



**EUROPÄISCHE SENIOREN UNION (ESU)**

**EUROPEAN SENIORS' UNION (ESU)**

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## ***Building bridges – giving impulses***

*Impressions from an ESU regional conference of the Baltic states in Vilnius with prominent speakers*

**VILNIUS.** "The ESU is a bridge builder." The sentence is not new. Whether or not it corresponds to reality, proves itself in the continuous political action of the European Seniors' Union. Their "backbone" are regional conferences: they put current issues on the agenda, bring together citizens of the host country – often from several generations – and from other ESU member-associations.



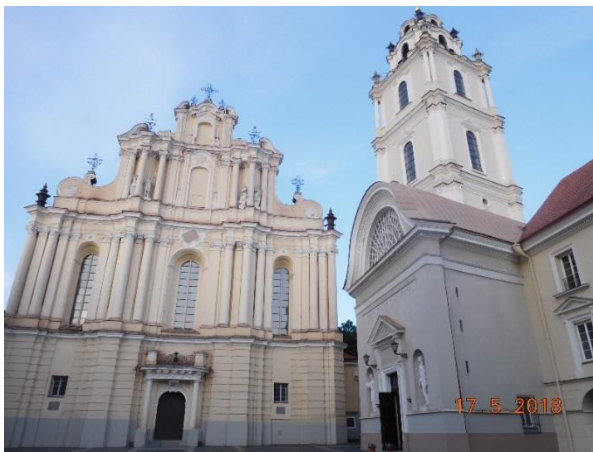
*Vilnius: ESU President An Hermans with the guests of honour Prof. Wolfgang von Stetten and Prof. Vytautas Landsbergis (from left)*

The ESU, in conjunction with the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, had invited participants to a conference in Vilnius from 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> May. Attending were of course Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians, but also guests from Poland, the Czech Republic, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Great Britain and Italy/South Tirol. Most of the 65 participants have political responsibilities at home and are looking for current information, an exchange of experiences and new contacts.

In the Lithuanian capital there was no shortage of it. Speeches, PowerPoint presentations and lively discussions met the demands of the organisers and arrangers. In a Resolution presented by **President An Hermans** at the end of the conference, there are some facts that still stand in the way of beneficial Baltic social cooperation, solidarity and cohesion. It welcomed recent EU decisions that have brought more focus on the social rights of citizens.

*(The wording of the Resolution will be made available by the ESU on its website: [www.esu-epp.eu](http://www.esu-epp.eu); "SI" will return to this in the next edition.)*

### *Important conference venues*



1. The University of Vilnius, one of the oldest in Eastern Europe, dates back to a Jesuit college founded in 1570, the Polish-Lithuanian King Stephen Balthory elevated it to the rank of university in 1578.

2. The building of the parliament, called Seimas, once the seat of the "Supreme Soviet of the Lithuanian Soviet Republic", was in January 1991, temporarily a fortress, which was defended by thousands of opponents against Soviet troops. Bullet holes can still be seen today.

## *Singing and Dancing*



*Songs and dances from the Lithuanian regions performed in a classical ambience*

Just how lively the cultural heritage is in northern Europe, the guests learned by the exemplary appearance of a folklore ensemble. Only at second glance, to their surprise, did they discover in a lead singer their friend **Jonas Volungevicius**, vice president of the Lithuanian Seniors' Association; who had slipped into a historical costume in the baroque concert hall of the university. In the “bright weeks” that culminate on St. John's Day (24<sup>th</sup> June), streets, squares, halls and open-air arenas are filled with singers and dancers. Cheerfulness and high spirits are called for – despite all the tribulations of everyday life.

## *"Chief Architect of Independence"*

What also distinguished the conference was its own generally welcoming and lively culture of remembrance. This was ensured by **Prof. Vytautas Landsbergis** with his speech, warmly welcomed by **ESU President Prof. An Hermans**. He had led the resistance to the Soviet occupation in the early '90s. His name is linked to the proclamation of Lithuania's independence from the USSR on 13<sup>th</sup> March 1990 and the new 1992 constitution. For **Dr. Žibartas Jackūnas**, the first president of Free Lithuania is “the chief architect of independence”. It is not surprising that Landsbergis, the fervent patriot and European, spoke once again in plain language and – also from his experience as a MEP – denounced deficiencies in European integration that need to be overcome.



*Dr. Jackūnas and Prof. von Stetten in front of a mural reminiscent of the adoption of the Constitution of Free Lithuania on 25<sup>th</sup> October 1992, in obviously just this room. In the picture, 1st person on the left: Prof. Landsbergis*



*At the side of the ESU President: Žibartas Jackūnas (l.) and Jonas Volungevicius, the leading personalities of the ESU member-association of the seniors in Lithuania*



## *Highly-valued Honorary Consul*

After him spoke **Freiherr Prof. Wolfgang von Stetten (DE)**, who is passionately committed to the free development of Lithuania and is highly regarded as an honorary consul of Lithuania. He is to be thanked for founding the German-Baltic parliamentary group at the beginning of the '90s, whose presidency he took over. The three Baltic countries lost more than 500,000 people between 1940 and 1945 through escape, deportation and extermination through German and Soviet guilt, von Stetten noted. When, in the summer of 1991, the violent death of seven citizens was to be lamented, he addressed their graves before 50,000 mourners and called on Gorbachev to recognise finally the independence of the Baltic from Soviet territory. Only Boris Yeltsin, his successor as Russian president, eventually agreed.

