

Ageing in Europe.

The mission of the European Seniors' Union (ESU).

Demographic change, due to the increase of life expectancy and low birth rates, has affected our societies and lifestyle. Growing older, creating a society for all generations is an opportunity and a challenge for each individual, for families, for stakeholders in the industry (silver economy), for care and health services... and governments. From local to international level, all governments, have to cope with the challenges and opportunities of 'ageing societies' or, if you want, 'societies of longevity'..

What does this mean for Europe?

How are we, European Seniors' Union (ESU) involved in this processes?

Demographic change: an overall European challenge

"Demographic Change" is to be understood as a mainstream issue that must be considered not only in the areas of pension and employment policies, but also in city and regional planning, family policies, housing and transport, education policies (e.g., in the areas of: life-long learning, education, continuing education and qualification) as well as immigration and integration policies.

Already at the end of the 20th century awareness about the need for new perspectives on ageing policies and solidarity between generations was rising. This led in Europe to the launch of the (1993) European Year of older people and solidarity between generations. At the end of 1993 the EU Council and Ministers for Social Affairs declared that the Member States (then 12) wished to pursue policies based on the essential principles of solidarity between and within generations in order to promote the social integration of older persons.¹

¹ Declaration of principles of the Council of the European Union and the Ministers for Social Affairs, meeting within the Council of 6 December 1993 to mark the end of the European Year of the elderly and of solidarity between generations (1993). Official Journal C 343/01 , 21/12/1993 p. 0001 – 0003.

It is obvious that in those years the search for a new position of older people was seen as the main problem. Conversely, problems in education, employment and poverty amongst young people gradually grow in the discussions on intergenerational issues.

In the years following the first 'European Year', a wide range of policies, action plans and research was developed, addressing the ageing population and intergenerational solidarity. Intergenerational solidarity was understood as 'social cohesion between generations' and 'inclusive society for all ages'.

Need for innovative and coordinated actions

It is expected that the total population of the EU will increase from 511 million in 2016 to 520 million in 2070. However, the working-age population (people aged between 15 and 64) will decrease significantly from 333 million in 2016 to 292 million in 2070².

The economic and societal consequences associated with ageing population are likely to have profound implications across Europe, both nationally and regionally.

Today there is a broad framework of policy options and instruments to respond to the challenges ageing societies. International organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO) are proposing action plans. For example the Actions Plans on Active and Healthy Ageing, encouraging the Member States to recognize the potential of older persons and create better chances for them in all parts of society. Although, at first sight, the EU has only limited influence in fields concerning demographic change, the Union has a crucial role to play in stimulating investment, boosting job creation, focussing on social and fiscal fairness and promoting cohesive and inclusive societies. This promotion will also energize other policy levels and the civil society as a whole. It is not enough only developing the goals of ageing policies. We need national, regional and local measures to implement the principles and rights of seniors, taking into account the differences and disparities, the cultural and historical context in member states and regions to turn these challenges into innovative opportunities. In this way ageing is not a burden, it is an opportunity and a strength for the society.

Today there is a range of initiatives, developed at the European level underpinning a better participation of seniors in society in the field of economy, research, health, lifelong learning... The starting points for all those initiatives are the fundamental texts and treaties sustaining the European Union. In its Article 3.3 the Treaty of Lisbon (which was signed on 13 December 2007 and entered into force on 1 December 2009) the promotion of the well being of European citizens is mentioned as one of the aims of the Union. This 'well-being of

² The 2018 Ageing Report: Economic and Budgetary projections for the EU Member States (2016-2070). European Commission, Economic and Financial Affairs, Institutional Paper 079, 25 May 2018.

its citizens' is a dynamic concept. Today it certainly contains safety, employment, and social protection....

Marianne Thyssen, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility has the responsibility to promote employment and social policies, bringing practical benefits to citizens. The ageing of Europe's population and changing social realities, were two of the reasons to develop the European Pillar of Social Rights containing a number of key principles and rights to support fair and well functioning labour markets and welfare systems in the EU member states. The Pillar was officially presented in April 2017, after a broad consultation with the relevant stakeholders. Supporting the Pillar, the Commission aims to further develop and strengthen the social dimension of the EU. Economic growth and social protection need to be developed together. In addition to pension reforms and the promotion of longer working lives, measures must be taken that both encourage and enable older persons to work. These include promoting positive attitudes towards older persons among employers and the society as a whole, preventing discrimination, tackling unemployment, enhancing health and safety at work, adapting workplaces to the changing needs of older workers. Besides the sector of pensions, health and employment many other policy topics are affected by demographic change. Such as housing, tourism, education, mobility, urban & rural development and many others. It is obvious that only by working together, the Member States, the regions and the EU will attain the best results for its citizens. Joint scientific research strengthens these processes. The Joint Programming Initiative (JPI) "More Years, Better Lives" (MYBL) is a good example in this field. It seeks to enhance coordination and collaboration between European and national research programs related to demographic change³.

