



**EUROPEAN SENIORS' UNION**

**#FOOD4THOUGHT EVENT**

**Europe's Senior Voters:**

**Long Term Implications and Challenges for the Centre  
Right**

**Wilfried Martens Centre, Brussels, 1 October 2015**

**Intervention of ESU President An Hermans**

Ladies en gentlemen,

Dear Friends,

1 October is the 25th birthday of the International Day of the Older Persons. Worldwide attention is given to the phenomenon that we all know: we are ageing. This is an individual development and I hope and wish you could all become 'experience experts'. However,... if we are all getting older, and especially if the younger generation grows less strongly, then this 'increasing life expectancy' is not only an individual, but also a worldwide demographic and social development. How do we respond as a society to the economic, social and health questions associated with a society of great longevity? And therefore too: what does it mean on a political level? That is a question that should not only concern parties in the sense of 'how can we win and keep the votes of a growing group of older persons?' The question is more diverse. For the policy makers it also means: how can we implement a policy in which older persons feel at home, in other words, how can we create an 'age friendly' policy? But also society as a whole and especially seniors themselves are invited to look at how older persons – how 'we', as I may say – can improve the participation in the social and political life. If scientists and think tanks give us a hand to shed light on these questions, we obviously have every reason to be happy and grateful.

1. That is why I want to start my speech with a word of thanks. The way that we have gone with this project was for me and our organization, very fascinating. Just before the elections last year we conducted a small survey in our member organizations on their view and commitment to the European Parliament elections. I want to touch on that most of these organizations are affiliated with parties that are members of the European People's Party, and that others are independent for several reasons. After the initial internal findings and discussions, we 'transferred', in a sense, the question asked to a broader study about the place and involvement of older people in the recent

European elections. We were particularly pleased that Professor Steven Van Hecke was attentive to our request and thought it was worthwhile to go along with us on our way. I am particularly grateful that the Martens Centre included our request in its research. I thank the young researchers Lawrence Cappelle and Gilles Pittoors. The conversations with them and Prof. Steven Van Hecke were very enriching as ‘intergenerational’ encounters.

2. Secondly, I want to make a comment to the results of the research. As I said, I appreciate the work that has been done a lot. The researchers know however, better than anyone, that the present data and the method of collecting the data also imply their limitations. As a result of the research process, we often only look at the averages. Although we know that regional differences, the influence of the economic crisis, cultural traditions and knowledge of European integration also have an effect on opinions and attitudes and the involvement in European affairs. I hope that the results of this research may trigger further research. Not only by the researchers of this study, but I hope it will also stimulate others. Lately, and rightly, a lot of action has been taken and a lot of research has been done on the involvement of young people, or to put it better, to their tenacity in refusing to play along in the given ‘political game’. However, I also believe that seniors deserve to receive attention. As pointed out: they experienced the development of the EU. They often have a good knowledge of the functioning of the EU. And yet, even they lost enthusiasm and confidence. This deserves research and attention.
3. That brings me to a third point around which, according to me, it really revolves in this research and in our ESU functioning: participation and in particular, political participation. Participation is one of the five principles, besides independence, care, self-fulfilment and dignity, of the ‘United Nations Principles for Older Persons’ adopted by the General Assembly on 16 December 1991 as resolution 46/91.<sup>1</sup> Participation in society is, to my opinion, as vital for people as breathing for the human body. Participation in political life, the right to vote,... Generations of men and women fought for it... Why do they make so little use of it? Why do they not experience this participation as a source of joy? The researchers will tell me that seniors are the best participants in elections. Who leave other groups, especially young people, behind them.

Ladies and gentlemen, good friends: should we be satisfied with an average participation rate of 51 percent?<sup>2</sup> Knowing that the participation rate is much lower in many member states. The reasons for this non-participation – which is in addition lower than the one for national, regional and local elections – are diverse. On young people and their disinterest in elections there is a lot of research, whereas there is hardly any on seniors. Do we not want to know? Do we not think it is worth it for seniors? Can we blame this absenteeism solely on the citizens? With me, you know that is not the case. For this turn-off, this distrust, this indifference, this not joining in breathing, in the public and political context, politicians and society as a whole are also responsible. I have the speech of Herman Van Rompuy here in mind, when he received the International Charlemagne Prize in 2014. He asked the rhetorical question: “How is it possible that people now see Europe as a reason they feel

powerless and without a say – whereas it was precisely conceived to make them stronger and regain a grip on their own history?’<sup>3</sup> How is it possible? How is it possible?... that this other president, Jean-Claude Juncker, had to call in the Parliament on the European citizens to remember their history, a history of a difficult search for cooperation and integration, of solidarity and democracy.<sup>4</sup>

Ladies and gentlemen, good friends, I think that the time in which we live invites us to take this study, which I am very happy with, not as a simple starting point for some pragmatic questions like: how can we gain more votes on the next occasion and in particular for centre and centre-right parties? With this division between right and left, I have had difficulties since my student days, and therefore I will certainly not start a discussion about it right now. THE fundamental question of participation of citizens, of which only a few aspects were dealt with in this research, certainly transcends the left and right classification and applies to all parties and all associations and bodies that want to enable participation, the social-political breathing.

As European Seniors’ Union we make a small contribution to that. We, this means all volunteers in different member states that work across language and cultural differences to enable participation in an ever-changing context. Therefore, in conclusion, I thank the many enthusiastic seniors in our own ESU. Their commitment and active citizenship are at the basis of our political action and of this publication. I hope they, each in their own place and their member state, and men and women of all generations, will find inspiration in reading this publication.

---

<sup>1</sup> In line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and other declarations and covenants that has to guarantee the implementation of the universal rights, in 1991 five principles were put to the fore: independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity. See: United Nations General Assembly, “Resolution 46/91: Implementation of the International Plan of Action on Ageing and related activities”, 16 December 1991,

<http://undesadspd.org/Ageing/Resources/UNReportsandResolutions/GeneralAssembly/GA16December1991Resolution4691.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> The average participation rate of people over 55 is 55%, whereas the average of the total EU28 population is 42,54%, 28% between 18-24 years old, 35% between 25-39 and 45% between 40-54. Apart from that, there are big differences between the Member States. E.g. People over 55 have a participation rate of 76% in Ireland (Total population average: 52,44%), 64% in Denmark (average 56,30%) and 59% in Germany (average 48,10%), whereas it is only 32% in Croatia (average 25,24%), 28% in Poland (average: 23,83%), and 18% in Slovakia (average 13,05%). See: Data from the European Parliament, *Post-election Survey 2014: European Elections 2014, Socio-Demographic Annex*, p.10.

<sup>3</sup> VAN ROMPUY, H. “Rede von Herman Van Rompuy”, *Der Internationale Karlspreis zu Aachen*, 2014, <http://www.karlspreis.de/de/preistraeger/herman-van-rompuy-2014/rede-von-herman-van-rompuy>.

<sup>4</sup> JUNCKER, J., “State of the Union 2015: Time for Honesty, Unity and Solidarity”, *European Commission - Press Release Database*, 9 September 2015, [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_SPEECH-15-5614\\_en.htm?locale=nl](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-15-5614_en.htm?locale=nl).

**Contact ESU** : ✉ rue de Commerce/Handelsstraat 10, 1000 Brussels

☎ +32 2 309 28 66

@ [esu@epp.eu](mailto:esu@epp.eu)

 <http://esu-epp.eu>

 [facebook.com/esu.eu](https://facebook.com/esu.eu)