Referring to the continuing threat to the Baltic countries from the East, he finished his speech with the words: "without freedom, even peace loses its meaning". Landsbergis had said something similar before.

That the second and third conference day took place in the parliament, the Seimas, was the wish of the ESU and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (Elisabeth Bauer, Augustina Zamuskeviciute and others), but it was probably a coincidence that von Stetten took his place in front of a large-format mural which announced the promulgation of the 1992 constitution with Landsbergis. It recalls the ceremony that took place in this very room, now called the "Constitutional Hall". Genius loci ...

## *Anniversaries at a glance*

The Baltic states had become for the first time independent at the end of the First World War in 1918, together with the Czech Republic (then Czechoslovakia) and Poland. **Prof. An Hermans** took the forthcoming anniversaries as an opportunity to congratulate warmly the delegates of these countries. In her welcoming address, she said: the importance of Europe lies in its unity, strength and competitiveness, as well as the guarantee of security, prosperity and peace towards all its citizens. She added: "but this unity needs the active and constructive cooperation of all member states", which takes full account of the general theme of the conference "Building Bridges to Solidarity and Social Cohesion in the Baltic States".

The President recalled the 600 km long human chain from Tallinn via Riga to Vilnius from August 1989, which, with the desire for freedom expressed at that time, called for defending human rights, democracy and sovereignty with the greatest determination in our day. She thanked the hosting Seniors' Association of the Homeland Party – Christian Democrats for its many-sided work in this respect.

## *Plea for Christian profile*

ESU Vice-President **Lidmila Nemcova**, who comes from Prague, inspired by the words of the President, spoke about important milestones in the recent history of the Czech Republic and Slovakia. These included the Munich Agreement of 1938, which gave Hitler a free hand for further aggression, the Communist accession to power in 1948, the "Prague Spring" in 1968, and the Velvet Revolution of 1989. Her organisation is part of a network



that pursues the crimes of the socialist regime. As an example, the group in Zdar nad Sazavou of her Association of Christian Seniors' (SKS), participates annually in a Passion Play, Mrs. Nemcova emphasised how important the Christian profile of ESU organisations is to her; it radiates across the whole of society in the Czech Republic.

### *The Hostess*

**Irene Degutienė** was not only the "patron" of the invitation, but also on the list of speakers at the conference. The Vice-president of the parliament said at the beginning of her speech that she would attend this conference as part of the anniversary "100 years since the first



*Elisabeth Bauer (KAS, middle of the picture) introduces the ESU President to the Vice-president of the Seimas, Irene Degutienė, who had previously attended regional conferences*

Independence” and as “an important milestone”. That it took place has filled her with joy. In the course of her speech, she said that it had to be concluded that “the new generation only learns history from books”, and it should go without saying that men and women seniors should explain the historical context and the virtues of liberal democracy from their own experience. In their parliamentary activity (six legislative terms), the everyday life of seniors plays a considerable role. It was still, therefore, about the elderly in society having “a life of dignity” and experiencing freedom as a great asset. In view of the low pension levels (according to participants, 300 – 400 €), there is indeed still much to do. The former Labour Minister sees the key in stronger economic power, which enables higher wages and in motivating younger people to return to Lithuania.

### *An Hermans: everyone is responsible*

ESU General Secretary **Guido Dumon** took up this topic when he opened the conference section “Social Realities”. The basis for the prosperity of Europeans has to be the social market economy everywhere, he said. The ESU strives, in this sense, to promote the cooperation of politicians, scientists and other citizens.

For President **An Hermans** the personal responsibility of everyone for the common good is decisive.. All generations have to be taken into focus.

This recognition has only developed gradually in the 23 years of the existence of the ESU – from a message to reality. Essential social change can be achieved only with modified and active political action. In doing so, networking with other decision-makers is an advantage. In this connection she named the European Parliament; in which **Heinz K. Becker** from Austria, a Vice-president of the ESU, is “our Member”, also with the European People's Party (EPP), with AGE Forum Europe, BAGSO (the German “Federal Association of Seniors’ Organizations”) and other associations, initiatives, societies etc. at national, regional and local levels.

### *Lack of solidarity*

**Prof. Dr. Steven van Hecke** (Belgium) spoke about the history and mixed results of the “Treaty of Rome”, which laid the foundation for Europe in its present form in 1957. Many promises remained unfulfilled. It is a paradox that in the EU, the competence for social policy lies with the governments, but the EU institutions ultimately regard the well-being of citizens as its most important task. He deplored the situation in the EU concerning the lack of solidarity of some member states with regard to the reception of refugees and the understanding of democracy.

