

VICE PRESIDENT FOR DEMOCRACY AND DEMOGRAPHY SPEECH
– *“Europe’s future: demographic challenges and opportunities for a
strong recovery”*

European Seniors’ Union

Date event: 16 February 2021

Thank you Madam President, Doctor An Hermans,
Dear Ladies and gentlemen of the European Seniors’ Union,

It is my pleasure to address you today. My only regret is that, under the current pandemic circumstances, our exchange is not possible in person. By coming together today, we are sending a strong message. First, that Europe’s older citizens are high on the European agenda. Secondly, across the European Union, our response to demographic change will have a direct impact on the success of our recovery from the pandemic. In my role as Vice-President for Democracy and Demography, I focus on the whole life cycle, from the rights of children to those of older people. Everyone is impacted directly by the prospect of living a longer life, even the young. So ageing is relevant to all of us, no matter at what stage of our life we are. Ageing brings **both challenges and opportunities**. It is important that we maintain this balance in all aspects of our policy-making. Especially given what we are going through now with COVID-19 and what the future is likely to hold for each one of us.

COVID-19 & DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

When we discuss demography, we talk about people's lives. COVID19 has exposed unprecedented challenges for our health, our economy and our social well-being and demonstrates the importance of addressing demographic challenges. For example, it is clear that the virus has not hit every Member State in the same way. Secondly, it has not hit men and women in the same way. Thirdly, it has not hit the young and older people in the same way. As we look to recover from the pandemic, it is clear that understanding demographic structures is key. A better understanding of a country's demographics from its age structure, its population concentrations, to its household structures and intergenerational interactions will help inform better policy responses.

This understanding is key, given that Europe is going through a profound transformation. It is true that climate change and digitalisation are key drivers. But demographic change is too. It may be less visible and silent but it impacts all our lives and will gain in prominence over the coming years as Europe's ageing population steadily increases. I am pleased to see that members of the European Seniors' Union appreciate this point. Indeed as senior citizens, you explicitly say that you want to be part of a better Europe for all ages.

We often hear that COVID19 is a virus that does not discriminate. But when I look at how it affects our society, there is another side to this, in particular for vulnerable people. I think about older people, the homeless and people with underlying health conditions who are at greater risk. Older people's right to a dignified life and independence is enshrined in Article 25 [TWENTY FIVE] in the EU Charter on Fundamental Rights. But the pandemic hit older people particularly hard and stretched these rights to their limit. In residential care settings, older people were more vulnerable to infection and death. On top of this, protective measures, which were necessary for their well-being, sometimes increased their isolation and loneliness. In the face of scarce resources, their right to equal healthcare was at risk. These are hard truths to face but we must tackle them head-on. Protecting the rights of vulnerable people to life and health, while simultaneously avoiding additional inequalities or worsening already difficult circumstances, should remain our priority as we continue to battle this virus.

When it comes to social services, we must help both the users and the service providers. We have seen how both care-workers and those receiving care have been particularly exposed to COVID-19. We know that social services have been under remarkable strain. The Commission is committed to help. Together with my colleague Commissioners Nicolas Schmit, who is responsible for Jobs and Social Rights, Stella Kyriakides, who is in charge of Health, and Helena Dalli, who is responsible for equality, we held discussions with organisations focusing on providing services to older people, people with disabilities and others who are in need of long-term care. We are listening to the sector and are assessing the different instruments and possible solutions to support both providers and users of these services.

EU's COVID-19 response

The COVID-19 situation is still very serious in nearly all Member States and globally. We are at a critical moment because we need to address both the pandemic itself and the growing weariness with preventive measures. We cannot let our guard down now. We must contain the virus until the vaccination programmes are completed and can give us better means to protect everyone's health. We cannot recover until each and every citizen is protected, healthy and safe. We cannot play games with the lives of our citizens.

COMMISSION'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

The Commission's response has emerged from several angles. We remedied initial shortages and initiated seven joint procurements for protective personal equipment, ventilators and supplies. We are doing the same with **rapid antigen tests**. We insisted on lifting national export restrictions for critical supplies and we suspended customs duties and VAT on such items. We set up the allimportant 'green lanes' to allow the proper functioning of the Single Market and transport. We introduced a coordinated approach to travel restrictions based on common colour-codes for risk zones. We have designed a **European gateway to enable interoperability of COVID-19 tracing apps across Europe**. We proposed an ambitious, forward-looking **EU4Health programme**. And we are building **the first steps towards a European Health Union**.

COVID19 COMMISSION RESPONSE – LESSONS LEARNT

While it is true that no one could have predicted this pandemic, we must build on lessons learnt. As I said already, the Commission's response has emerged from several angles because we are determined to overcome this virus. This is why, along with the Italian G20 Presidency, the Commission will convene a Global Health Summit later this year in Italy. Because when one city, region or country is affected by this virus, we all are.

