

Dr. Dušana Findeisen
Slovenian Third Age University, Vice President of DANET

Active ageing: New attitudes and approaches
Raising European identity awareness in 3rd age citizens

Brescia, October, 2015

Introduction

I have never been comfortable with the denomination "older people". Who are they, who are we talking about? Are they Italian researchers who are considered to be older workers already at the age of thirty - five, are they frail older people in institutional care, are they older people belonging to the dynamic time between work, retirement and old age (once called the third age) like myself, are they simply those who are above the average age of the population in a country (French Official Journal)?

In what way do the existing legal mechanisms and policies support, limit or hinder the contributory role of older people, of different groups of older people?

Finally as a word of introduction, a question: "Are we afraid of ageing society? Are we really afraid of lower fertility and longevity in European countries, or are we afraid to admit that numerous social changes have brought also a new cultural organisation and role of ages and policies are to be amended or created accordingly". These are the questions I would like to ask you and these are, and many others, the questions I am asking myself. I hope we might answer at least some of them, now and later on in a debate we intend to open.

European identity and (older) people's active citizenship

This event is about European identity. Are we aware of our European identity? Particularly we, older people, who have been coining our identities, personal and collective identities in different social, political and cultural contexts?

Knowing a little bit more about the European Union, its principles, history, current structural developments and mission, is as important as understanding the identity and the aims of your own country. The European Union and your country are closely related and you are European citizens as much as you are citizens of your own country. Within this framework, it is barely conceivable to think that European institutions are of no concern to European citizens, because they simply are! More than 70% of your national legislation comes from Europe, whether it concerns maximum working hours, the food you eat, the air you breathe or the age when you can retire. And do you know who decides about all these issues? It is not the anonymous bureaucrats in Brussels, but increasingly it is the European Parliament that makes decisions, the men and women whom you elect. Together with your ministers, heads of state or government they take decisions affecting your everyday

life, whether you are young or old, producer or consumer, or living in the North, South, East or West of the Community . Often we complain that Europe is distant from its citizens - but is it?

How well do we know EU

Although based on the principles of the French Revolution – liberty, equality, fraternity – the European Union is not a revolutionary enterprise, but it is an intellectual enterprise as much as it is a practical reality

Over decades EU has become a framework for numerous enriching cultural, social, economic and other transactions among its member states. It established a common currency and it has provided for common security. Nevertheless, it has also failed several times and in several ways. Thus, Jacques Delors, Marcel Gauchet, Cohn Bendit and others are convinced that Europe has failed in imposing itself as a political force and it has failed in imposing itself in the processes of globalisation. Moreover, member states do not truly understand that “union is a force” and that union means community, giving, as well as ensuring receiving.

Nevertheless, in times of economic, financial, political and social crisis, the EU is believed to have a new chance, that is, the chance to tackle, democratically, issues of common and global interest, such as environmental issues, reversing the global trend of the market economy (Habermas, 2009, p.105) and demographic changes. (including ageing population, migrations, ageing workforce). These issues cannot be tackled in isolation, but on the contrary, they should become subject to large-scale public debate and real civil dialogue (Jacques Delors, idem).

Nowadays most European institutions and advisory bodies (European Commission, European Parliament, European Economic and Social Council) act accordingly. “The development of a European wide political public sphere - that is of a communicative network extending beyond the national borders and specialising in the relevant questions - is of central importance to the emergence of the European identity, says Habermas (2009, p.87). It is time for Europe and its institutions to become an agora, a truly deliberative space, including the representatives of all its citizens. In this spirit, I believe, we have gathered here in Brescia.

We thought it would be interesting to find out to what extent the relationship between European union and its older citizens has become a reality has been consolidated. To what extent older citizens identify with EU, to what extent they are aware of their European identity.

A research on the relationship between Europe and older citizens conducted by Slovenian Third Age University and its French partner organisation Old up from Paris, has yielded the following results: There were more than 500 respondents in each country.

