



Seniors standing up for Europe
Engaging with citizens and developing a more united and democratic Union

Sandanski Declaration – ESU Congress 2019

Between 23 and 26 May 2019, 427 million European citizens had the opportunity to vote for Members of the European Parliament. With a turnout of 51 percent in 2019, the highest level of participation of the last 20 years was reached. For the first time since 1979, the persistent decline was reversed. Elections are crucial in a democracy and therefore a high turnout helps to increase the legitimacy of the political system of the European Union (EU).

On the occasion of the European elections, we, the European Seniors' Union (ESU), together with the European People's Party (EPP), underlined in our manifesto our commitment to the basic values and founding principles of the EU. Standing at a historic crossroads, we hold a plea to protect and to renew the European project and meet people's expectations to live in peace, freedom and prosperity.

The ESU urges all decision-makers to take into account the values the older generations fought for, as well as their experience while at the same time to cope in a united manner with urgent issues of our times such as globalization, security threats, climate change and migration flows, as the European level is the level that is best placed to tackle these challenges.

The only way we can succeed in tackling these challenges is for European and national governments to stay united, to reduce economic and social disparities and to look for common solutions in a spirit of respect and responsibility. We therefore stand for one Europe: from East to West, from North to South.

Thirty years ago, in 1989, citizens played a crucial role in bringing down the Iron Curtain and in ending the division of the European continent. They were striving to find a new future in freedom, democracy and solidarity. As the ESU, here united in Sandanski, we want to pay tribute to those courageous people and let us be inspired by them to build a more united and democratic Europe.

The more united and democratic Europe that we want is a Europe for all generations, leaving no one behind, ensuring fairness between people of different ages, protecting the right to live and age in dignity, and enhancing older persons' rights in combatting ageism and age discrimination.

In our European house of peace, freedom and prosperity, intergenerational solidarity should be a cornerstone. We believe that no model of democratic governance can be truly inclusive and sustainable without ensuring dialogue and solidarity between generations. Therefore,

authorities at all levels should empower, encourage and promote the role of seniors in different areas of society.

New ways to embrace the EU's motto – „Unity in Diversity“ – will have to be developed to ensure that all citizens feel a sense of belonging. It is the duty of all decision-makers to build bridges between their governments and the citizens they represent. This strengthened link will not only increase legitimacy, it will also show the way forward for the Union.

In order to establish a real European identity based on our common values and beliefs, it will also be crucial to support this civic engagement in Member States with less historic ties to civil society and grass-roots movements. Also those citizens need to feel appealed to and supported by the European Union through concrete and tailor-made actions.

The ESU strongly believes in active citizenship and the empowerment of citizens of all ages. We want to enhance the joint ownership with the European project and establish a genuine partnership between citizens at all policy levels. We therefore urge the new European Commission and the newly elected European Parliament to intensify the re-engagement with its citizens through different actions.

1. Focus on citizens

In order to revitalize citizens' trust in the EU, decision-makers should go beyond institutional matters and tackle the problems that affect citizens in their daily lives. With new efforts in citizen-centred policies that improve people's lives tangibly, not only economically but also socially, the Union has to make clear that Europe is supporting all of its citizens.

2. Multi-level governance

The EU is built upon the principle of subsidiarity: Decisions are taken as close as possible to the citizen and at the most appropriate level to achieve its political goals. An age-friendly society can only be realized through multi-level initiatives reaching from the local, regional and national political platforms to the European one. The more that citizens notice the positive impact of the EU on their quality of life, the more they will appreciate the supranational level.

3. Public debate

It is the duty of politicians to engage with citizens to identify their needs and expectations. The combination of different opinions in the public debate thus provides a better insight into the most appropriate solutions to the most urgent challenges. Discussion platforms that foster dialogues in local and regional communities, between different age groups, different economic and professional interest groups should also be set up, challenging citizens to think about a better future for all Europeans.

4. Information and communication

All too often, widespread populism finds its basis in misinformation, a lack of knowledge and critical thinking and the so-called clash between the citizen and the political class. It is up to the EU and all other decision-makers to make clear how they are improving the life of citizens throughout Europe at every level. Moreover they have to be proactive and provide clear

information without disregarding different cultures and identities. The common goal must be the conscious citizen in our societies and voter at elections on all levels.

Through these efforts, the ESU wants to promote the active participation of seniors and all European citizens and contribute to building up a common European project. We underline the necessity of working together: the European institutions, the Member States, regional and local governments and citizens. Only with joint forces we will be able to tackle the challenges ahead and ensure a better future for the coming generations. In this way, together we can build a more united and democratic Union.

Sandanski, 27-28 September 2019