

*'La soledad se admira y desea cuando no se sufre,
pero la necesidad humana de compartir cosas es evidente'*

*'Solitude is admired and desired when one does not suffer,
but the human need to share things is evident.'*

Carmen Martín Gaité (1925 - 2000)

Project proposal for

A European Strategy for Mental Health

Establishing a long-term framework to tackle the 'second pandemic'

18 April 2021

Madrid, Spain

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1. The Issue: Loneliness and the Neglect of Mental Health

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the deteriorating levels of mental health in Europe and unveiled its ‘silent killer’¹: loneliness. In 2018, it was estimated that more than 30 million people in the EU frequently feel lonely² and in the first six months of 2020, feelings of loneliness in Europe tripled³. In the case of Spain, an estimated 6.4 percent of the Spanish population were referred to mental health professionals during the first 12 months of the pandemic, with four out of five people reporting symptoms of extreme anxiety or depression⁴. The **unseen public health crisis of loneliness**⁵ has been exacerbated by social isolation measures introduced to limit the spread of COVID-19⁶, which has seen citizens suffer from severe psychiatric symptoms associated with increased sentiments of loneliness⁷. It is often said that Europe is forged in times of crises thus, if a better future is to be forged in a post-pandemic world, coordinated action is needed at the European level to cope with the impending ‘second pandemic’ of mental health⁸, to tackle social inequalities and to safeguard European democracy.

Young people and the elderly have been disproportionately impacted by loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is well documented that young people have been more prone to suffer from mental health issues since lockdown measures began⁹ and, in Spain, the number of young people suffering from loneliness has more than doubled in comparison to 2019¹⁰. Amidst the worst economic recession since World War II¹¹ and a job market in which citizens aged 55 and over are two-to-three times more likely to find a job than young Europeans¹², it is now more important than ever to support and invest in mental health and particularly in youth, lest young people ‘may never fully recover’ from the crushing effects of the pandemic¹³. A growing body of literature reinforces the **close relationship between democracy and mental health**¹⁴ and if Europe is to strengthen its democracy, this process should not be separated from supporting the well-being and health of its citizens.

A well-functioning democracy relies on an informed, engaged and healthy citizenry able to participate in social, political and economic dimensions of society. Loneliness transcends discomfort and isolation; **loneliness can negate commitment, reduce eagerness to participate in democratic processes**

¹ Banks, K. “Loneliness: The Silent Killer.” University Affairs, 27 February 2019.

² European Commission. *Loneliness - an unequally shared burden in Europe**. Joint Research Hub: Publications Office, 2018.

³ European Commission. *2020 Strategic Foresight Report: Charting the Course Towards a More Resilient Europe*. Brussels, 9 September 2020.

⁴ Confederación Salud Mental España. “Manifiesto ‘Salud mental y COVID-19. Un año de pandemia’.” 16 March 2021

⁵ Killgore, William D. et al. “Loneliness: A Signature Mental Health Concern in the Era of COVID-19.” *Psychiatry Research* 290 (August 2020)

⁶ See Manca, R. et al., “The Impact of COVID-19 Infection and Enforced Prolonged Social Isolation on Neuropsychiatric Symptoms in Older Adults With and Without Dementia: A Review”; Santini, Z. I. et al., “Loneliness and Its Association with Depressed Mood, Anxiety Symptoms, and Sleep Problems in Europe during the COVID-19 Pandemic.”; and Santini, Z. I. et al., “Loneliness and Its Association with Depressed Mood, Anxiety Symptoms, and Sleep Problems in Europe during the COVID-19 Pandemic.”

⁷ Shrira, A. et al. “COVID-19-Related Loneliness and Psychiatric Symptoms Among Older Adults: The Buffering Role of Subjective Age,” *The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* 28, no. 11 (November 2020): 1200–1204.

⁸ Choi, K. R. et al. “A Second Pandemic: Mental Health Spillover From the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19),” *Journal of the American Psychiatric Nurses Association* 26, no. 4: 340–43.

⁹ See Health Europa. “COVID-19 lockdowns reveal loneliness crisis for young people,” 20 January 2021; and University of Copenhagen. “People’s levels of loneliness since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic,” accessed 17 April 2021.

