

NEWS FROM BRUSSELS



Word from Senior Policy Advisor Dr. Theodoros Koutroubas

Dear Friends,

Our Romanian colleagues have actively participated in a very interesting meeting of the South-Eastern European Health Network, in Lithuania, an EU-funded programme offers free tuition to hundreds of Nursing students, the “Nursing Action” initiative is ongoing, and Prague calls for bringing back medicine production to Europe.

I hope there is something of interest for you all in this “News From Brussels”!

**Do feed back to us and have a lovely week-end,
Theo**

NEWSLETTER HIGHLIGHTS

The South-Eastern Europe Health Network's (SEEHN) 48th Plenary Meeting

Lithuania To Make Nursing School Tuition Free for Hundreds of Students to Bolster Health Workforce

Europe Must Reclaim Medicine Production, Focus on Prevention

Countries Advance “Nursing Action” Initiative to Tackle Nurse Shortages Across the EU

The South-Eastern Europe Health Network's (SEEHN) 48th Plenary Meeting



The South-Eastern Europe Health Network (SEEHN) convened its 48th Plenary Meeting on June 17–18, 2025, in Sofia, Bulgaria, centred around the theme **“Health Promotion and Disease Prevention – Acting Together for Better Health for All.”**

Organized under the Bulgarian Presidency of SEEHN and hosted by the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Bulgaria, the event brings together

national health leaders, international partners, and key stakeholders dedicated to enhancing public health cooperation across the region. The meeting was officially opened by Assoc. Prof. Silvi Kirilov, M.D., Minister of Health of the Republic of Bulgaria; Dr Tatiana Paduraru, Acting Head of the SEEHN Secretariat; Dr Svetlana Nicolaescu, Chair of the SEEHN Executive Committee, H.E. Christina De Bruin – UNICEF Representative in Bulgaria and Mr Guillaume Simonian, a.i. WHO CO Bulgaria – online.

Minister Kirilov warmly greeted the participants and outlined the importance of multilateral cooperation in the field of public health:

‘The global and regional health challenges in the field of public health today require, above all, working in partnership, sharing good practices and mutual experience, the goal of which should not only be to provide optimal quality of treatment to patients, but also to actively protect and sustainably strengthen their health.’

In her opening address, Dr Tatiana Paduraru highlighted the critical importance of collaboration in health:

‘At a time when public health challenges are increasingly interconnected, acting together is not just a strategic choice – it is an imperative. This meeting is a platform to forge innovative pathways for collaboration and reaffirm our shared commitment to inclusive health for all.’



President Timofte and Ms Hainaigiu



Ms Roxana Hainagiu (Romanian Order of Nurses)

Dr Svetlana Nicolaescu echoed this sentiment, stating: *‘Prevention is a long-term investment — one that transcends sectors and borders. As our societies face growing health demands, we must act with foresight and unity.’*

The Plenary Session was attended by the President of the Romanian Order of Nurses and ENC’s President, Mircea Timofte as well as Mrs Roxana Hainagiu, Head of Communications of the Romanian Order of Nurses, who

took the floor at a briefing on nursing and midwifery.

The key highlights and outcomes included:

- **Strong emphasis on regional collaboration to advance health promotion, disease prevention, and youth well-being through joint policies, information and good practices sharing, and coordinated campaigns.**
- Comprehensive overview of Bulgaria’s SEEHN Presidency (2024–2025), with recognition of major strides in digital health, NCDs, nursing and midwifery leadership, and health diplomacy.
- Strategic transition to the incoming Israeli Presidency (2025–2026), marked by continuity planning and reaffirmed commitment to regional solidarity in health.
- In-depth sessions on public health communication, vaccination strategies, nutrition policies, and digital innovation, highlighting the need for multisectoral investment in prevention.
- Opportunities for partnership building and knowledge exchange identified across all sessions, laying the groundwork for future joint actions.



Lithuania to Make Nursing School Tuition Free for Hundreds of Students to Bolster Health Workforce

The EU-funded initiative aims to combat the Baltic country's nursing shortages. Lithuania will offer free tuition to hundreds of young people training to become nurses, in a bid to shore up its ailing health workforce.

