

Stealing the future of our children and grandchildren? *Searching for constructive relations between generations.*

Speech by ESU president An Hermans at the ESU-RSI Seminar 'Promoting political responsibility of youth and seniors' (Budapest, 24-25 April 2017).

Since some months the slogan 'You stole our future from us' is always in my mind: young people blaming their parents and grandparents immediately after the results of the EU referendum in Great Britain were known.

I suppose that when I confront my friends and fellow citizens with this opinion, they should be surprised and uncomprehending. They should tell me how they care for their grandchildren, how they supported their children to buy or rent a house and, in the best cases, how they enjoy common holidays and festivities. And yes, their experiences of transfers between generations, mostly from older to younger generations are confirmed in research all over Europe. On the microlevel and in the informal family atmosphere, even in newly composed families, social contacts are often complex, but vital and a source of joy and happiness between generations. It is different when it comes to the meso- and macrolevel.

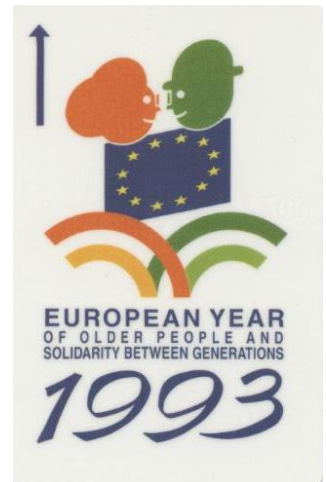
Demographic change due to the increase of life expectancy and low birth rates has affected our societies and lifestyle. All governments, from local to international level, have to contend with the challenges and opportunities of 'ageing societies' or, if you will, 'societies of longevity'.

Demographic change: an overall European challenge



Ageing is one of the great social and economic challenges of the 21st century for European societies. "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 an awareness about the need for new perspectives on the position of older persons, ageing policies and solidarity between generations was rising in international forums. This led 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 of Social Affairs declared that 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 to manifest themselves in society in the spheres of family, social, political, cultural, recreational and educational life.¹



In the following years a wide range of policies addressing population ageing was developed in the fields of research, innovation, action plans. Since almost 30 years international and European frameworks highlighted the importance of intergenerational solidarity. It is understood as 'social cohesion between generations', as 'inclusive society for all ages'. It refers to relations between the younger and older generations, including child-parents-grandparents relations, social participation in communities, affordability of pensions, health care and longtime care, equity and justice between generations,...It is a pillar of fair and sustainable societies, informal and formal welfare and it is an integral part of the European social model.

Intergenerational solidarity: a pillar of fair and sustainable societies

The Treaty of Lisbon, which was signed on 13 December 2007 and entered into force on 1 December 2009, in its article 3.3 mentions solidarity between generations as one of the key areas to promote the well-being of European citizens.

"3.3.. It (the Union) shall combat social exclusion and discrimination, and shall promote social justice and protection, equality between women and men, solidarity between generations and protection of the rights of the child".

As well the Commission as the Council, as Parliament, and the Committee of the Regions regularly highlighted the importance of solidarity between generations. It concerns us all : governments and civil society.

The Member States agreed overall frameworks and strategies in line with the Action plans for 'active and healthy ageing' developed by the World Health Organisation. Repeatedly it was stated that the responsibility for addressing issues arising from an ageing population will need to be shared between generations.

One of the shining examples was the EU-Presidency event in Brdo (Slovenia), 28-29 April 2008, titled "Intergenerational Solidarity for Cohesive and Sustainable Societies". During the event, 29 April was designated as the European Day on Intergenerational Solidarity and Cooperation

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.

to rekindle every year the importance of intergenerational solidarity and also the organisation of a European Year For Intergenerational Solidarity was launched (2012). Speeches and debates were held in a broad framework of "a society for all". Not only the quality of life of the older generation was at stake but also the needs and interests of all generations.

As it was stated in the report : "If we wish to maintain a system of intergenerational solidarity, we must learn to transform what appears to be a risk into an opportunity. It is high time to envisage a new Social Pact, which pays greater attention to all generations, to their needs and expectations and which will ensure the real involvement of all in society. (...C)reating links between the generations cannot be limited only to actions that target seniors: it must necessarily include all of the generations.

We need a new Intergenerational Pact based on three fundamental principles:

- Actions should be integrated and cover all spheres of life including work, housing, mobility, social action, care, local and national politics and the voluntary sector;
- Actions should be universal and integrate the various generations, from childhood to old age, via the young and intermediate age groups;
- Actions should not be exclusively for the benefit of one particular group, but must be based on an exchange between the generations".²

Intergenerational solidarity became a complex mechanism to attain an inclusive society for all, where no one was left behind. This orientation towards a broad common intergenerational horizon and many projects - supported by local and regional governments - on intergenerational learning, on housing, on care ... could not prevent or avoid "a war between generations" being waged in the public sphere and in the media.