The majority of the respondents report that Europe has changed their everyday life; political changes, (50,7 %), economic changes, (65,4 %), social changes (46,4 %) and cultural changes (70,9)

The majority of the respondents report that educational systems should be unique (51,5 %) and cultures should be mixed up (72,3 %).

The majority of the respondents are of opinion that their co-citizens have no opinion of European citizenship (49,6 %).

The minority of the respondents report that they know associations related to Europe (36,3 %) et only some of them are their members (11,5 %).

Media and cultural exchanges would be the best vehicles consolidating the concept of European citizenship. Following are associations, forums, seminars, meetings and politicians.

The majority said they take part in European elections (78,3 %).

European identity and (older) people's active citizenship

Since its establishment, the geographical shape of European Union has been changing. Its borders are now open, an open public space has been created. These developments influenced the existence of European society, have shaped a new political community of nations, and the emerging public space.

Individual rights are today secured on both, the European and global levels, and not only within nation states. Typically, social rights will be secured by the nation state, the rights in relation to the internal market will be guaranteed by the European Union and the UN will guarantee human rights. As a consequence of globalisation the idea of active citizenship needs to be developed on three levels: the national, European and global level.

Nevertheless, European identity is still an abstract concept, loosely formulated and loosely rooted in the social tissues, as indeed is the European active citizenship.

Are you sure you know what active citizenship is?

The idea of active citizenship is not new but can be traced back to ancient Greece. Greek citizenship was primarily built on the obligations, that each citizen had to the city (polis) government. To be an active citizen- one who took part in political life was considered to be a moral duty. One was morally obliged to take an active part in common polis matters, if one wanted to be respected as a citizen and a human being.

In the 1700s there was a redrafting of the citizenship concept. Moral values like

fraternity, freedom equality became the basis of active citizenship.

In the 19th century the concept of legal state was formulated and citizens' rights were secured within national states.

The citizens of Europe should ideally view themselves not only as British, German, and Italian, etc. but also as European citizens and indeed as citizens of the world to which they are connected with rights and obligations and work they do for community.

Demographic changes and the ageing society

The ageing society is one of the major current demographic changes. The other changes are shrinking populations, the ageing workforce and migrations.

When we think about ageing, we think about it principally as individual ageing, not as demographic ageing. Demographic ageing is a rather new phenomenon which first appeared in the second half of the 20th Century. Despite the progress achieved in all areas, human life is not any longer than in previous times, however the number of people over the age of 65 is increasing considerably and deaths are outnumbering births. Ever more people reach an advanced old age and at the same time the rate of fertility is reducing in some European regions due to a number of reasons, migrations being one of them.

Population is ageing and our societies are ageing. We live in an ageing society. Of course, on one hand this is a threat, but the percentage of older people in a society is a civilization achievement (ie.in Afganistan there are only 3.5 % of people 65+ while in EU this is going to be a quarter of population).

But any change requires adaptation. This brings about the need to promote a cultural change in attitudes towards older people and old age, a change in the position of older people in society and the need to modify policies that determine the relationships between generations and that are supposed to meet the needs of different generations.

I have a tendency to believe that enhancing intergenerational solidarity (time, money, knowledge, culture, work) and cooperation is crucial in order to react constructively to today's rapidly evolving social and demographic context.

Changes in the age structure of our populations will have a significant impact on the dynamics among and also within generations, and intergenerational solidarity and cooperation will need to be reinvented and sustained by appropriate policies. Expectations towards all generations should be high and ambitious and older people are no exception here.

Major older people's issues

Older people's needs and issues are addressed by different policies adopted on the basis of the European Treaties. However progressive they may want to be, they are often governed by a significant number of negative or positive stereotypes about older people. Older people are being approached mostly in terms of their age and not in terms of their involvement, potential, situation etc. What is important are their differences. The least important seems to be their age! However people in later life – according to some definitions this already begins at around the age of 45 - are a large group of extremely heterogeneous people.

The issues of older people are connected to the way of life that society allows or enables older people to have. Older people's needs are social, emotional, cognitive and involve the need for sharing values.

