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European Union**

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'I' ITEM NOTE

From:	Working Party on Information
To:	COREPER
Subject:	Communication regarding Covid-19 vaccination - options for further coordination

Following the operational conclusions of the IPCR roundtable of 7 January, delegations will find attached a report based on the discussions held by the Working Party on Information at its meeting of 19 January, which outlines options for enhancing coordination among Member States and EU bodies and ensuring clear and coherent messaging to the public in order to manage expectations.

Coreper is invited to:

- take note of the report;

- task the WPI to review developments regularly, and to report to IPCR and Coreper as appropriate.

Communication regarding Covid-19 vaccination - options for further coordination

Context

1. The importance of communication aspects for the success of Covid-19 vaccination campaigns was raised by several Member States at all levels, including the European Council, IPCR and Coreper. Currently, such communication aspects are addressed in the Health Security Committee Communicators' Network (ComNet), chaired by the European Commission and composed of experts from national health authorities. Disinformation driven by external actors is tackled by the European External Action Service (EEAS) with respect to Member States' competences, while the Commission leads the work within the EU, including collaboration with the platforms. A large number of materials (infographics, videos, Q&As, etc.) has been produced by the European Commission, and also by the European Medicines Agency (EMA), the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), the General Secretariat of the Council and other EU bodies; many of these are shared with Member States through the Communicators Portal[1] (an online platform managed by the General Secretariat of the Council). In addition, the Commission shares multilingual and regularly updated materials on a dedicated website[2], and a social media wiki[3].

2. To ensure coherence of efforts, IPCR concluded in its Roundtable on 7 January that the Working Party on Information (WPI) should "(…) discuss and present options to ensure clear and coherent messaging to the public in order to manage expectations". A WPI meeting devoted to this issue took place on 19 January.

Meeting outcomes - concerns and support needed from the EU

3. At the meeting on 19 January, Member States outlined actions taken at national level to inform the public about Covid-19 vaccines and address identified citizens' concerns, indicated which

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[1] https://ras.eeas.europa.eu/community/comm-communication-portal
[2] http://www.ec.europa.eu/covid-19-vaccines
[3] https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/wikis/display/SMGG/Vaccines

kind of additional communication support they would need from the EU level, and explored some avenues for coordination. The European Medicines Agency talked about the materials they produced to inform about the safety of vaccines. The Commission presented a shared toolbox of communication products and a campaign developed to inform the general public. The Chair of the Health Security Committee Communicators Network (ComNet) described the mandate and composition of the network, and briefed on the meetings on Covid-19 vaccines. The GSC COVID-19 coordinator outlined the work undertaken in IPCR and in other fora, giving context to the mandate received by the WPI from IPCR.

4. **Main public concerns** appear to be, in most cases, the **safety and effectiveness of vaccines**, and **the timing and sequencing** of vaccination for all categories of the population. However, a constant evolution of concerns has been observed over time. In the last period, there was a rise of questions regarding **serious side effects** and **the efficacy of vaccines against the new variants** of the virus. Disinformation was identified as having a high negative impact on public trust in the safety of vaccines. Some Member States have also mentioned the difficulty of balancing messages when communicating about managing the current epidemiological situation and the relevant restrictions, on the one hand and on the ongoing vaccination processes, on the other. One of the biggest challenges identified is conducting large-scale public education campaigns, and answering citizens' enquiries, while at the same time managing expectations with regard to the general vaccine shortages/delays. They also highlighted a need to reach the categories of population that do not use social media and to ensure transparency of the process.

5. **To tackle these questions and challenges**, many Member States have launched multi-channel communication campaigns, in line with the phases of the vaccination process at national level. They have involved public figures, influencers, health professionals, the civil society and other experts and trusted members of offline and digital communities in disseminating messages. Based on national figures of vaccine acceptance levels, some have focused on raising awareness and increasing trust and willingness to get vaccinated. Efforts have been invested in countering mis-/dis- information, in particular on social media.

6. In terms of **additional communication support needed from the EU level and of coordination**, the following main points were mentioned by delegations:

- there is a need for more explanatory, fact-based content on the joint procurement procedure, safety of vaccines and how they work, practical benefits of vaccination, and

the fairness of distribution of doses among Member States; in particular, more information should be disseminated regarding the vaccine development, approval, monitoring and distribution process in order to foster transparency and build trust;

- it is preferable to have a limited number of quality materials provided in all EU languages rather than a large amount of content in fewer languages;

- materials provided should be more customisable, allowing for tailoring to specific national/regional/local contexts, and for adaptation of messaging to domestic target audiences and the evolution of (scientific) knowledge; at the same time, it is important to minimize conflicting or distracting messages by keeping message content as consistent as possible;

- the creation of new structures should be avoided, as well as the dispersion of information and duplication of content across too many fora, websites or platforms - the best approach is to increase the use of existing networks and tools.

Way forward

7. The following steps are proposed in order to enhance coordination and support. This menu of options can be adapted based on the effectiveness of the actions proposed and based on evolving needs.

  A. The WPI chair will organise regular meetings between the main EU institutional actors about communication on Covid-19 vaccines and share reports from these meetings with Member States, via the WPI community and via the Communicators' Portal. Initially, the meetings will be convened on a weekly basis; their frequency will be adapted to needs.

  B. The WPI will invite the EEAS and the Commission at its next meeting to present its work on disinformation, and to explain how they plan to develop that work. The EEAS and the Commission will be invited to upload all relevant materials and links (also) on the Communicators' Portal.

  C. The GSC will aim to make the Communicators' Portal more versatile, to increase the number of access rights, encourage its more systematic use and adapt it further to Member States' needs. The WPI chair will actively invite more EU bodies, as well as

national authorities, to share relevant materials on the Portal. The GSC will look into ways to monitor the take-up by and relevance for Member States of the shared communication assets and editorial planning from the Communicators' Portal.

D. All relevant institutional EU actors will create more customisable materials aiming to address identified challenges, notably those mentioned in paragraph 4 above, and make them available in all EU languages. They are invited to present objective data in a visually engaging, interactive way.

E. EU actors and Member States are invited to explore the possibility of joint social media campaigns, launched in a coordinated manner, under a common hashtag.

F. When new information campaigns are being planned to tackle next challenges (e.g. differences between vaccines, the consequences of having been vaccinated, misinformation/disinformation and development of effective counter messages), early exchanges could be organised with the relevant fora, to ensure synergies, and to enable the institutions and Member States to join forces.

G. After Member States have made sufficient progress in the roll-out of their communication campaigns, they will be encouraged to present findings on the impact and reach of the EU-produced content that they have reused.

H. Member States are also encouraged to share their respective vaccination communication strategies, as well as any other relevant resources of common interest, via the WPI network and platforms.

Coreper is invited to task the WPI to monitor the implementation of these actions, to adapt them in light of needs, to report regularly to IPCR on progress made and to revert to Coreper as needed.