¹⁰ Patino, M. “Informe España 2020: la soledad en España crece un 50%,” Universidad Pontificia Comillas, 12 November 2020.

¹¹ The World Bank. “COVID-19 to Plunge Global Economy into Worst Recession since World War II,” Press Release, 8 June 2020.

¹² Grzegorzczak, M. et al. “The scarring effect of COVID-19: youth unemployment in Europe,” Bruegel, 28 November 2020.

¹³ Schwandt, H. et al. “The Long Shadow of an Unlucky Start,” International Monetary Fund, Winter 2020.

¹⁴ Landwehr, C. et al. “Too Sad to Vote? Mental Health’s Impact on Political Participation during the Covid-19 Crisis,” Social Science Research Council, August 27, 2020.

and actively feed political disaffection¹⁵. As things stand in Europe, many citizens find themselves more isolated and disconnected from their communities than ever before, faced with various hurdles that impede civic rights, participation in democratic life and access to critical economic and social support. The continued inability of Member States to address the social, political and structural inequalities exposed and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates the need for coordinated action on mental health at the European level¹⁶. Currently, we are certainly *not* all in this together.

Progress has been made in the EU in recognising the threats posed by loneliness for mental health but little-to-no concrete action has been taken at the European level. In the 2021 Green paper on ageing, the Commission recognises the importance of considering ‘the causes of and impacts of loneliness in policy making’ concerning the elderly¹⁷. Moreover, President von der Leyen became the first President of the Commission to mention the words ‘mental health’ in a State of the Union address in 2020¹⁸, albeit in the context of the environment. Despite an online conference on mental health being organised by the Commission in the lead-up to an important 2021 Global Health Summit, loneliness is notably absent from the priorities of both the online event and the summit itself¹⁹. Likewise, even though the European Commission has convened a number of reports touching upon mental health issues since the turn of the millennium, **scarce legislative action has been taken at the European level** and the only significant document remains the 2006 Green paper on improving mental health.

The 2006 Green paper highlighted the ‘significant losses and burdens to the economic, social, educational as well as criminal and justice systems’ caused by poor mental health²⁰. It recognised that ‘a comprehensive strategy on mental health does not yet exist at Community level’ but, if it did, ‘[it] would strengthen the coherence and effectiveness of current and future initiatives’²¹. The 2008 European Pact for Mental Health and Well-being built upon the forward-looking principles of the green paper and, among other things, recognised the need for coordinated action on mental health at a European level with the assistance of stakeholders from a wide range of sectors²². To this day, these are the only dedicated comprehensive documents that the Commission has released on mental health. Although a 2018 Science for Policy Brief recognised the unequal burden of loneliness in Europe, the document fails to propose concrete action and merely calls for more research and consideration to be given to loneliness for future evidence-based policymaking²³.

European institutions do not regularly gather, research or compile measurable data at present on the state of mental health of European citizens. Although the European Commission, the EU Science Hub²⁴ and occasional Special Eurobarometers have touched upon the subject in the past, the lack of comprehensive, longitudinal data on mental health in Europe undermines international research, complicates the initiation of European legislative processes and disregards the threat of loneliness to the

¹⁵ American Enterprise Institute. “Political and lonely,” Interview with Ryan Streeter, 17 April 2020.

¹⁶ Bambra, C. et al. “The COVID-19 Pandemic and Health Inequalities,” *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, June 2020.

¹⁷ European Commission. *Green Paper on Ageing: Fostering solidarity and responsibility between generations*. Brussels: Publications Office, 2021.

¹⁸ European Commission. “State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary,” Brussels, 16 September 2020.

¹⁹ EU Global Health Summit. Website. Accessed 17 April 2021. https://global-health-summit.europa.eu/index_en.

²⁰ European Commission. *Green Paper Improving the mental health of the population: Towards a strategy on mental health for the European Union*. Brussels: Publications Office, 14 October 2005.

²¹ European Union. *Mental Well-Being: For a smart, inclusive and sustainable Europe*, September 2011.

²² European Commission. *Loneliness - an unequally shared burden in Europe**, 2018.

²³ European Commission. “How lonely are Europeans?,” EU Science Hub, 12 June 2019.