There are many issues associated with older people:

- working longer under better conditions,
- preparing for volunteering whilst still in paid employment,
- working as a volunteer on an individual basis or in an organised way within public institutions and other organisations during retirement
- having a different position within families,
- taking part in lifelong learning and education,
- participating in local communities,
- .participating in taking decisions in municipality matters such as education, health, culture,
- enjoying transport, social protection,
- alleviating poverty, etc.

All of these older people's specific issues -plus others-are important. Not only pension schemes, and pension reforms.

The issues of older people are related to social fairness. More social fairness is needed not only on the distributive but also on the cultural and symbolic level. There are stereotypes about older people and old age, there is discrimination of older people, there is ageism, there is abuse of older people(financial, verbal, physical). Stereotypes do not affect only older people, they also affect everyone dealing with issues relating to older people, such as professionals, politicians, researchers etc. The best thing would be to ban these stereotypes - which is an easy thing to say but a very difficult thing to achieve.

In order to identify the issues of older people, one must first identify resources in society that are available to the generations in the middle, and secondly, a number of questions need to be asked:

- (a) Do older people have equal access to accommodation, work, culture, health, education, transport, decision-making process?

- (b) Do they have the right to go on working after their retirement without being penalized?
- (c) Do older people have equal access to the media and do they appear in the media, in public space?
- (d) Are there discounts offered to older people solely on the basis of their age, pushing them in the end to appreciate being supported and slowly abandoning their right to play an equal role in public matters?
- (e) The direction of local, national and EU policies regarding older people is often one that promotes weakness and dependency and this should be changed! EU treaties and common policies as well as numerous documents address older people's issues.

Policies and legal mechanisms protecting older people's rights

The year 2015 should be a landmark in social development: the UN Summit will adopt the post-2015 agenda, the European Social Charter will be 50 years old, and the EU will be devoting the entire year to development. And Slovenia together with other countries is acting towards an International Convention on The rights of Older Persons.

All this is happening against the backdrop of a rapidly changing global social structure. The global population is ageing, and increased life expectancy imposes a heavy burden on traditional public finances and sustainable health systems. At the same time, prolonged life expectancy and advances in technology enable older people to live fuller and more integrated lives. Nevertheless, the inequality gap between the rich and poor remains a significant impediment to social progress.

Older people seem to face multiple discrimination based on gender, age and ethnicity. Older people might be discriminated against within their own, very diverse, social group, or by other groups. Inequality and 'ageism' thus hinder progress in bridging the generational gap, in reforming the social contract, and in creating a model for long-term demographic stability and a supportive environment. There is a clear need to strengthen inter-generational links and foster human rights awareness and respect for the human rights of people of any age, potentially enabling greater solidarity between generations and thus an inclusive society.

The needs of older people are specific. Despite the fact that the human rights of older persons are in principle addressed in all human rights instruments, there is no coherent, holistic instrument that specifically addresses the rights of the elderly. One approach to addressing this issue that has been gaining momentum is the adoption of an international convention on the rights of older persons.

Older citizens and who represents them at the European level?

a/ The institutional level

The issues of older citizens are being addressed through the endeavours of various European Institutions, mainly by *the European Commission and the European Parliament*.

The European Commission (EC) The EC seeks public opinion on the issues through promoting public debate, peer reviews, consultations, thematic conferences etc., and prepares proposals in the field of social policy that concern older citizens (employment, social security, volunteering etc.).

Intergroup on Ageing This is a group within the European Parliament and unites MPs from different committees and sectors who are willing to discuss this particular issue. The Intergroup issues statements directed at the European Council and other EU institutions. The Intergroup is convinced that social protection and employment policies must be linked, that the EU has a key role to play in bringing about reform of pension systems in order to ensure decent pensions for all, giving people a fair share of society's economic prosperity and not just preventing outright poverty. Countries need to provide secure, universal and fully adequate first pillar pensions. It is also necessary to adopt reforms to allow and encourage older people to keep working.

b/ The NGO level

AGE (www.age-platform.org), the European Older People's Platform, is a European network of around 150 organisations working on behalf of people aged 50+, which directly represent over 28 million older people in Europe. AGE aims to voice and promote the interests of the 150 million people aged 50+ in the European Union and to raise awareness of the issues that concern them most. AGE also aims to give a voice to older and retired people in EU policy debates through the active participation of their representative organisations at EU, national, regional and local levels, so as to input into EU policy development. AGE's work focuses on a wide range of policy areas that impact on older and retired people. These include issues of anti-discrimination, employment of older workers and active ageing, social protection, pension reforms, social inclusion, health, research, accessibility of public transport and of the built environment, lifelong learning and ICT.

