



Europe's Recovery.

Building the future of fair and resilient societies - including all generations.

A) Context

- On the 11th of March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that the outbreak of the viral disease COVID-19 had reached the level of a global pandemic. This world-wide health crisis concerned all and everyone. It became a health crisis, an economic crisis and the actions taken to stop the spread of the virus changed our way of life and had an enormous impact on our societal life. People across Europe were suffering and had to cope with illness and death and many people feared for their own health and that of their loved ones. Moreover, the economic impact of the pandemic has cost people their jobs and livelihoods, and has started to impact people's well-being and mental health. At the same time, a remarkable growth of individual solidarity became apparent which gives hope for comparable challenges in the future.
- Managing the COVID-19 crisis in the first half of 2020 was predominantly shaped by distinct country-specific national approaches. Although several initiatives were taken at the European level, a common European guidance, a coordinated European approach to cope with the crisis was missing. In the media's headlines the common European voice was weak or missing. In vain citizens asked: "*where are the European values of solidarity and respect for each person?*"
- The COVID-19 crisis has exposed many vulnerabilities, some of which are linked to the profound demographic change already affecting our societies and communities across Europe. Although all age groups are at risk of contracting COVID-19, older persons faced a significant risk of developing severe illness if they contracted the disease due to their physical fragility and underlying health conditions (cardiovascular disease, hypertension, diabetes...). Moreover, older persons living in long-term care facilities (LTCF) were at a higher risk of infection due to living together in close proximity to others. In many European regions their dramatic living and care conditions, the fragmented and chaotic management of the crisis, the suffering of residents and personnel caught the eye of public opinion and international and European institutions, including: the United Nations (UN), the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), the WHO/Europe, the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe (CoE)... Repeatedly, authors expressed their concerns about older persons in LTCF as 'often neglected, out of sight, being among the most vulnerable of all' in our society. On the other

hand, it must be said also that in many cases previous mismanagement over years and even decades, together with the failure of effective reforms, became obvious and evident in the crisis and should be mentioned as additional causes for the enormous problems that national and regional health systems were and are facing.

- In line with previous statements and resolutions, including in the Resolution of the ESU Prague Conference in March 2020, '*Securing the quality of life for all generations in Europe*' and the ESU Declaration of Sandanski 2019: '*Seniors standing up for Europe*', the ESU wants to call on the EPP parties, the EPP in the EP, and all politicians to work together for a resilient recovery for all generations without forgetting the older generations, in particular older persons living in LTCF, often felt forgotten during the recent dramatic period....

B) Building fairer and more resilient societies for all generations

- Also during the period of confinement and lock-down the ESU, as a network of seniors' Associations linked to the EPP, continued our aim of 'connecting with seniors all over Europe' by maintaining contacts and creating digital ways of mutual exchange and communication. We stood together and paid tribute to all those working day by day at the absolute limit of their strength to care for patients, and we therefore express our gratitude to all those in our society who responded in different ways to the changing work and life conditions.
- Now that confinement measures are lifted, European institutions and societies in all member states should work together to implement the lessons learned during COVID-19. This is a historic opportunity for reflection and rebuilding more resilient, more fair, resilient and inclusive societies for all generations. We need to recover together and provide a common resilient response to the immense economic, social and societal challenges. Member States acting on their own is not enough. The EU must play an effective and visible role in leading the Common Strategy, addressing challenges in different areas and giving citizens the confidence that the EU, the national and regional governments and the stakeholders at all levels are working together to develop solutions by, among other measures, reaching 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 EU' initiatives.
- We welcome the announcement of a 'Green book' on demographic change, linked to the Report on the Impact of Demographic Change (2020). Dubravka Šuica, Vice-President for Democracy and Demography, stated: "*Addressing demographic change is key to building a fairer and more resilient society.*" The ESU, representing a vast number of active senior citizens in Europe, wants to be part of the recovery perspective. Referring to the '*Statement on European solidarity and the protection of fundamental rights in the COVID-19 pandemic*' (European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies, 2nd April 2020), we must face this situation with strength, care and solidarity – a social vaccine that accompanies our search for a COVID-19 vaccine, which has an enduring character. One that provides resilience, lasting social and economic solidarity and lasting immunity against indifference.

C) Ensuring that older persons' rights are respected

- In every situation, also in the acute phase of the COVID-19 crisis, human rights are valuable and essential. All policy must invariably be based on the equal worth of all human beings, rooted in a common human dignity. Older persons' human rights must be protected on an equal basis with others, without discrimination. Advanced age should never by itself be a criterion for excluding persons from specialised care. Every person must have access to the health care and long-time care he/she needs. Difficult health-care decisions affecting older people must be guided by a commitment to dignity and the right to health.
- In the phase of lifting containment measures it is essential that the risks of the relaxation of containment measures are taken into account. Vulnerable groups, such as older fragile persons, persons with underlying health conditions (for example cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory and cancer diseases...), need protection, but again a reference to age solely can't be a criterion to make decisions concerning the lifting/not lifting of these measures, or to keep 'people of a certain age' in longer isolation.
- The coronavirus has deepened prejudice against older persons. Over the last months, older persons have been increasingly stereotyped and stigmatized as frail, dependent, as a burden on society, as if all older persons experienced the same symptoms and the same risks of death by sole virtue of their age. Hate speech and ageist comments gained visibility in the media. Isolation and lock-down have worsened the picture of elderly abuse and discrimination. Violence against older persons is increasing. Fighting discrimination and abuse of older persons involves fighting ageism as a structural factor of stereotyping.
- During the acute phase of the spread of the COVID-19 virus and the lock-down, older persons, often grandparents, persons deserving respect from all generations, lived in a very difficult situation. Especially in residential care homes, residents as well as medical and caring personnel went through dramatic circumstances. Physical distancing rules aggravated the risk of social isolation in care homes, as well for persons living alone. Adapted social support and smart efforts to reach older persons could – and can – help older persons to maintain the feeling of 'being part of a community'.