COVID19 VACCINATION

Vaccination is key to our plans for beating this virus. We have secured access for Member States to vaccines as soon as they become authorised and available, through advance purchase agreements. We have so far secured access to almost 2.3 [TWO POINT THREE] billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines, from six promising vaccine manufacturers. First BioNTech-Pfizer, then Moderna and since 29TH [TWENTY NINTH] of January we have the authorisation of the AstraZeneca vaccine. In recent weeks, production and delivery issues arose regarding BioNTech/Pfizer and AstraZeneca. These are subject to ongoing discussions. Together with all Member States and the companies, we work hard to present a predictable and transparent delivery schedule to deliver on the companies' commitments. On 21 [TWENTY FIRST] of January, Member States agreed on a Council recommendation setting a common framework for the use of rapid antigen tests and the mutual recognition of COVID-19 test results across the EU. This is essential in order to facilitate cross-border movement, cross-border contact tracing and treatment. Let there be no doubt, the Commission has EU citizens' health as its first priority. The next step for us now is addressing the challenge that arises from the different variants of the Coronavirus.

REPORT ON IMPACT OF DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE - OUR FUTURE WORK

Addressing demographic change is key to building a fairer and more resilient society. The Report on the Impact of Demographic Change, which we adopted in June last year is the point of departure for our work. The report identified longer life expectancies as a major development within the Union. Indeed, living longer in better health is one of the highest expectations of European citizens. It is also one of our greatest achievements. Indeed ageing is the demographic mega-trend of our European Union. The report indicates the interrelationship between taking action on demographic change and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, and references issues such as loneliness, social isolation and providing access to essential services and facilities.

Green Paper on Ageing

AGEING

I want to emphasise the important message that **ageing brings both challenges and opportunities. This really drives me in my work** because we must balance our policy-making for everyone **across the entire life cycle**, making sure we leave no one behind. This is why **on the 27 th [TWENTY SEVENTH] of January, we launched an EU-wide discussion on ageing through our Green Paper. This paper is of particular interest to you, given your understanding that one of the key challenges of today's societies is demographic change. As senior citizens, you want to be part of a better Europe for all ages.** I take this opportunity to ask for your support in raising awareness among your members and other stakeholders about the **public consultation on the Green Paper. It is open until 21st [TWENTY FIRST] of April** and I encourage a wide and deep debate.

We look at how we lay the foundations for a full life in the early years and how we make the most of our working lives as adults. We are exploring the new opportunities and challenges for the growing needs of an ageing population. All these stages require us to look at issues such as health, care and pensions, active ageing and the capacity of social protection systems to deal with an ageing population. We will look at intergenerational solidarity and responsibility, impacts on the labour market and the economy. And of course, education and skills.

This issue is multi-dimensional. It is important to grasp the opportunities of ageing. We need to fully understand intergenerational fairness. We must grasp the economic opportunities and the innovative character of the silver economy. The silver economy, meaning the shift in demand for products and services that reflects the specific needs and preferences of older people, is expected to grow by about 5% [FIVE PER CENT] a year from EUR 3.7 [THREE POINT SEVEN] trillion in 2015 [TWO THOUSAND AND FIFTEEN] to EUR 5.7 [FIVE POINT SEVEN] trillion in 2025 [TWENTY TWENTY FIVE]. We have a strong territorial angle in the Paper because certain challenges are reinforced at the regional and local level. Aside from care, pensions, labour market questions, we plan to look more closely at issues such as loneliness, social isolation, mental health, economic resilience and, of course, long-term care. There are two more initiatives under my

portfolio that I would like to draw your attention to; the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Long Term Vision for Rural Areas.

EU STRATEGY ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

During the first quarter of 2021, we will adopt the EU strategy on the rights of the child. This new strategy is designed to embed the perspective of child rights across all European Union policy areas. This signifies the mainstreaming of children's rights in all relevant policy areas, both in the internal and external dimension. On the same day we will also adopt the European child guarantee.

LONG TERM VISION FOR RURAL AREAS

In the second quarter of 2021, we will adopt a Long-term vision for rural areas. This Communication will propose actions to harness the potential of these regions to the maximum. It will address challenges from demographic change to connectivity, low income or limited access to services. It will explore innovative, inclusive and sustainable solutions including those triggered by climate and digital transformation or new developments arising from the current COVID-19 crisis. Crucially, it will offer reflections to feed into future policies. I am sure I can count on your participation in this too, as we reflect on the future for all generations.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Dear Ladies and gentlemen,

Demographic trends are key to responsive policy-making. Europe's older citizens are high on the European agenda. They have to be. They are part of a key demographic trend and they will drive many sectors of our economy, our social and health services and our society overall. Secondly, if we factor demographic change into our policy-making, we will ensure that we are more effective in rolling out our green and digital agendas. And thirdly, across the European Union, our response to demographic change will have a direct impact on the success of our recovery from the pandemic. Demographic trends are key to the recovery from the COVID- 19; By 2060 [TWENTY SIXTY] one in three Europeans will be over 65 [SIXTY FIVE]. We can empower them in their bid to live long, healthy, active and autonomous lives. Today's event will help to deepen society's conversation on older people, their rights and their empowerment. And as ageing is not just for older people but in fact concerns us all, we must educate others in recognising the active and positive role of older people in our society and build the intergenerational solidarity that is so necessary for our European Union, today and in the future. Thank you.

END