convenient subjective weapons. Nothing exemplifies this better than the notorious bus of the UK’s Vote Leave Campaign: ‘We send the EU £350m a week – let’s fund our NHS instead.’

Access to health is a fundamental European value, as well as a fundamental expectation of European voters. Yet, in such a polarised environment, it is no easy feat to achieve health in all policies, or to foster regional consensus and inter-sectoral co-operation on health. Is the health community not ‘politics-savvy’ enough, or do we communicate the wrong evidence? Is there not only a lack of political will, but also a lack of trust in our increasingly divided societies, preventing us from focusing on what matters?

### Why co-operate?

Though each country starts from its own context and its health system serves a unique population, most have a similar end goal: a well-equipped, efficient and sustainable health system to meet the needs of all citizens.

Health is, for the most part, a competence of European member states. However, Europe faces social, welfare and demographic challenges that could be met much faster by leveraging shared experiences.

As stated by the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, Europe is a ‘giant “natural laboratory” for health systems, with enormous potential for countries to learn from each other. European cross-border healthcare is the key to unlocking that potential, by facilitating the transfer of expertise and knowledge, by improving choice for patients, and by enabling greater efficiency in providing healthcare through cross-border co-operation.’

European co-operation on health policy already serves us all today – just look at the treasured European Health Insurance Card, faster and more equal access to medicines through the European Medicines Agency, and harmonised regulatory standards via the European Food Safety Authority.

Looking to the future, cooperation on health policy has so much more to offer. It can help us set up an airtight response to antimicrobial resistance (last year, the European Antibiotics Awareness Day Project was the recipient of the European Health Award at EHFG). Through Horizon 2020 and other EU funding of cross-border research programmes, regional cooperation is helping us get to the cures for diseases like dementia faster than any one member state could arrive alone.

However, health policy cannot operate in isolation. Today’s challenge is not only to co-operate across national borders, but to truly bring health concerns to the forefront of all political decision making.

Thus far, the good intention of health in all policies is often only put into practice when it does not impact on budgets or staff resources. As governments grapple with ageing populations and rising healthcare expenditures, there has never been a better moment to bring together the right people to debate the future of public health in Europe.

### European Health Forum Gastein 2017

What have we learnt from Vote Leave's campaign bus, French presidential candidates debating healthcare plans to gain public favour, and governments tussling for the glory of hosting the European Medicines Agency? Increasingly, health policy has moved from a technocratic consideration to the front and centre of political life. That's why discussions at the 20th EHFG will reflect this new reality, taking the technocratic concept of health in all policies to the political level.

The conference programme follows four thematic tracks. With the main theme of 'Health in All Politics', we found that one track solely dedicated to health in all policies was mandatory. These sessions explore local governance and incentivising health promotion in cities, empowering societies to overcome health inequities, improving food policies, exploring the potential of workplaces to foster social inclusion, environment and health, and possible ways of mobilising political will. Additional tracks on health systems, access to medicines, and innovation, big data and ICT look to lay the ground for more flexible health systems, able to respond to the needs of patients in an innovative, equitable and efficient manner.

There is plenty to cover, but we are not daunted by the task at hand. Already, the European region represents the greatest collective commitment to health anywhere in the world. Let us also set the standard in building bridges between the different policy areas, to see just what can be achieved through a systematic and structural embrace of the values of universality and access to good quality care for all.

The special 20th anniversary edition of the European Health Forum Gastein takes place on 4-6 October 2017, where we will be laying the ground for the next 20 years of health policy debates in Europe. I hope to see you there.



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**This article will feature in issue one of *Pan European Networks: Health*, due for publication in May.**

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