²⁴ European Commission. *Special Eurobarometer 471*. Brussels: Directorate General for Communication, April 2018.

health of citizens and European democracy. It is high time that loneliness is treated with the urgency a 'silent killer' deserves and not as an unfortunate, temporary social inconvenience.

2. The Solution: A European Strategy for Mental Health

A European-wide strategy for mental health is required to ensure that loneliness does not become the forgotten crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to create a sufficiently informed, comprehensive and visible strategy, two key steps have been identified:

1. Researching and evaluating the state of mental health in Europe;
2. Launching a European Strategy for Mental Health.

Step 1: Researching and evaluating the state of mental health in Europe

In order to grasp the depth and scale of the mental health crisis, **the collection of empirical data at the European level relating to mental health is needed.** The acquisition of empirical data exploring levels of loneliness across EU Member States should be included in this process. The 2006 Green paper on improving mental health, previous policy briefings from EU institutions and the relevant Special Eurobarometer surveys on mental health carried out (editions 248 and 345) demonstrate the competence of the EU for action at the European level. The benefits of collecting measurable empirical data on mental health are threefold: to measure the pulse of European opinion and stimulate discussion on mental health, to guarantee up-to-date quantifiable data at the European level while establishing reliable European data comparability, and to enable Pan-european research to feed into information policy at the European level that can inform policy documents such as the Communication on a European Strategy for Mental Health proposed in this document.

The **creation of centralised European data collection processes on mental health** would provide added-value to national health information systems while establishing a comprehensive European framework to feed into proportionate, informed action on mental health. Not only would dedicated European data collection processes enable EU institutions to better assess increased levels of loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic, it would empower the EU to better evaluate and respond to future mental health crises.

The European Commission Eurobarometer surveys present the ideal opportunity to carry out pan-European longitudinal data collection processes on mental health. **The Standard Eurobarometer survey should incorporate a dedicated segment on mental health and include questions measuring loneliness.** The inclusion of dedicated questions on mental health and loneliness in the (biannual) Standard Eurobarometer surveys would recognise that the irregular Special Eurobarometers carried out previously on mental health were insufficient for the comprehensive research needed to inform European policymaking.

The European Commission should carry out a Special Eurobarometer on Loneliness by the end of 2022 to assess the short-, mid- and long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on loneliness in Europe. The realisation of a Special Eurobarometer on Loneliness would, alongside the introduction of a Minister for Loneliness in the United Kingdom in 2018²⁵ and in Japan in 2021²⁶, mark a historic moment in the struggle to combat loneliness. Previous Eurobarometers exploring mental health have placed a disproportionate focus on physical symptoms and emphasised the economic cost and visible aspects of mental health, thus future Eurobarometer research must also ensure that psychological and emotional symptoms are recognised in their questions and that mental health issues are not kept invisible.

²⁵ UK Government. "PM launches Government's first loneliness strategy," 15 October 2018.

²⁶ Steen, E. "Japan now has a 'Minister of Loneliness' to tackle mental health issues," Timeout, 25 February 2021.

Through establishing longitudinal empirical research processes on mental health and loneliness, EU institutions would acquire sufficient data and information to take action at the European level and introduce a European Strategy for Mental Health.

Step 2: Launching a European Strategy for Mental Health

The Commission should **publish a Communication on a European Strategy for Mental Health by 2023**. Principles 9 and 10 of the *European Pillar of Social Rights* establish the right to work-life balance and a healthy, safe and adapted working environment respectively, which should be remembered when drafting a common European strategy. A citizen-centric approach should be adopted that places citizens, European decision-makers and civil society organisations on equal footing as co-policymakers. Deliberative democratic methods such as citizens' dialogues and innovative e-democracy tools²⁷ offer the opportunity, alongside a comprehensive pan-European social media campaign, to empower citizens to share their views, recommendations and experiences surrounding an array of different mental health topics. It is particularly important that citizens who have experienced loneliness or mental health associated issues, as well as relevant civil society organisations, are supported in taking an active role in this drafting process.

The short-term goals of a European strategy for mental health would be influenced by the extensive research realised at the European level (see Step 1) and contribute towards **identifying common priorities to foster the well-being and mental health of European citizens**. Critical and contemporary health issues, such as the sharp increase in feelings of loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic, should be addressed in the strategy. Furthermore, the specificities of Member States and their different social welfare systems should be taken into account to encourage proportionate investment and commitments to access, effectiveness and support for mental health care.