Representatives from the region spoke about the economic and social conditions in the Baltic states. For **Dr. Žibartas Jackūnas**, cooperation between the three countries has developed well, although differences are considerable in the social sector. According to **Dr Georg Männik** (Estonia), the differences in pension payments in the three countries have been and are somewhat lower, but considerable growth is only expected to be step by step, depending on the growing gross national product. **Prof. Dr. Ivars Brīvers**, a member of Latvia's parliament, spoke about “Institutional Aspects of Social Inequality” and dealt out criticism of the global economic system and its impact on the Baltic states. **Prof. Dr. Boguslavas Gruževskis**, head of the Labour Market Research Institute in Lithuania, looked to the future with anxiety. We have to deal with global problems, and the readiness for solidarity, to share, leaves something to be desired. Looking around the room, he asked: “what can we do?” He presented some answers

and suggestions: to continue the social dialogue, reverse the population development into positive, support and motivate young people to return by encouraging them to find their “place in the society”!

### *Pictures of the World Heritage Site*



*The Gates of Dawn*



*The European flag also in front of the Town Hall*

### *Ambivalent record*

Under the chairmanship of **Elisabeth Bauer**, the KAS representative based in Riga, the role of the EU and national institutions with regard to economic and social cohesion was discussed. **Marius Vaščega**, who works in Lithuania for the European Commission, stated that the three countries had developed very differently in some areas. He looked at aspects such as average life expectancy, levels of employment and income development, and spoke in favour of appropriate decisions. In the draft budget of the EU Commission for the years following 2022 (after the expected BREXIT), 27 percent is intended for social purposes, which must be set out by the end of the month of May.

**Dr. Rimantas Jonas Dagys**, a Seimas deputy, is very pleased about the growing birth rate in Lithuania. The fight against poverty must continue to be a priority, he said. He proposed that governments should involve the population more in draft decisions, as a matter of principle, in their own interest. In his opinion, he believes that there are solutions in all areas and for



everyone: for example, in the agricultural policy and in the social policy aimed at all generations (family, labour market and pension policy).

### *Functioning civil society*



*Lina Kalibataitė presents the versatile activities of Kolping in Lithuania.  
Centre in photo - Claus Bernhold, Seniors Union of the CDU Germany, next to him  
Mantas Benkuskas from the Young Conservatives*

Those challenges and opportunities for “building bridges” that belong to civil society were presented by representatives of the younger generation and the Kolping organisation, which is concerned predominantly with older patients. In this context therefore, this was “bridge building” between the generations – by the way in the same country (Lithuania), whose representatives had previously not met.

**Lina Kalibataitė**, the national Kolping Society secretary, always maintains “cross-border” cooperation very definitely! And there were excursions with a seniors’ organization in Kaunas, the second largest city after Vilnius. Kolping sees itself as committed to the dignified life of citizens. In addition to caring for people in need of all kinds, this includes: lifelong learning, also language learning, PC training, as well as providing religious and political information to help citizens make informed choices. They also learn to distinguish fake news, distributed by Russia, from real news, and to appreciate the value of a free society.

**Mantas Benkuskas** presented the programme of his “League of Young Conservatives in Lithuania.” He said with pride that several current politicians come from the ranks of his organization. The 2,100 members scattered across the country learn their “political craft” for the different levels, why one should scrutinise the news and why the future must be a united Europe.

## *Old and young “with one voice”*

For **Claus Bernhold**, deputy Federal Chairman of the CDU Seniors' Union (DE), Member of the ESU Executive Committee and moderator of the closing session, the ESU certainly had a reason to pay close attention to the relationships of the generations in a conference like this one. As one of the outcomes, he sees a reassessment of the fundamental “European strategy on demographic change, developing new opportunities for solidarity between young and old” - across a wide range of policy areas. Bernhold brought to the attention of the ESU conference in Vilnius a greeting from the Junge Union in Germany, expressing the appreciation which they attach to working with the Seniors' Union. **Paul Ziemiak** stated that senior and youth organizations are campaigning together and “speaking with one voice”. Bernhold suggested – also influenced by the message of greetings just read out – a new “Intergenerational Pact”, which would allow space for the memories of the elderly of war, flight and expulsion to cope with today’s challenges.

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There was an opportunity for discussion at all stages of the conference, which often led to a dialogue with the speakers. In the framework of this report we are not in a position to comment further. About one or another statement, "SI" will return. - The foreign conference guests were able to get to know the Old Town of Vilnius on a tour. It has UNESCO World Heritage status. Almost more than anywhere else, so many churches of different building periods and architectural styles deserve a visit in a relatively small area. The renovation of numerous buildings was financed or subsidised by EU funds.

## ESU Diary 2018

06. July	<b>Vienna:</b>	Praesidium and Executive Committee
07.-08 July	<b>Vienna:</b>	9 <sup>th</sup> Summer Academy for Executives
07.-08 November	<b>Helsinki:</b>	EPP-Congress with ESU participation
21.-22 November	<b>Magdeburg:</b>	CDU-Senioren-Union federal delegates' Assembly
23.-24 November.	<b>Leuven:</b>	Praesidium

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