The European Seniors' Union (ESU): active citizenship in daily practice.

ESU: who we are?

The European Seniors' Union (ESU) was founded in 1995. It is a network of 34 seniors' associations, located in 26 countries. The ESU is linked to the European People's Party (EPP). Most member associations are also linked to a political party. In Poland, our partner and its president have an independent position.

The ESU focuses on the improvement of the rights of senior citizens; promotes their active citizenship and stimulates their engagement in European societies. The ESU aims to make their voices heard and to promote the interests of older persons. Our organization focuses on a range of policy areas that have an impact on seniors. These include: anti-discrimination,

³ A collaboration between 14 EU countries and Canada, from 2010-2020.

active ageing, social protection, social inclusion, health, intergenerational solidarity, and accessibility... Based on the experience of previous generations, and in openness with the future generation, the ESU is a permanent bridge between generations.

In November 2013, delegates of the member associations of the European Seniors' Union (ESU) elected me as President of the ESU.

I became the 3th President of the ESU, after Stefan Knafl (1995-2001) and Dr. Bernhard Worms (2001-2013).

Relying on my competences and experiences, I accepted this new responsibility: working together with delegates of member associations from all over Europe, sharing the experiences of our previous President, promoting the mission of the ESU in several social areas and in particular towards the European People's Party (EPP). Our fundamental attitude and motive was and is still counting today: the need to develop a more inclusive and fair society where every person, also seniors and vulnerable persons, feel respected and invited to participate.

The ESU has a 'presidium' (board) of 12 vice-presidents and honorary presidents and an Executive Committee (General Assembly) composed of 2 delegates from each member association.

Goals and actions.

1. Bringing seniors' vision and aspiration to the European level

- Participating in the EPP's political meetings, working groups, congresses, we underline the importance of seniors for our society and call for respect and dignity.
- The "Friends of ESU" is a small group of MEPs of the EPP-group in the EP (chairman Heinz Becker). It is a short bridge between the ESU and the European Parliament.
- The ESU membership in AGE-platform Europe gives the opportunity to hand over seniors' experiences and aspirations towards the non-governmental channels.
- In a broader network we explore new concepts and learn from experts (KAS, IDEA, WMCES...)
- Our delegates are encouraged to communicate regularly with their national MEP and to participate in surveys, activities...especially during of the first of October, namely the International Day of Older Persons and the 29th of April, the European Day of Intergenerational Solidarity.
- We take part in the election campaign for the European elections.

2. Active citizens need information, training, empowerment

- Several times a year we organize conferences on European subjects.
- In 2019 we organise the tenth edition of our Summer Academy in Vienna, this is a special event for chairmen of seniors' associations. It is organised with the support of Polak, the WMCES, and the ÖSB.
- We encourage the exchanges of ideas, practices between the seniors' organisations
- The ESU has a website, a frequently used Facebook page and a bulletin as communication instruments.

3. Explore and stimulate new initiatives

- The 'Life histories' of our members are an inspiration for lifelong learning and communication across borders and generations.
- 'Bridging the gap between generations': The 29th of April this year we celebrated the 10th anniversary of the *European Day of Solidarity between Generations*. This day is of high value to us. We will promote solidarity between generations as a corner stone of the European social model.

'Participation is for older persons one of the most crucial dimensions in growing older. As ESU and as seniors' associations from all over Europe, we have a role to play in this field. Participate and empower people. Participate and increase self-esteem and engagement. Participate and create new perspectives and feel healthier and happier. Participate and learn about our ever-changing world. Participate and defend the interests of older people. Participate and be wholeheartedly part of social and political life. Participate and make our society more age-friendly and bring Europe nearer to its citizens'.

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- Dr in Educational Sciences, Kuleuven (Catholic University of Leuven), Belgium
- Professor in history of education (1986-2004)
- Secretary general of KAV (womens movement within the Christian workers movement in Flanders) (1987-1989)
- Member of the European Parliament (1989-1994)
- Member of the Federal Parliament in Belgium (1995-1999)
- President CD&V-senioren (2007-)
- President European Seniors' Union (2013 -)