There are other important NGO's at this level, some of which specialise in the issues of older people, and some of them that deal with relevant issues as a part of their particular field of activity. Many also play an important international role in the field of research. Below is a selection of some of the more important and relevant NGOs:

- Care (Christian Action Research & Education for Europe): <http://www.careforeurope.org/>
- CEV (European Volunteer Centre): <http://www.cev.be/>
- COFACE (Conf.d.ration des Organisations Familiales de l'Union Europ.enne): <http://www.coface-eu.org/>
- CCRE (Council of European Municipalities and Regions): <http://www.ccre.org/>
- EUROCADRES (Council of European Professional and Managerial Staff):

<http://www.eurocadres.org/>

- Eurocarers (European Association Working for Carers): <http://www.eurocarers.org/>
- Euro Cities: <http://www.eurocities.eu/main.php>
- Euro Health Net: <http://www.eurohealthnet.eu/>
- European Association for Population Studies: <http://www.eaps.nl/>
- European Federation for Retirement Provision: <http://www.efrp.org/>
- European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities:
<http://www.easpd.eu/>
- EURAG (European Federation of Older Persons): <http://www.easpd.eu/>
- European University: <http://www.euruni.edu/Scripts/Index.aspx?idz=2>
- FAFCE (Federation der Katholischen Familienverbände in Europa):
<http://www.family-eu.org/cms/index.php>
- IPSE (Institut de la Protection Sociale Européenne) :
<http://www.idies.org/index.php?post/Linstitut-de-la-protection-sociale-europeenne-IPSE>
- Youth Forum Jeunesse: <http://www.youthforum.org/>

Since 2000 social policy has occupied a much more prominent place in the overall agenda of the EU. After the adoption of the Lisbon Strategy by heads of state or government, a new goal was formulated which stated that economic and social policies should go hand in hand. As a result an ambitious social agenda was formulated, which sets out the social priorities - the Open Method of Coordination – which promotes stronger co-operation and co-ordination between member states on different social issues. This method applies to the areas of employment, social protection (pensions), social inclusion and education.

Conclusion

The ageing society simply requires many changes of the roles of older people and of the roles of other generations, including many changes in their mutual relationships. Above all, it requires active participation of all citizens within the member states of the European Union.

The policy discourse of dependance, old age stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination should be replaced by policies focusing on the contributory role of older people, older people as agents of change and development.

Intergenerational co-operation should be seen as a condition sine qua non for active ageing.

Older citizens should be more present in the shaping of European policies in line with Jaques Delors' argument that in the future, "the European dynamics will be much more dependent on the contribution of the European (older) citizens than on the European institutions". (Jacques Delors, idem).

For this purpose it is most important that European older citizens increase their knowledge about the European Union, its institutions and its achievements.

Moreover, better policies, experience and knowledge is/will be the basis of older people's European identity awareness.

Literature and References

Balibar, E. (2003): *We the People of Europe; reflections on transnational citizenship*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Church, Clive H./Phinnemor, David (2009): *The Penguin Guide to the European Treaties: From Rome to Maastricht, Amsterdam, Nice and Beyond*. Penguin Reference Books.

Habermas, J. (2009): *Europe The Faltering Project*. Cambridge: Polity.

Intergenerational Solidarity for Cohesive and Sustainable Societies: outcomes of the Slovenian Presidency Conference Brdo. Slovenia, 28-29. April, 2008.

Moussis, N. (2007): *Guide to European Policies*. 13th edition. Rixensart. European Study Service Official Journal of the European Communities.