Under the new scheme, ten colleges and universities will admit 535 people to state-funded nursing programmes for the 2025-2026 school year, according to Lithuania's health ministry.

That's 100 more state-funded students than last year!

Around the same number of students will be offered unfunded spots, meaning they will have to pay for their nursing education – unless they agree to work in certain medical centres for two years after they graduate, in which case the institutions will cover their tuition. The programme is expected to save self-funded students €10,500 to €16,400 each.

'We would like to invite school graduates and other young people ... to connect their future with a noble mission that is extremely necessary for the state – the nursing profession,' Laimutė Vaidelienė, Lithuania's Deputy Minister of Health, said in a statement. Once they graduate, students will be encouraged to return to their hometowns for their two-year placements. They can pursue any field they like – whether that's general practice, emergency care, psychiatry, paediatrics, or something else, the health ministry has stated.

The European Union will provide €17 million for the programme as part of a broader effort to fix nursing shortages across the bloc, which are driven by both an ageing population that needs more healthcare services and retirements and other departures within the health workforce. In 2022, for example, Lithuania had 27.6 nurse graduates per 100,000 people, ranking 11th among 33 European countries with data. But 51.5 per cent of its nurses were aged 55 or older, a higher rate than anywhere else.

Few nurses migrated to Lithuania from other countries, prompting the Baltic nation to look for ways to boost its nursing pipeline.

'Nursing is more than a job,' Vaidelienė said. *'It is an opportunity to help, care, be needed, contribute to people's health, public welfare and the preservation of life, and to constantly grow as a person and as a specialist.'*

Europe Must Reclaim Medicine Production, Focus on Prevention

Europe must act urgently to bring pharmaceutical production back to the continent, says Czechia's former Health Minister, Adam Vojtěch.

In an interview with Euractiv, Vojtěch warns that Europe's reliance on Chinese imports for essential medicines is no longer just an economic issue.



'We need to support production in the EU. We should have the pharmaceutical industry here. Europe must become more proactive,' said Vojtěch, who is widely seen as a leading contender to return as health minister after the Czech elections in October.

'Dependence on countries like China has become a security issue, particularly when it comes to essential medicines such as antibiotics. I see it as a serious risk,' he added.

Vojtěch has served as a Czech Health Minister during the Coronavirus Crisis, from June 2018 to September 2020, and again from May to December 2021.

The EU is currently negotiating the "Pharma Package", a major reform of pharmaceutical legislation to boost innovation and accessibility of medicines in Europe. Vojtěch said he welcomes the package initiative, but cautions that some policy moves may be undermining the goal of pharmaceutical sovereignty.

Risk of Overregulation

'It's one thing to say we want a strong pharmaceutical industry in Europe – but then we pass measures that push it out,' he warned. As an example, he criticised the EU's wastewater directive that shifts the costs of wastewater treatment primarily onto pharmaceutical and cosmetics companies. 'Overregulation can backfire,' Vojtěch warned, pointing out a recent case in Denmark, where a factory producing a key antibiotic ingredient announced its closure. Still, he remains optimistic that Europe can reverse the trend – if the political will is there.

'I believe there's always a chance. We just have to get started, look at the issue holistically, and avoid taking contradictory steps. It's all about the right incentives – at the end of the day, this is business.'

'Europe is a safe, stable region – it's actually a great place to do business. But the environment needs to be structured in a way that makes it worthwhile for companies to stay.'

Prioritise Prevention, Healthy Ageing

Back home, Vojtěch sees the biggest challenge in shifting Czech health policy toward long-term prevention and healthy ageing.

'It's now absolutely clear – not just here, but across the Western world – that the biggest challenge is chronic illness,' he said, pointing to diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer as key concerns. He singled out the alarming rise in obesity rates as a major risk factor.

'Two-thirds of the population is obese or overweight, which directly contributes to many of these diseases. These aren't problems that can be solved overnight – but we have to deal with them,' he said.

