

COVID-19 and the EU's Health Policy: Gaps in Crisis Preparedness

Target Role: EU Policy Researcher

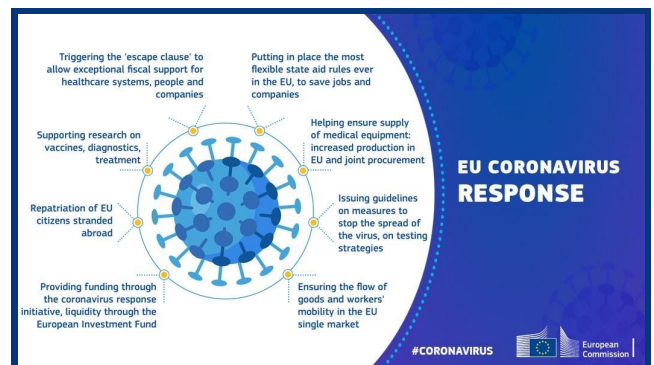
Target Audience: European Commission

KEY POINTS

1. COVID-19 Exposed Weakness in EU Health Crisis Preparedness
2. The EU Strengthened Its Health Crisis Response After COVID-19
3. Gaps in Coordination and Preparedness Still Need to Be Addressed

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic showed that the EU was not fully prepared for a major health crisis. During the pandemic, member states faced problems with coordination and essential medical products such as masks, vaccines and ventilators. To address these problems, the EU introduced new measures and established HERA to improve its preparedness for future health emergencies. Although these steps have improved the EU's health crisis response, some problems still remain. Creating new institutions is not enough if the existing ones do not work effectively. This policy brief argues that the EU should focus on strengthening its current mechanisms instead of creating more institutions. It should improve coordination between health agencies, clarify their responsibilities and regularly check medical supply chain risks. By addressing these weaknesses, the EU can be better prepared for future health crises and protect public health.



Weakness Revealed by COVID-19

Covid-19 pandemic showed an important weakness in the EU health industry. It means that in any kind of pandemic or health crisis, European Union was unprepared. During the pandemic, the EU faced a lot of problems like finding vaccines, masks, medical supplies, production capacity and coordination. These kind of problems showed the importance of preparing for the next pandemics in the future.

The Commission has built a diversified portfolio of vaccines for EU citizens at fair prices. Contracts have been concluded with 8 promising vaccine developers, securing a portfolio of up to 4.2 billion doses. Deliveries of vaccine doses to Member States have increased steadily since December 2020. Vaccination gathered pace across the European Union, and by mid-2022, 86% of adult EU population were fully vaccinated. (European Commission, n.d.-d)

EU Actions After the Pandemic

In November 2020, the European Commission proposed strengthening the European Health Union to address these weaknesses. HERA was created in 2021 to solve these gaps and support to health industry prepare to new pandemics. It is vitally important especially for medical products, vaccines and any kind of health emergencies. In 2022, the EU also explained the new rules on cross-border health threats. Additionally, ECDC and EMA have stronger responsibilities, and EU FAB was developed to support the vaccine manufacturing capacity.

Remaining Challenges

Although the EU has strengthened its health crisis preparedness, it should further improve it. The EU should examine HERA's performance, supply chain and evaluate the outcomes of these measures. It would be helpful for the EU to improve the current system instead of relying on new policies.

However, having new institutions and regulations does not mean that the EU is ready for any kind of pandemic or health crisis. These measures should be effective and try to solve and improve all the weaknesses, and regular evaluations can help these improvements. Because future health emergencies may create different challenges.

Health emergencies can affect all of the countries around the world. The EU should work with the international community to collaborate with health organizations and other countries to share all the experience and information. The cooperation can support earlier responses and improve preparedness for future pandemics and health crises.

In conclusion, COVID-19 showed that the EU needs a strong and well prepared health crisis response system. However, creating new measures is not enough if they are not effective in practice. The EU should focus on addressing existing weaknesses, improving preparedness and ensuring that essential medical products are available during future crises.

Recommendations

In my view, the EU should improve coordination between its health agencies. During COVID-19, medical products were not enough and it was hard to find essential items like vaccines, masks and personal protective equipment for hygiene. Although the EU created HERA to solve these problems, HERA is not enough by itself. Instead of creating new institutes, the EU needs to fix and strengthen HERA. It should control the roles, find the weaknesses and change them into strengths. Furthermore, the EU should check the supply chain problems to prevent shortages and lower VAT on essential health products during emergencies. Because nobody knows what viruses and health risks emerge in the future, the EU has to organize everything properly for everyone's health.

FOOTNOTES

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2. European Commission. (n.d.-b). *Health crisis preparedness: Preventing and preparing for the health threats of the future* https://commission.europa.eu/topics/public-health/european-health-union/health-crisis-preparedness_en

3. European Commission. (n.d.-c). *Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA)*. https://commission.europa.eu/about/departments-and-executive-agencies/health-emergency-preparedness-and-response-authority_en

4. European Commission. (n.d.-d). *Overview of the Commission's response*. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/coronavirus-response/overview-commissions-response_en

5. European Commission. (2025). *Study supporting the review of the Health Preparedness and Emergency Response Authority (HERA) with regard to its operations, structure and governance: Final report*. Publication Office of the European Union. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/c8ab8a41-09f8-11f0-b1a3-01aa75ed71a1>

6. European Commission. (2026, June 16). *Annual activity report 2025 - Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA)*. https://commission.europa.eu/publications/annual-activity-report-2025-health-emergency-preparedness-and-response-authority-hera_en

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This Policy Brief has been prepared as part of the participants / students' assessment in the framework of the EU Politics lecture.

The content of this policy brief lies entirely with the author. It does not reflect the official opinion of Çağ University.