



# Building the future **TOGETHER**

ESU celebration 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary and extraordinary Congress.

Madrid, 23-25 September 2021.

Introduction, 24 September 2021

An Hermans

Feeling grateful

- ESU founded in 1995, in Madrid
- Christen-democracy as a foundation
- A network for empowering
- Engaged in a broad spectrum of activities

Looking ahead

- A challenging future
- ESU 's look at EU policy priorities.
- Mainstreaming demographic change
- Ensuring qualified health and care systems
- People-centered 'green deal' and digital transformations

Together for resilient and sustainable societies

- Stronger together
- Rethinking age and ageing
- Where no one is left behind

Let's celebrate

# Welcome speech: Feeling grateful

Honorable guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear Friends,

I feel grateful and honored to stand, next to ESU Vice-president Carmen Quintanilla, here in Madrid,

to open this event at the occasion of the 25th anniversary of ESU.

Being your president since 2013,

it is with proudness, but also with humility that I speak to you, and first, thank you for your confidence and cooperation.

It's you, it's you in your daily active citizenship making the ESU to what it ought to be:

- the voice of seniors believing in Europe,
- a platform for encounters and exchanges,
- a common perspective to create modern, inclusive societies where no one is left behind.

Standing together, like we say in the title of this Congress,

together with all generations,

together with policymakers and citizens,

together with governments at all levels,

together with those who created the road for our association and indicated the road signs.

Dear friends,

The founders of the ESU created the association as a platform for exchanges and empowering senior citizens all over Europe.

They were convinced that every person is called to live and work in dignity and to participate in society for a better tomorrow, based on the fundamental values and basic pillars of Europe: respect for human rights, democracy, the rule of law, social market economy, solidarity, and overall human-centered policymaking, without ever taking these values for granted.

They were inspired by the Christen-democratic vision of society and felt called to commit themselves to its realization. We share that inspiration, and it is our inspiration and mission to this day. And to tomorrow. Tapping our talents and sharing our talents and 'being the guardians of ethics in politics and in all social acting' EPP party president Donald Tusk used to say.

Dear friends,

how can we honor all our friends who have dedicated themselves to the creation and development of our association better than by looking ahead?

By looking to the future, by trying to improve the society in which we live?

In the coming hours, we will look at the European priorities in politics, highlighting some age- or ageing-related accents, creating common perspectives for inclusive, age-friendly societies

Dear friends, that is what we intend to explore today. Here in Madrid where our association was founded and where, again we are pleased to invite you to re-new your engagement and where we invite all political parties, and all policymakers to support this engagement.

I wish you the joyful experience that togetherness is a treasure in our society.

I wish you an interesting day in Madrid.

I thank you.

An Hermans

Looking ahead

Building the future together.

Responding to some challenges.

Ladies and gentlemen,  
Dear Friends,

In this morning programme, we are looking together to some challenges ahead. First of all, challenges, to which the EU and Member States responded already in planning the

**Priorities for the governance period 2019- 2024.**

Beside the challenges and priorities highlighted by the EU institutions, and of course welcomed by us, we also want to shed light to some age- and/or ageing related priorities, being in our immediate interest.

## **The EU's policy priorities**

When Ursula von der Leyen took office as President of the European Commission on 1 December 2019, the EU Commission presented six priorities to pursue:

- **1. a European Green Deal;**
- **2. a Europe fit for the digital age;**
- **3. an economy that works for people;**
- **4. a stronger Europe in the world;**
- **5. promoting the European way of life;**
- **6. a new push for European democracy.**

The sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic the EU's emergency response and the planning of a coordinated EU Recovery, however, overshadowed all other political objectives in 2020 and 2021.

Nevertheless, the initial priorities of the new Commission, aiming to frame the EU political perspectives, remained as benchmarks for political action. The crisis has had inevitably some influence on the realization of the EU Commissions' priorities, but the topics weren't changed and... finally only a seventh priority was added to the existing list, namely **action to contain the coronavirus crisis and promote economic recovery from it.**

A structured Recovery Plan must lead Europe out of the crisis into sustainable, long-term economic growth, based on a green transition and a digital transformation. (The comprehensive package for European recovery, with its overall budget of €1.85 trillion. Major initiatives like the 'Next Generation EU' boost the EU budget in the first crucial years of the

recovery and contribute, together with the reinforced budget for 2021-2027, to making it sustainable, inclusive, and fair.<sup>1)</sup>

We were glad to see finally start medio 2021 the Conference of the Future of Europe, aiming at the improvement of the functioning of democracy, transparency, and participation in policymaking. Conferences and a digital platform are open to all European citizens and invite to participate in a common reflection on the Future of Europe.