As never before a generation -the babyboomers, born between 1945 and 1965 - was subject to mythologising. It seemed, they—we- had it all: free love, free universities, a guaranteed job, a good salary, a steady career, pensions, ... At the same time, we have not been proactive enough on climate change, on sustainability of the welfare state. Did the post-war generation get more than its fair share?³. To the older generation it seemed that the relation between generations was perceived only in one direction: younger workers paying taxes to support older persons's benefits. What was not seen was that the older generation had also gone through difficult periods, did not enjoy equal opportunities for schooling and worked hard to deliver the welfare state that young generation are used to.

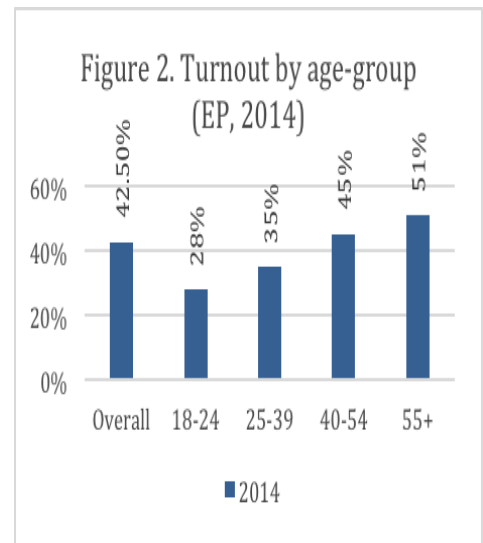
² Intergenerational Solidarity for Cohesive and Sustainable Societies. Outcomes of the Slovenian Presidency Conference. Brdo, Slovenia 28 - 29 April 2008,

³ David Willetts, *The Pinch: How the baby boomers stole their children's future and how they can give it back.*

A war between generations?

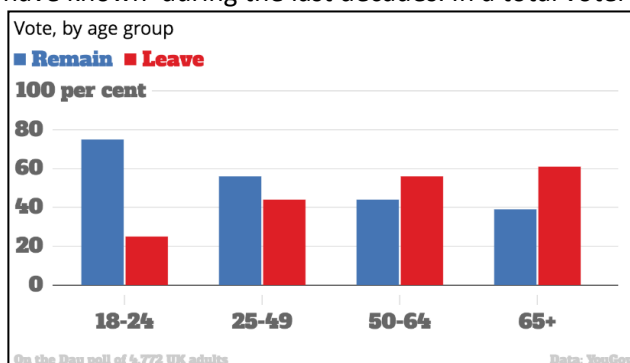
Instead of a common perspective, common opinions and shared values differences between young and older persons were growing, in opinions, in attitudes, in participation. A gap between generations could not and cannot be denied. Stereotypes and segregation between generations hinder direct encounters, openness and respect as a base for new bridges and looking ahead towards common perspectives. These differences, of course, are of a particular weight when it comes to politics and public decision making. We could also experience it at the European level. Only three examples:

- Speaking with young politicians in the framework of training programmes I tried to convince these young people that older persons also had the right to participate in society and that 'lifelong learning' could be an instrument to improve their skills. I will never forget their faces: 'please don't send us to this 'lost generations'. We want to create our societies with 'young potentials',
- After the EP elections of 2014 we analysed the turnout and voting results by age groups. The average turnout for the European elections in 2014 throughout the whole Union was 42.5%, ranging from high percentages in countries with obligatory voting to 17 % (Slovakia) as the lowest result. Turnout had never been so low since the direct elections in 1979. Data shows that turnout is higher among senior voters aged 55 and over, with a variance of almost 10% EU-wide . In most EU countries age played a significant and distinct role in a person's likelihood to vote.⁴



Data: European Parliament (2014)

- On June 23 2016 the UK's EU Referendum drastically changed the European situation we have known during the last decades. In a total voter turnout of 72%, the so-called 'Brexiters'



came off best with 51.9% or more than 1 million votes more than the r-camp. One of the striking facts about the referendum is the marked difference in voting behaviour of age-groups: while 71% of the 18-24 aged voted to remain, only 36% in the 65+ category did so. Immediately when the results were known, young people came on to

the street expressing their disappointment, telling everyone they had hoped that their future lay

⁴ Lawrence Cappelle, Gilles Pittoors, and Steven Van Hecke, *Seniors in the 2014 European Parliament Elections: Turnout, Voting Intentions and Representation* (Brussels: Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies and the European Seniors' Union, 2015), <http://www.martenscentre.eu/publications/seniors-2014-european-parliament-elections-turnout-voting-intentions-and-representation>. (With a foreword by ESU President Hermans).

in the EU, feeling abandoned by the people they thought understood them most. "You stole my future!", they tell their grandparents and parents. But at the same time they call for young people to be resilient and to continue promoting the attitudes of co-operation and collaboration of the Union into which they were born.

