

RESOLUTION

of a Regional Conference of the European Seniors' Union

BUILDING BRIDGES TOWARDS SOLIDARITY AND SOCIAL COHESION IN THE BALTIC COUNTRIES

17- 19 May 2018, Vilnius

1. This year Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, as well as the Republic of Poland, celebrate a centennial anniversary of the restoration of their independence in 1918. After a short period of independent life, the Baltic states were occupied by the Soviet Union and only regained their independence again in the 1990s. They have made fundamental progress in the course of their persistent free development: the Baltic countries established solid systems of political democracy; they became members of the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the European Union and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. Thanks to market principles, which form the basis of the economy, and multiple areas of support from the EU – political, economic and financial – living standards in the Baltic countries are gradually approaching those prevailing in the EU as a whole.

2. Despite the obvious achievements in different spheres of social and political life, the Baltic countries face, nevertheless, various internal and external obstacles which hinder their smooth progress towards a deeper cohesion of their societies and the development of harmonious relations with other nations. That is why the participants of the Conference emphasise a particular significance which must be accorded to the strengthening of solidarity and social cohesion in the Baltic states and some other European countries.

3. There are numerous factors, both internal and external, which hamper the promotion of solidarity and cohesion between and inside countries. A spread of various destructive tendencies, manifesting themselves in the inner life of countries, as well as in the area of international relations, exerts a strong negative influence upon the processes of cohesion. One can mention among them the following : increasing xenophobia and intolerance towards refugees and representatives of social minorities; progressive ideological polarisation and radicalisation of political forces or movements; a deterioration in the political arena in some countries and in Europe as a whole; the emergence of Euro-sceptical attitudes, populist parties and movements; an increasing mistrust of

national as well as of European elites and authorities; a persisting tendency to consider a person mainly from a socio-economic perspective; etc. It is important to keep in mind the fact that some of the above indicated tendencies are consciously encouraged by the aggressive regime in contemporary Russia.

4. An urgent challenge to overcome the above-mentioned harmful tendencies cannot be successfully met by any one single country. It requires the consolidated efforts and resources of many European countries. Participants at the Conference welcomed recent documents of the EU (*Reflection Paper on the Social Dimension of Europe, European Pillar of Social Rights*), a draft of EU budget for 2021-2027, which reflects a constant attention by the EU to the strengthening of solidarity and social cohesion between and inside member states of the EU. On the other hand, experience and best practices, accumulated by single countries in the sphere of diminishing social discrepancies, deserve particular attention. A systematic exchange of experiences contributes significantly to sustainable progress of countries towards cohesion in their societies.

5. Analytical approaches to present living conditions in the Baltic countries leads to the suggestion that a struggle for deeper solidarity and social cohesion must take into account, at least, two dimensions of this phenomenon: a) the reduction of disparities, inequalities and social exclusion; b) the strengthening of social relations, interactions and ties, i.e. all aspects which are generally identified with the social capital of society. The first dimension concerns, in essence, the material welfare of people and plays a crucial role until now in fostering social cohesion. The second dimension concerns primarily a person, the quality of his or her interpersonal relations (family, friends, neighbours, that people trust one another), ties with associations and organizations (political parties, clubs) and with macro-level (municipal, state) institutions. According to *The Legatum Prosperity Index 2017*, countries with higher social capital tend to perform better in many spheres of their sociocultural life: “this can be seen of Latvia and Lithuania, who, despite good performance elsewhere, still have low Social Capital sources, holding back their overall level of prosperity” (p.35). This circumstance permits the conclusion that further progress towards social cohesion and prosperity in the Baltic countries cannot be secured without due attention to the development of their social capital.

6. Participants of the Conference, taking into account the challenges that the Baltic countries face in their path towards solidarity, unified societies and harmonious relationships with other countries, **recommend** that national, municipal authorities, the European Union and institutions, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders:

- 1) to secure a due balance between efforts aimed at satisfying people's social welfare interests and efforts directed towards satisfying interests concerning their personal well-being. The latter presupposes an unconditional respect for human dignity, personal freedom, responsibility, a fundamental equality between people and the creation of conditions contributing to their all-round personal development, satisfactory interpersonal relations etc.
- 2) to apply consistently a diversified approach to the issue of satisfaction of social welfare and other interests peculiar to different societal groups, it is necessary to improve the living conditions of people who constantly suffer from various social risks and shortages
- 3) to simulate economic and social developments in order to reduce disparities, inequalities and social exclusion and to promote the strengthening of social relations, interactions and ties to enhance the social capital of society
- 4) to strengthen the role of the mass media to enhance the sensitivity of society and of decision-makers to the problems of persistent social discrepancies and gaps in the development of social capital
- 5) to value strongly the cooperation and solidarity between generations in building up prosperity and well-being for all; to promote the participation of all in the political functioning of our societies, and to improve the involvement of young and older people in all areas of society
- 6) to answer the hopes of the younger generation to live in a united, prosperous Europe, where the diversity of cultures and languages is rich and where we commit ourselves to a future of freedom, peace and democracy.