D) Health and social care for older persons

- Europe's healthcare and long-term care systems have been at the forefront throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the past few months, it became clearer than ever that the EU and member states must work together to deliver a coordinated, effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated and exposed the vulnerability of our healthcare systems in the member states and our societies. It is time to improve the Europe-wide coordination and to support the member states to strengthen their systems in the field of public health, especially in emergency situations. In recent months, several initiatives have been undertaken, including the EU4Health programme, the common development of a vaccine, the mobilisation of resources through international pledging and by joining forces with countries and global health organisations to promote universal testing, treatment and vaccination. To master future challenges like the COVID-19 crisis, it is necessary to ensure that all ordinary medical institutions (hospitals, outpatient poly-clinics etc.) would be able to provide a fully-

functioning spectrum of usual, regular and adequate medical services for all patients, especially the older ones, as soon as possible.

- Health and caring personnel in the health, and in particular the long-time care sector, need better work conditions. They were ‘our heroes’ during the pandemic. The main challenge is meeting a growing demand for sufficient, accessible, good quality and affordable health and long-term care services as enshrined in the European Pillar of Social Rights. Ensuring a high level of human health and care protection requires the right infrastructure, such as hospitals, long-term care homes and housing adapted and equipped for older people.
- Our societies need health, social and long-term care systems which provide individualised support to older persons, while promoting their full inclusion in the community. How do we make this happen? This was already an important question over several decades in our ageing societies, and it became a burning question during the period of the Corona crisis. Even when we take into account the competences of governments at several levels, and have the greatest respect for subsidiarity, we can’t deny that we are all concerned. Governments, stakeholders and citizens. Long-time care is one of the crucial social and economic challenges of demographic change across the EU. In Europe, we can learn from each other about how to organize these facilities, respecting older persons’ rights and meeting their needs.
- Therefore, we call for the integration of long-term care in the Social Scoreboard indicators, feeding into the preparation of the Country Reports in the context of the European Semester. It complements the more qualitative assessment of economic and social challenges across the EU, and it is thus one of the answers to the permanent challenges of demographic changes in our societies.

E) Recovering together, realizing solidarity

- In this difficult time, we call to uphold solidarity that is inclusive to everyone and in particular to those who are hit hardest. We hope that the recent dramatic experiences will elicit a broad reflection on our life-style, and in particular on the protection of the most vulnerable persons in our society and how we care for vulnerable older persons. All social, economic and humanitarian responses must take the needs of older persons fully into account, from health care to social protection and a decent income. As most older persons are women, who are more at risk of entering into poverty in this period of life, they need especially our solidarity.
- As solidarity is not a one-way street the ESU, as a strong representation of the elder population of our continent, wishes to show solidarity with the younger generations in Europe by supporting the EU’s Green Deal and by fighting together for the restoration of our climate and environment.
- We need to boost initiatives for healthy ageing and life-long learning, including digital skills, in all age groups. Whilst in some countries the use of digital communication is very common, also among older generations, in other regions many older persons have never learned it. They are missing an important instrument to communicate. In an inclusive society, cohesion between groups requires that older persons also have access to available technology. Life-long learning, participation in the digital world of science and culture and social networking with children,

grandchildren and friends are important gains of such learning processes. Access to the digital world: no generation can miss it.

Therefore older generations need continuous support to reach the necessary capacities to participate in the digital world. Meanwhile all institutions in Europa, governmental or private, are strongly requested to communicate and motivate them via the classical form (printed, papers, TV, radio) as a first step to integrate all those who have no online facilities.

- Rural depopulation, combined with an ageing population, will require ambitious investments to attract the youth, create jobs and make rural areas vibrant while also developing adapted services for all generations. In some EU ageing regions, especially if rural, remote or mountainous, there is a lack of long-term care services. We welcome the promotion of the Silver Economy, a sector that can contribute to increase the quality of life of older persons by providing innovative services, including utilising digitalisation. For that purpose the Silver Economy must respect the needs of seniors and offer them relevant goods and services which respond to and fulfil their aspirations and needs.
- Most older persons who are not suffering from illness and fragility are not dependent and powerless. They are and want to be part of all areas of society. They are fully integrated in family life, work, volunteering, and play an important role in caring for others, teaching and learning. They want to offer their life experiences, their cultural and social heritage to the younger generation and are prepared to look to the future together to build a sustainable future in intergenerational solidarity. They hope their voices count.
- While the pandemic highlighted challenges for health and care systems, with the situation of care homes in the spotlight, the crisis also highlights the power and importance of solidarity, society and mutual support in neighbourhoods and local communities, as people cared for each other, providing both practical and psychological support to reduce anxiety, isolation and loneliness. Furthermore, the COVID-19 crisis emphasizes the role of the traditional family, because seniors in family relationships have overcome the crisis much better than those seniors not having contact with their family or living alone. This also reinforces the importance of psychological support, not only of material help.
- As a consequence of the crisis, analysis by the ESU supports massively the view that henceforth the EU should give political priority to providing prevention, care and health education (“life-time healthy ageing”) for all generations, in order to make our health systems as strong as possible. This includes the most efficient international cooperation, especially in enhancing the exchange of health information between the EU member states’ institutions.
- The ESU urges seizing on this pandemic as a call to foster solidarity and promote resilient societies, where no one is left behind. Let’s foster our European values by protecting and promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

And finally: All generations count the same and must be heard in the upcoming process of European recovery. In Europe, we can only recover together by aiming to build a future of fair and resilient societies.

Brussels, 7 August 2020