

Research Article

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The Successful Story of the MEPs Interest Group “European Patients’ Rights & Cross-Border Healthcare”

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Mini Review

Civil society, patient organisations and Members of the European Parliament working together to strengthen the protection of patients’ rights at the European level: this is both the message and the main objective of the political initiative that has evolved into a model for promoting thematic interest groups within the European Parliament.

Promoted and coordinated by the Italian NGO Cittadinanzattiva [1] through its EU branch, called “Active Citizenship Network” [2], the MEPs Interest Group “European Patients’ Rights & Cross-Border Healthcare” [3] represents one of the most relevant examples of civil society engagement in European health policy. A real success story, which has also been examined within academic settings [4] (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Official logo of the MEPs Interest Group “European Patients’ Rights and Cross-border Healthcare”.

Since 2015, the MEPs Interest Group “European Patients’ Rights & Cross-Border Healthcare” [5] - whose secretariat is managed by the Cittadinanzattiva-Active Citizenship Network’s representative office to the European Institutions in Brussels [6] – has facilitated the presentation and discussion of civil recommendations, best practices, and case studies at the European Parliament.

Thanks to the sensitivity and vision of numerous Members of the European Parliament [7] who recognised this initiative as a meaningful contribution from civil society, it has been possible to elevate citizens’ health needs on the EU agenda. Through the platform of the Interest Group, dialogue was opened with EU institutions and relevant stakeholders on a broad range of pressing public health issues.

These included the situation of patients with chronic diseases [8], as well as those affected by invisible health conditions such as pain and ostomy [9-12]. Furthermore, the Group addressed challenges regarding access to innovative medicines [13] and Advanced Therapy Medicinal Products (ATMPs) [14,15]. It promoted the value of public health policies on vaccination and emphasized the need to reinforce a life-course immunization culture among the entire population [16-22]; discussed the risks linked to medical desertification and the healthcare workforce crisis [23,24]; and contributed to reflections on how best to prepare for future and neglected pandemics, including COVID-19 [25,26], healthcare-

associated infections and antimicrobial resistance (AMR) [27,28]. The Interest Group also focused on key cross-border healthcare issues, beginning starting with the role of European Reference Networks (ERNs) and the phenomenon of “medical travel” [29-32]. Additional discussions centred around the European Health Data Space (EHDS) and the strategic role of health data sharing [33].

The official launch of the Interest Group's third mandate took place on 15 May 2025, during the annual celebration of European Patients' Rights Day at the European Parliament in Brussels [34] (Figure 2).



Figure 2: “Save the Date” from the 15 May 2025 celebration at the EU Parliament.

The activities of the Interest Group are aligned with the outcomes of the Conference on the Future of Europe [35], which emphasised the urgent need for greater EU involvement in public health. The Group's mission also reflects the European Parliament's recent establishment of the SANT standing committee, in response to sustained civil society advocacy — as acknowledged in the committee's founding documents citing “responding to citizens' expectations” [36].

The idea of encouraging an informal interest group of MEPs focused on patients' rights emerged from the widespread request of almost 100 civic and patient organizations [37] calling on the EU Parliament to officially recognize the value of citizens' initiatives, such as the European Charter of Patients' Rights [38], based on the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, and the European Patients' Rights Day [39], which has been organized at local, national and EU levels every year on 18 April since 2007 [40].

The proposal was formally launched at the European Parliament in May 2015 during the IX Edition of the European Patients' Rights Day [41], and was already reflected in the “Report on safer healthcare in Europe: improving patient safety and fighting

antimicrobial resistance (2014/2207(INI)) [42]”, which was approved unanimously by the ENVI Committee on 16 April 2015, and subsequently by the European Parliament in plenary in the second half of May 2015.

In its first decade, the Interest Group gained the support of 40 MEPs and hosted over 30 high-level policy dialogues, beginning with its inaugural event in December 2015 [43]. These meetings brought together hundreds of experts from across Europe and beyond, united by a shared goal: strengthening the right to health and making patients' rights enforceable throughout the EU, in accordance with the principles outlined in the European Charter of Patients' Rights [44].

Cittadinanzattiva-Active Citizenship Network expresses deep gratitude to all Members of the European Parliament and partner organisations who have supported our efforts over the past decade to advocate for and protect the rights of European citizens and patients and contributed to this initiative. Special thanks to MEPs Brando Benifei [45] and Tomislav Sokol [46] who have once again agreed to serve as co-chairs of the Group.

The importance given to health issues in this European policy framework will determine whether the creation of a stronger European Health Union is merely an aspiration or a reality, and this will serve as a key metric for assessing the work of the European institutions in this area.

Declarations

Each of the authors confirms that this manuscript has not been previously published by another international peer-review journal and is not under consideration by any other peer-review journal. Additionally, all of the authors have approved the contents of this paper and have agreed to the submission policies of the journal.

Authors' Contribution

Each named author has substantially contributed in managing the described initiative and drafting this manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

To the best of our knowledge, the named authors listed on the first page declare that they do not have any conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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