Calling for a general European strategy on demographic change

Our European societies need to tackle numerous problems. Demographic change is only one of them. But it must be possible to handle it.

In the 'Reflection Paper on the Social dimension of Europe'⁵, following the Commission's White Paper on the Future of Europe (1 March 2017) several challenges of demographic change are analysed. It highlights the question of intergenerational fairness, stating: 'There is today a real risk of a generational divide between younger and older people in terms of decision-making, wealth, material security and access to housing, as well as in terms of sharing the financial and fiscal burden of an ageing society.'

In view of an effective and coordinated response to the challenges of demographic change, taking into account the differences and specific problems of certain regions and cities, a coordinated European strategy for demographic change is needed. We called for it and it was adopted at the Malta Congress 2017 in the EPP's vision "Secure Europe's Future"⁶. At EU level, European legislations, recommendations, research institutions, exchange programmes, ... can support Member States, Regions and local authorities to strengthen solidarity between generations as a part of the social dimension of Europe.

How to address the democracy challenges for all generations?

It is obvious that the foundation of an overall approach for a fair, sustainable and inclusive society for all ages is the functioning of our democracy. Democracy is the key to take part in the decision-making

⁵ (COM(2017) 206, 26 April 2017): https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/reflection-paper-social-dimension-europe_en.pdf.

⁶ The European Union is facing unprecedented demographic changes (an ageing population, low birth rates, changing family structures and migration). In the light of these challenges, it is important, both at EU and at national level, to review and adapt existing policies. We recognize that strong families are a precondition for positive demographic developments, and we advocate pro-family values and policies. We need a more creative and coordinated response from the EU and its Member States, and we call for a European strategy on demographic change and for more family- and child-friendly environments. This strategy should aim to integrate the economic, social and scientific challenges and increase the potential of the working-age population. It should also stimulate active and healthy ageing and create new opportunities for intergenerational solidarity. Moreover, it should take into account the major disparities between and within Member States, both in terms of life expectancy as well as in living and working conditions. See: Secure Europe's Future: <http://www.epp.eu/press-releases/epp-congress-in-malta-highlights-of-the-final-day/>

process, to respond to the needs and challenges of the society we live in, to deliver welfare and quality of life for everyone.⁷

In many countries, democracies are under pressure. Also in Europe. Lack of interest, mistrust, populism, changing attitudes towards political parties, poor political education, new styles of communication, ... are but some of the challenges to overcome.

How can we, starting from the conviction that young and older persons have the right and the responsibility to participate and to be represented in governance, enhance our democracies? How can we enhance the participation of young people in politics? How can we understand and respond to each other's need and use our competences to create a better future? FOTO BUDAPEST?

It is my conviction that no older person has the intention to harm, to steal their children's and grand children's future. But it seems that when each of us is acting behind the barriers of our generations we miss the opportunities of mutual sharing of competences, creativity, experiences. Let us break down the walls of segregation between generations and address the democracy deficit between generations and go forward together.

There are several steps to be taken:

- enjoy activities of common interest and mutual understanding,
- meet and share each other's experiences,
- develop common goals and strategies,
- create opportunities for political participation in civil society organisations, political parties,
- find mechanisms to bring young and older persons within the processes of decision-making, governments, ...

I hope that our encounters and discussions between generations will serve as a strong moment of empowerment. I feel grateful for the speakers and participants agreeing to share their experiences and capacities. I hope that this meeting will open new perspectives for cooperation and that we will find the strength and creativity to bring more young people to politics and share with young and older people the good feeling of belonging to an inclusive European society. In this society there is room for active and constructive citizenship of all generations. Let us make it happen!

An Hermans

The European Seniors' Union (ESU) is the seniors' association of the European People's Party (EPP) with 34 member associations from 27 countries. It is led by a board elected every three years. Since 2013 An Hermans is elected President of the association. Secretary General of the association is Guido Dumon.

More information: <http://esu-epp.eu>; <https://www.facebook.com/esu.eu?fref=ts> and esu@epp.eu

⁷ Tomaz Dezelan, Intergenerational Dialogue for Democracy. International IDEA Discussion Paper 21/2017, International IDEA, Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance; www.idea.int.