



EUROPÄISCHE SENIOREN UNION (ESU)

EUROPEAN SENIORS' UNION (ESU)

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Growing older in the Euro-regions

ESU regional conference in the border triangle Aachen

Anyone who thinks of Aachen comes quickly to the Charlemagne Prize, which has been presented since 1950 always on Ascension Day – this time awarded to Emmanuel Macron on 10th May – in the historic town hall. This award is given to those individuals who are committed to peace, freedom and democracy in a united Europe, and who in particular promote cooperation between immediate neighbours.

The location of the city of Charlemagne, near the German border with the Netherlands and Belgium, prompted the ESU to host a central / west regional conference, where experiences of cross-border coexistence for the older generation, as well as other topical issues, could be discussed. The echo from the guests confirmed that these expectations have been met.



Participants from Münsterland (German state of North Rhine Westfalen) with the ESU President Prof. An Hermans (3rd from right) and the Vice-President Dr. Gabriele Peus-Bispinck, who led the conference. The men, from left to right: Hermann Rotthowe, Eduard Silge, Dr. Gerhard Bonn and Hans-Georg Ortmann. The venue was the Catholic Academy in Aachen.

ESU Vice-President **Dr. Gabriele Peus-Bispinck** from Münster (Westfalen) had gained the Aachen regional chairman of the Seniors' Union, **Herbert Geller**, as co-organizer and co-moderator for the event on 27th and 28th April. Besides the ESU President, **Prof. An Hermans**, and Secretary-General **Guido Dumon**, she was also able to welcome former ESU President **Dr. Bernhard Worms** and other well-known personalities.

The participants came mainly from the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) – at any rate from six out of eight districts – as well as from Belgium, and even – in the case of **Dr. Vaclav Roubal** (92) and **Dr. Dagmar Koutska** – from the Czech Republic.

What **Dr. Peus-Bispinck** reported about the general topic from her Euro-region is strongly optimistic. Thus, a two-day exchange of office by the mayors of Münster (DE) and Enschede (NL) was extremely successful and should be repeated. A cross-border bike path is well used, they organise joint New Year celebrations between the fire brigades and meetings of the choirs. If required, German children are treated in Dutch hospitals.



Helga Sacher-Ramakers (left) and Noella Jakobs report

Noella Jakobs, Secretary-General of the Flemish Seniors' Association/ CD&V, produced a PowerPoint presentation that lived up to its name! Her organisation, whose president is An Hermans, has an influence on the activities of their party, which, by the way, according to the statute, includes all members of the seniors' association. It is represented in the party committees and seniors' councils at all levels. Through excursions to Strasbourg, to the Robert Schuman House in Metz, to former camps of political prisoners and to other places of political relevance, the seniors are motivated for their social activities. By collecting money, they demonstrated their solidarity with the poorest in India. Much of this happens in cooperation with seniors in eastern Belgium (formerly known as the "German Community in Belgium"), as **Maria Bellin-Moeris** from Eupen gladly illustrated with examples.

Helga Sacher-Ramakers, of the cdH (Belgium), also maintains contact with the German minority in the country. Her seniors' organization is responsible for regular lunches for elderly people in two districts and ensures their safe arrival and departure; they advise on current issues, including health care and inheritance law, offer opportunities to play sports, is networked with other "carers" in the region, use radio and television for their concerns and as a source of information about the events in neighbouring regions and in distant countries.

Some experiences from the Euro-region Spree – Neisse – Bober in the border region of Germany – Poland were presented by **Ulrich Winz**. Despite unfortunate differences over "big politics", citizens of both countries have recently returned to practical work in the rescue and rehabilitation of a castle (in Biecz/Beitzsch); for years they have been working together to restore the historic park in Brody/Pförten, which became famous through Augustus the Strong and Count Brühl (both located in Lubusz Land/Poland). Mutual trust is increased through common interests, and an awareness of a common cultural heritage. An expression of this is also the extension of the "European Park Network Lausitz" to include two parts in Poland and three in Brandenburg/Saxony, which recently attracted attention as a contribution to the "European Cultural Heritage Year 2018".

"Europe Day" on 9th May, the anniversary of the German capitulation in 1945, is always celebrated together in the European city of Guben/Gubin on the Lausitzer Neiße.

Several speakers who spoke on the general topic made a connection to a major event next year: the elections to the European Parliament at the end of May. For them, this vote is a measure of citizens' trust in the European institutions.



