

Dear colleagues and friends,

During the previous 10 years, in this period of the year, we were joyful preparing our ESU-Summer Academy. This year, due to the Covid 19 pandemic, together with our Austrian colleagues of the *Österreichischer SeniorenBund* (ÖSB) we decided to cancel our yearly meeting in Vienna.

We very much hope that next year, we can be together again in Vienna.

Meanwhile, we have not lost sight of each other during this difficult period. We have kept in touch through our Newsletters, Facebook, sometimes by telephone.

Also in this period we are:

- A network of senior citizens' organizations, working for the wellbeing of their fellow citizens;
- A platform where we exchange experiences, find inspiration and learn from each other;
- A bridge between the European policy level and the home situation, between politicians, and in particular EPP politicians and citizens.

In this June Newsletter, we bring you an overview of our initiatives in the previous months. We hope to be able to make proposals in a few weeks' time at possible meetings. To strengthen our contacts with you all, we propose to organize a video conference on the **4<sup>th</sup> of July**.

Dear colleagues and friends,

We thank all of you who have contributed to making the ESU, also in this special times a platform of communication and friendship.

Stay save and healthy.  
Hoping to see you all.

An Hermans  
ESU President

# ESU initiatives in times of the COVID-19 pandemic:

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## A worldwide health crisis affecting us all

With almost 50 participants the ESU organized a fruitful Executive Committee and interesting conference in Prague on 5-7 March 2020. Meanwhile, COVID-19 spread in more and more countries. On the 11th of March, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that the outbreak of the viral disease COVID-19 had reached the level of a global pandemic. This worldwide health crisis concerned all and every one. It became a health crisis, an economic crisis and the actions taken to stop the spread of the virus changed or way of life and had an enormous impact on our societal life.

Hereby we would like to inform you about our work during the past 'COVID-19 months'.

→ How did our ESU acted during these months of 'confinement' and 'lock down'?

→ How did we continued our aims of 'connecting seniors across Europe', 'highlighting the role of seniors in our society', 'defending seniors' rights to dignity...'

## Digital ways to stay in touch in the ESU

Immediately after our ESU meeting in Prague we felt that we must maintain our contacts within the ESU. We were concerned about the developments of the COVID-19 virus, not only in our own country but also in the whole of Europe.

To keep in touch we relied on a variety of media:

- **Our [Facebook page](#)** was almost daily updated with new posts. Especially about our own activities, but we also focused on EU politics and seniors' issues. Several senior associations have their own Facebook account which enables us to follow the initiatives of - for example - our Finnish member association "[Kansallinen Senioriliitto](#)" or our Cypriot association "[Senior Citizens Organisation of Cyprus](#)"

- **The ESU Newsletter** was our most elaborate communication tool during the pandemic:

We started in April and wrote two newsletters about the challenges the COVID-19 pandemic brought to the older generations. The focus was on *Respect for older persons' rights*. We underlined the importance of adequate medical care for older patients, highlighting that 'we all have equal rights, regardless of age' and these must be equally protected during the pandemic. A higher age should never be an argument for excluding persons from specialized care.

As all governments where looking ahead for 'step-by -step' measures to lift the lockdown, we wrote in our newsletter: *'Also in this new period, the rights of older persons must be adequately protected in COVID-19 exit strategies. Special attention and support is needed to analyse the possibilities for lifting confinement measures in nursing/care homes that lacked protective equipment, and updated hygiene routines. Governments and persons involved in the organisation of the 'exit strategy' need to take into account: (...) the lifting of the confinement measures and the 'step by step' participation in public life can have an impact on people in vulnerable situations, such as persons with an underlying health condition (e.g. cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory and cancer diseases), persons who are diagnosed or with mild symptoms and/or many older persons; we are sure that all these groups will act with great caution and take precautions and that a persons' judgment will be the criterion, not just age.'*

We are proud to say that our newsletter became an 'interactive communication instrument' as we invited our delegates to react on the following questions, so that we could share their answers in the in the upcoming newsletters.

- *What are/were some of the main challenges during this crisis, especially for seniors?*
- *Are there positive measures that have been put forward that could help us also in the future?*
- *Are there particular stories you would like to highlight?*

Colleagues from different countries reacted and our members could read how people in some countries suffered deeply, but also how they developed innovative forms of solidarity and how all people were sure that they would somehow overcome the crisis.

