

European Commission's advisory panel on COVID-19

Report – audioconference Thursday 7/05/2020 at 19:00

The President outlined the results of the Global Pledge event for the fight against COVID-19. It succeeded in raising \$8 billion and mobilising all key international organisations. The Panel welcomed the event and the leadership shown by the EU.

The discussion focused on its key agenda point:

1. EU guidance on preparing for summer holidays and travel

The President introduced the issue of tourism during a pandemic. With decreasing numbers of cases across the EU and de-escalation measures under way, it is important to design a framework that would allow safe tourism to take place. This is a multifaceted issue that will require general guidance for tourists, specific guidelines for hotels, restaurants, etc. and travel advice. It will also have a clear effect on border restrictions. The President underlined the importance of designing a system that while putting public health at its core is also workable.

The Panel welcomed the draft guidance documents prepared by the ECDC. There was wide agreement on the importance of contact tracing strategies and apps in both de-escalation and tourism. The local healthcare capacity and the need for local COVID-19 management plans was stressed. Two missing areas were highlighted: beaches and modern rentals (such as Airbnb). Overcrowding (e.g. resorts) was raised as a particularly important challenge.

The Panel underlined the challenges of producing and gathering high quality surveillance data. It stressed the importance of this information in order to reassure citizens and allow them to make informed (holiday) choices. In this context, providing information to citizens and tourists on how to react if symptomatic was deemed essential. The question of what level of surveillance should be considered as necessary was raised. In addition, the need to provide clear advice to symptomatic (but not tested) people was highlighted. It was requested to explore whether EU guidance on this matter could be issued although it would require national/regional adaptations.

The Panel cautioned against maintaining the traditional holiday schedule and argued in favour of spacing travel and holiday taking (e.g. not focussing the season only in July/August). Similarly, and considering the current knowledge gaps, the Panel did not consider immunity passports or similar instruments as effective or viable tools.

The Panel argued that testing should not be used as a triggering mechanism to allow or prohibit travelling as the situation varies between countries and regions (testing capacity, testing strategies, etc.). In addition, there was agreement on not allowing travelling for symptomatic people.

Finally, the Panel outlined key criteria to look at in the context of tourism:

- Number of tests being done as a % of the population
- % of positive tests
- Admission in hospitals and ICU of COVID-19 patients

The Panel mentioned the importance of developing standardised surveys at national level (a sample being tested with PCR and serological tests). If properly designed, they would lead to a better overview of the transmission of the virus and produce comparable results. In this context, the Panel asked whether test kits and lab equipment could be made available at EU level.

The President concluded by thanking the Panel and stressing that the current pandemic has shown the importance of high-quality data collection in order to assess the epidemiological situation and quickly develop policies to respond to challenges. The tourism package will be adopted next week.

Participants in the audioconference:

- European Commission: Commissioner Kyriakides, C. Hili, F. Carlucci, A. Whelan, K. Vanderberghe, R. Reig Rodrigo
- Peter Piot (London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine)
- Marion Koopman (Erasmus MC)
- Arnaud Fontenot (Institut Pasteur)
- Maria Capobianchi (National Institute of Infectious Diseases, Rome)
- Kåre Mølbak (Statens Serum Institute, Copenhagen)

Observers:

- Andrea Ammon (ECDC Director)

Excused:

- Lothar Wieler (Robert Koch Institute)
- Christian Drosten (Charité)