Prof. An Hermans and Maria Bellin-Moeres took the floor

An Hermans, President of the ESU, sees no reason to sit back despite optimistic forecasts – such as that of Commission President Juncker. On the contrary: each of us is encouraged to continue talking with our fellow citizens about the merits of the EU - “in a respectful partnership, on the road to a prosperous and secure Europe,” as stated in her speech. That applies at the national level as well as in meetings with neighbours. (Unfortunately, due to time constraints, her speech had to be shortened; it is available to all interested parties.)



Rolf Berend (centre in picture)

Rolf Berend (DE/Thuringia) took the floor for the chairman of the CDU Seniors’ Union, Prof. Dr. Otto Wulff, who was prevented from attending. Summing up political activity since the peaceful revolution of 1989/90 in East Germany (GDR), he urged “not to listen to the sceptics, but to those who shape the future with clear positions.” The result of the European elections will determine how Europe can maintain itself against other parts of the world. The EU can count on 450 million citizens, but they make up only just less than 1 percent of the world’s population, said Berend, a member of the ESU Executive Committee. He recalled that on 3rd October 1990, through unification the eastern part of Germany, the GDR, and the whole of Berlin became members of the European Union overnight, which remains the dream of many European citizens to this day.



With **Dr. Markus Optendrenk**

... not only a member of the Landtag NRW (*federal state parliament of North Rhine Westfalen*) took the floor, but also a member of the “Association of the Euro-region Rhein – Maas Nord”. He was proud that “his” Euro-region had developed already in 1958, “from the bottom up”. It received a major boost in the 1970’s.



Prof. Dr. Manfred Borutta



Sabine Verheyen



Dr. Markus Optendrenk

He is interested in issues such as: “what closer cooperation do people want?” and “how to grow older well in the border regions?” This is why he is concerned about some tendencies in German-speaking Eupen (BE), where language differences are diminished. He sees deficiencies in the lack of recognition of professional qualifications in the other country. He is committed to the exchange of vocational school teachers and to overcoming the shortage of skilled workers.

He considers the range of mobility opportunities in the Aachen region to be exemplary; ticket bookings are possible with a smartphone. However, if someone – like the reporter – spontaneously travels by public transport (bus + bus) from Aachen to the three-country point (DE/NL/BE) on the mountain near Vaals (NL), he runs into problems and is defeated because: neither of the German bus drivers knew exactly how it continues after the border, nor could the driver of the small “connecting bus” sell a ticket, “because we accept no cash on board since the beginning of the year, and cannot take Eurocard.” The travel agency VVV was (on 28th April at 5:30 pm) closed, and the taxi ordered by the friendly restaurant staff next door did not arrive.

The deputy announced improvements in cross-border rail traffic and wants more connections between Brussels and NRW and from Aachen to Düsseldorf in the evenings.

His appeal to the meeting: “let’s tell young people how difficult it used to be to cross the border, and that peace, freedom, democracy, open borders are by no means self-evident. That’s why we have to go to the European elections in 2019 !”

The former Mayor of Aachen, **Sabine Verheyen MEP**, reminded with the statement “younger people are the elderly of the future” the realisation of decisions, also those of the EU. She spoke in favour of stronger

youth exchanges, also with the countries of eastern Europe, which caused her concern. In view of the constitutional changes pushed through by the Polish government to the detriment of the freedom of the media and the independent judiciary, her fellow MEP's from that country have it relatively tough at present. She spoke in favour of a "balanced system for receiving emigrants" and sees a kind of "Marshall Plan" for the African countries as a prospect for millions.

The same view expressed **Dr. Bernhard Worms** (DE), honorary chairman of the CDU Seniors' Union, ESU President from 2001 to 2013 and still politically active. If we want to secure European influence, we need alliance partners, he said. These he sees in Africa. Its inhabitants need help to help themselves, to make it possible for them to live a dignified life in their homeland. Furthermore, in his speech Worms urged credibility and trust in international relations, using the example of two events from the German-Soviet relationship in the time of Adenauer and Kohl.



Dr. Bernhard Worms & Herbert Geller (DE); Dr. Vaclav Roubal & Dr. Dagmar Koutska (CZ)

Prof. Dr. Manfred Borutta is pleased about the "slightly increasing birth rate in the city region of Aachen", which he – as a 58year-old grandfather – also can enjoy. With longer life expectancy, the need for care shifts to 75 – 80 years, noted the trained male nurse. The increase in single living ("singularisation of society") after the death of a partner must be confronted better and faster. Building regulations, limitations of liability and the like very often hindered the rapid adaptation of living conditions. The readiness of neighbours to help is gaining more and more importance. Borutta, who teaches as a gerontologist at the Catholic Hochschule, Dept. Aachen, complains of deficits in the combination of health insurance / patient and comes to the conclusion: "often the right hand does not know what the left does."