Whatever measures the individual Member States take, they must be assessed from the point of view of people's well-being and human rights, taking into account all the possible implications of long-term confinement. Considerations that it would be a good thing for older people - only in relation to their age - to remain isolated for a longer period of time, perhaps until the end of the year, have met with much criticism in senior citizens' associations. "We are forgotten," the senior generation says. They feel that they are isolated in the waiting room, while gradually all the other groups take part in active life. For seniors, too, participation is crucial for their well-being, for their health, for their existence as human beings.

For a complete overview find the newsletters on our [site](#).

## Expressing seniors' concerns

On this year's European Day of Solidarity between Generations (29<sup>th</sup> of April), we underlined the need for solidarity to overcome the economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 virus. Especially when intergenerational contacts are limited for a certain period of time, we need to stress that solidarity, including intergenerational solidarity, is a pillar of the European social and economic system. You can find the letter of our president An Hermans on the occasion of this day [here](#).

In a letter to EU Commission president Ursula von der Leyen, Vice-President Dubravca Šuica and EPP President Donald Tusk, the ESU expressed its concerns: respect for human rights, special attention to long-term care and a request for support for the digital training of senior citizens in the context of lifelong learning. We received positive reactions and a supporting letter from EPP President Tusk:

*'The EPP is very grateful for the important work ESU is doing to keep in contact with our senior citizens, exchange best practices and put forward concrete proposals to tackle together the challenge represented by the COVID-19 virus.*

*As you point out in your letter, only by acting together as a Union will we be able to fight this unprecedented health and economic crisis and emerge from it stronger than ever, protecting both our citizens and the European project. Seniors are among the groups of people the most affected by this virus as well as by its social consequences.*

*As EPP, we remain committed to protecting the most vulnerable among us, ensuring equal access to healthcare and promoting solidarity among member countries but also among generations. Once the emergency is over, we will have to rethink our health systems, our workplaces and the functioning of our economies and societies and I count on ESU to continue providing us with its precious input to this end.'*

Several member associations were inspired by our initiative and took similar initiatives in their home country

## Changing communication styles in EU institutions

In the European Parliament, as well as in the European Commission and in the EPP party, meetings at which the participants were physically present were very limited. They were replaced by digital meetings and... Several new initiatives emerged. The EPP communication department worked hard and successfully. The ESU also participated in some of the new initiatives.

On 15 June, we were invited to a first meeting of Working Group 1, with the aim of preparing a vision text for the next EPP congress in the spring of 2021. This meeting was also a video meeting. Former MEP, Vice President Heinz Becker participated in the meeting. A first discussion on the content took place (post corona challenges, climate politics, digitalisation, Fidesz troubles, etc.). Heinz Becker underlined the need for perfect coordination between the initiatives of the EU Commission, e.g. 'The Conference on the Future of Europe', the EPP Group in the European Parliament and the EPP Party.

The EPP also took initiatives to give the ESU a voice through online communication within the 'EPP family interviews'. An Hermans had a Skype meeting with EPP policy advisor Nathan Shepura on the 29<sup>th</sup> of April. Many people could see this conversation. Please find the Skype meeting [here](#).

## Solidarity needed for a coordinated European Exit & Recovery Strategy

In Europe, we can only recover together. We need a strong European response to overcome the COVID-19 crisis and provide a common resilient response to the immense economic and societal challenges. Member States acting on their own will not be enough.

The EU must play an effective and visible role in leading the Common Strategy, addressing challenges in different areas and giving citizens confidence that the EU, governments at all levels and all stakeholders are working together to create solutions.

After many discussions, communications, meetings of the EU Parliament, several videoconferences of the EU Council, agreements on major partial initiatives, the EU Council on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June failed to reach a final agreement on the EU's long-term budget (€1 100 billion for 2021-2027) and a temporary reinforcement (€750 billion) for the next generation of the EU.

European Council President Charles Michel presented his intention to hold an 'in-person summit' around the middle of July, and saw the video meeting as a crucial stepping stone towards an agreement at a subsequent physical meeting.

The European policy-making mostly develops slowly and, although policy-makers work hard, decision-making takes a lot of time. Also in this time of 'emergency'... citizens often had the impression that Europe was absent, or at least invisible, while the media focused on the spread of the disease in the own countries.

EU citizens hope that we will overcome this crisis together, therefore we need Europe, acting in solidarity 'with one great heart' as EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said. This is what citizens expect and deserve.

21 June 2020