The long-term aim of a common European Strategy for Mental Health is **to implement legislative change to tackle loneliness and mental health associated issues**. Article 168 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU states that public health is a shared competence between the EU and Member States, enabling the Commission to legislate proportionately with respect for subsidiarity in order to support efficient and sustainable health systems and to facilitate access to better and safer healthcare while keeping citizens healthy. With this competence in mind, the Commission should consider introducing a Regulation establishing a European Agency for Mental Health if irregular application and consideration of a common European Strategy for Mental Health emerges among Member States.

The Communication on a European Strategy for Mental Health should consider the following pillars of mental health, in no particular order:

1 - Cultivating Mental Health through Education. A Europe that cultivates civic knowledge of mental health topics and facilitates an environment for mental health issues to be discussed without shame or stigma should be encouraged. Educational campaigns should be directed towards establishing a culture of self care and mental health support should be provided in state institutions including, but not limited to, schools, universities, prisons and healthcare facilities. When the direct involvement of mental health professionals is not possible for citizens, an effective, timely referral mechanism should be established. Coupled with this, a robust communications strategy at the European level should be launched to

²⁷ Grazian, F. et al. "Next Level Participation: Citizen-Driven E-Democracy Tools," the European Liberal Forum and European Citizen Action Service, 2020.

stimulate transnational discussion on mental health and to tackle the stigmatisation and discrimination of mental health.

2 - Supporting Mental Health in the Workplace. A Europe is needed that invests in the well-being, support mechanisms and health of its labour force. Member States should be encouraged to better monitor labour practices that have a detrimental impact on the mental health of workers, such as establishing specific programmes to preserve work-life balance and prevent discrimination, intimidation or harassment in the workplace. To achieve this goal, a revision of the 2010/18/EU Work-Life Balance Directive should be considered by the Commission through the form of an implementing act in order to reflect the social and economic realities of the gig economy²⁸. A threshold of maximum overtime hours for employees per day should be promoted and regular employee well-being evaluation processes should form a compulsory part of internal reporting processes and a prerequisite for access to governmental funds or subsidies. The Commission should also build upon the European Parliament Resolution to introduce the **right to disconnection**²⁹, reiterating that the EU is a project that celebrates fundamental human rights and rejects an emerging culture of constant availability demanded by employers.

3 - Right to Mental Health Support. Mental health support should form a central aspect of the support given to unemployed citizens, persons without stable housing or undocumented residents at national and European levels. The Commission should promote a holistic, intersectional approach free of judgement to mental health support and emphasise the fundamental right for all citizens to seek, access and receive mental health support irrespective of their background and without detriment to their personal and professional life.

4 - European Resilience: Fighting Loneliness Together. The EU should treat loneliness as an issue of policy, encouraging Member States to adopt national legislation addressing loneliness. Adoption of loneliness strategies could include initiatives to enable everyday services to connect with people at risk of loneliness, strengthening local infrastructure, developing community spaces and ensuring that loneliness is considered in the housing and planning system; reducing stigma, supporting community groups and promoting digital inclusion.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the declining levels of mental health in Europe and brought the public health crisis of loneliness to the fore. In order to steer through the COVID-19 pandemic and realise the fair, green and digital European future envisaged in the Conference on the Future of Europe³⁰, European democracy requires an engaged citizenry whose health and rights are promoted and protected. Through incorporating regular surveys evaluating mental health and loneliness at the European level and implementing a coordinated European Strategy for Mental Health, the European Commission would bolster social inclusion, consolidate European democracy and construct a more informed, resilient Europe better equipped to navigate future crises.

²⁸ Eurofound. "Gig economy," European Observatory of Working Life, sec. European Industrial Relations Dictionary, 23 March 2018.

²⁹ European Parliament. *European Parliament resolution of 21 January 2021 with recommendations to the Commission on the right to disconnect (2019/2181(INL))*. Brussels, 21 January 2021.

³⁰ European Commission. "Conference on the Future of Europe: Engaging with citizens to build a more resilient Europe," Brussels: Press Release, 10 March 2021.

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