The enormous shortage of care workers, complained about in Germany, is the fault of lower pay, so that emigration to other western and northern European countries is common practice. Fortunately, he also knows some nursing homes that can lead to waiting lists for staff due to their adequate salary and general image! The offer to the elderly and the handicapped to improve their situation in the area around Aachen is appreciated positively by the professor. Nevertheless, it is not possible without volunteers.

Dr. jur. Vaclav Roubal from Prague recalled the Magna Charta of the ESU, which calls for civic engagement. This is also a Christian duty. His Christian Democratic Seniors' organization, whose honorary president he has been since 2017, has helped to make the Christian faith regain its significance in the Czech Republic. Invitations to conferences such as this are welcome, as they impart experiences and encourage social engagement for Europe.

Prof. An Hermans, who grew up not far from Aachen, recalled the presentation of the Charlemagne Prize four years ago to the then EU Council President, Hermann Van Rumpoy, who has appeared on several occasions at ESU events. What he said at the time remains valid: "one must be concerned about the way in which people perceive the Union and how they relate to it".

The regional conference in Aachen – according to the opinion of its participants – took seriously the concerns and demands of the older generation to the EU. The lively discussions following the speeches contributed their part.



The conference chair and her colleague, Herbert Geller, thank the mayor Dr. Schmeer for the reception in the imperial city. Important guests from home and abroad were once received in the White Room of the town hall.

Today, engaged couples frequently say the "yes" word here.

Dr. Gabriele Peus-Bispinck, as the primary responsible host, and her Aachen friends can draw a positive conclusion. The guests had the opportunity to attend a reception at the town hall, where the First Mayor, **Dr. Margarethe Schmeer**, reported with pride on the high level of social-political involvement of the city. Also, they made a guided tour through the Old Town, whose main attraction is the imperial palace of Charlemagne with the Mariendom.

School godfather in Saxon Muldenstein



Janusz Marszalek was appointed for this purpose. Only a few days before the 73rd anniversary of the liberation of Europe from German National Socialism, he came into possession of this document by surprise. By request, he wrote to the editor that he felt attached to this region in particular, as his parents once worked as forced labourers of the Nazi regime in Wolfen and Bitterfeld. Marszalek is president of the Polish Seniors' Union (PUS) and one of the ESU Vice-Presidents.

He accepted the award from the hands of the student Hannes. He belonged to the group that visited the children's village Rajsko near Oświęcim on 1st May, run by Mr. and Mrs. Marszalek.

Austria should become “fit for the future”

This concern of the government is also that of the Austrian Seniors' Association (ÖSB), under Ingrid Korosec. In a statement by the President, which went to the editorial board on 26th April, it said that a turnaround has occurred with the election of Sebastian Kurz to the chairmanship of the People's Party (ÖVP) and the Federal Chancellorship. “It is above all the generation of over sixty-year-olds” who, with their vote for the ÖVP, testifies to their desire for “sustainable reforms”, writes Ms. Korosec. After the elections to the Nationalrat (= parliament) on 15th October, in which the elderly voted in favour of Kurz with 35 percent, this age group has meanwhile provided

respectable results in three federal states in favour of the People's Party: in Lower Austria (leading politician Johanna Mikl-Leitner) with 55 percent, in Tirol (Günther Platter) 50 percent, and in Salzburg (Wilfried Haslauer) 52 percent.

The Seniors' Federation has been involved at federal and state level in "the negotiations of government programmes", whereby many demands, some of which have been made for a long time, are moving towards a solution. The older generations are not only concerned with pensions and health policy, but also with taxes, digitisation, the housing market and education Ms Korosec did not comment on expectations in foreign, migration and European politics at this time.

Since December the People's Party, led by Sebastian Kurz, has been in coalition with the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), chaired by Heinz-Christian Strache, who is also vice-chancellor and minister for public service and sport. On 1st May, he renewed his solidarity in refugee policy with the Hungarian prime minister, Victor Orban, according to the media.

Pension Commission appointed

The adoption of a cross-party pension commission by the German government is about to start work. It is tasked with "making the pension safe, affordable and adequate beyond the year 2030", as the CDU Seniors' Union expressed it in a press release on 3rd May. The Seniors' Union raised these demands three years ago at its delegates' day in Magdeburg. It is also expected that there will be regulations on more flexibility for the retirement age, as well as on the voluntary continuation of work beyond this date.

Already five years earlier ...

... as reported in No. 159, the Christian Democratic Association of Seniors in Sweden has been constituted. Its chairman, Leif Hallberg, mentioned in a letter 1993 as the founding year. Pardon!

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