Prevention Planning

Without stronger prevention efforts, he warned, the long-term burden on healthcare systems and public finances will become unsustainable. *'People who are ill often can't work, don't contribute economically, and become part of the social system. That has major impacts.'*

Prevention, he argues, must be supported by a strong primary care system. Like many EU countries, Czechia is facing demographic pressure as its population ages. Vojtěch stressed that this must be addressed with a focus on healthy ageing strategies. *'We have to ensure that people age in good health. The longer we keep the population in good health, the better it is for the system.'*

He also flagged the need for sustainable health financing and strategic investment in healthcare infrastructure. That includes giving insurers more power to plan care capacities in line with demographic trends. *'With an ageing population, we'll need a different kind of care,'* he stressed.

'That's where insurance funds need to have a long-term strategy – not just for a year or two, but for five to ten years,' Vojtěch said.

Countries Advance “Nursing Action” Initiative to Tackle Nurse Shortages Across the EU

The retention of nurses in Member States of the WHO European Region is central to **“Nursing Action”, a landmark European Union (EU)-funded initiative aimed at strengthening the nursing workforce across the EU and Norway and ultimately improving people’s health.**

Representatives from 20 participating countries recently gathered at WHO/Europe in Copenhagen, Denmark, to discuss draft national reports analysing retention of nursing staff across 7 key dimensions. These reports, which are the result of a comprehensive policy mapping and statistical review process, are a stepping stone towards the goals of “Nursing Action”. Through a collaborative process involving different stakeholders, including governments, trade unions and employers, countries discussed solutions to common challenges in attracting and retaining nurses in the health labour market. They also shared best practices and identified opportunities for sharing learning and working together.

‘We are moving decisively from research to action,’ said Dr Natasha Azzopardi-Muscat, Director of the Division of Country Health Policies and Systems at WHO/Europe. ‘This in-person gathering here in Copenhagen demonstrates the commitment of countries to addressing one of the most pressing health workforce challenges in Europe. By working together and sharing experiences, we can build more resilient health systems anchored by a strong and supported nursing workforce.’

Assessing Nurse Retention

The research approach draws on both quantitative and qualitative data from existing national and international databases and documents, adapted to reflect the unique characteristics of the nursing workforce. The 7 dimensions covered in the reports are:

- 1.safety, well-being and ethics, including safe work environments, nurses’ well-being, access to protective equipment and ethical standards;
- 2.income and benefits, such as wages and allowances;
- 3.working time and work–life balance, encompassing shift patterns, overtime and flexibility;
- 4.security, including job security, stability and career progression;
- 5.social dialogue, including collective bargaining;
- 6.skills and development, focusing on access to lifelong learning, upskilling and specialization; and
- 7.work relationships and motivation, covering leadership, positive workplace environments and relationships, and recognition.

These dimensions align with indicators already reported by countries to WHO, the European Commission and other international bodies. This alignment ensures that the findings not only support national policy planning but also contribute to broader efforts to advance health, well-being and decent work conditions across the Region.

‘What is important to understand is that every country has done something in at least one of these areas, and we have established a platform for countries to share those experiences,’ explained Dr Tomas Zapata, Head of the Health Workforce and Service Delivery Unit at WHO/Europe.

He continued, ‘During the meeting, national focal points shared good practice experiences and explored how the findings could be used to spark or strengthen national dialogue and policy action around nursing retention with key social partners. The session also featured country presentations sharing best practices and ideas for twinning and peer learning opportunities, underscoring the project’s commitment to collaborative progress.’

More about “Nursing Action”

Launched in September 2024, “Nursing Action” is funded by the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety (DG-SANTE) as part of its EU4Health initiative. The project aims to develop tailored, evidence-based solutions that support the recruitment and retention of nurses while improving working conditions and making the profession more appealing to a range of target groups, including younger generations but also second-career professionals.

‘This initiative is about more than data – it’s about dialogue and impact,’ said Ms Margrieta Langins, Nursing and Midwifery Policy Adviser at WHO/Europe. ‘By combining robust evidence with real-world experiences, we are equipping countries to make informed, meaningful policy changes that will support nurses now and into the future.’

Regional civil society partners also joined the meeting, including the European Nursing Student Association, the European Forum of National Nursing and Midwifery Associations, the European Federation of Nurses Associations, and the European Public Service Union. Next steps for the project include further analyses of the education market and mental health and well-being, which will feed into national policy dialogues to support countries in developing context-specific actions to improve retention and recruitment strategies.