When I now may highlight some concerns, near to our heart and being part of our longstanding call for an 'age-friendly society, then I can start mentioning the coordinated EU strategy responding to Demographic Change.

## **Mainstreaming demographic change**

**“Demographic Change: one of the ‘deepest-lying challenges’ for European societies”**

*Dubravka Šuica,*

*Vice-President of the European Commissi*

- With the nomination of an EU Vice-president, Dubravka Šuica, in charge of 'Demography and Democracy' and 'to work with all Commissioners to ensure that our tools and policies take account of the implications and impact of demographic change',<sup>2</sup> an important sign was given.
- Governments at all levels have a shared interest in responding to the impact of demographic change for the benefit of all generations. The way forward depends on several strategic questions, including: how to stimulate innovation and productivity? How to bring more people into employment? How to modernise healthcare systems, social protection, and social services and how to address regional disparities? We also must look closely at people's social well-being and how they cope with problems like loneliness, social isolation, mental health, economic resilience, and long-term healthcare...
- A policy answer to most of these questions is within the competence of the Member States and local governments, but cooperation between Member-States and all policy levels could certainly improve the efficiency and strengthen the results. And: 'working together' has many faces: It is not only about some age-related policy sectors like long-term care and pensions, it is about the organization and the mentality of our society towards inclusiveness for all ages in all parts of society.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility\\_en#the-recovery-and-resilience-facility](https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility_en#the-recovery-and-resilience-facility)

<sup>2</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/sites/default/files/commissioner\\_mission\\_letters/mission-letter-dubravka-suica](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/sites/default/files/commissioner_mission_letters/mission-letter-dubravka-suica)

**We hope that the EU, with the policy initiatives of the recent years, definitively has taken an age-friendly compass on board. In any case, we were glad to welcome in recent months several EU Council decisions and EU Commission initiatives showing that** together with the Member States, the regions and all stakeholders, the EU made a resolute choice to integrate ageing policies as a mainstream in all policy areas.

## **Ensuring qualified health and long-term care systems.**

**The COVID-19 pandemic - a health crisis, an economic crisis, and a social crisis - posed an existential challenge to the European project and put the question on the table: is the EU doing enough to protect the health of its citizens?**

To combat the COVID-19 pandemic and future health emergencies, we need a strengthened coordination framework and reinforcement of existing structures and mechanisms to improve protection, prevention, preparedness, and response at EU level against threats to human health.

**The new realities of the COVID-19 crisis have increased the focus on health policy at EU level. How can we implement the lessons we learnt from the pandemic, giving healthcare a higher priority in the recovery policy, placing health policy at the centre of our priorities, addressing the health and care needs of older persons? What is needed to improve the cooperation between Member States and international institutions? Several groups, also the EPP Group in the European Parliament, have explored what can be done.<sup>3</sup>**

The EPP Group calls for more coordination and the extension of European action in health policy within the existing Treaties. Health needs to become more central to European politics. It is clear for the EPP Group, the potential for more coordinated European action exists. We were glad to hear that also Commissioner Kyriakides is taking the lead in this perspective.

## **People-centered 'green deal' and digital transformation.**

Most of the EU priorities (a stronger Europe in the world, an economy that works for people, a new push for European democracy, promoting the European way of life) are comprehensive, broad priorities. Concrete are the objectives towards a European Green Deal and a Europe fit for the digital age.

The 'green deal' and the 'digital era' involve everyone. Moreover, they are often linked and twinned with each other. In several programs the EU Commission regularly refers to 'twin green and digital transitions. In their turn, they influence our economic and social life, our democracy and living environment. **To help achieve its climate goals, and reinforce digital**

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<sup>3</sup> [EPP Group Position Paper on Health: A European Union for Health- 2020](#)

**transformation, the EU decided to strengthen both areas in the EU budget and the Recovery plans: at least 30% of new resources will go to fighting against climate change and twenty percent to digital.**

### **The European 'green deal'.**

The EU is at the forefront of international efforts to promote economically, environmentally, and socially sustainable development to address the planetary crisis and in particular to fight climate change.

The EU, together with its Member States, have set themselves binding targets of achieving climate neutrality by 2050. Step by step the EU is working on the revision and update of its climate, energy and transport-related legislation under the so-called 'Fit for 55 package'. This 'Fit for 55' refers to the at least 55% emission reduction target which the EU has set for 2030. It is an intermediate step towards climate neutrality by 2050.

The ESU welcomes the 'Fit for 55' initiative, aiming at providing a coherent and balanced framework for reaching the EU's climate objectives

- that is **fair and socially just**,
- maintains and strengthens **innovation and competitiveness** of EU industry
- and underpins the EU's position as **leading the way** in the global fight against climate change.

A long list of legislative **proposals and policy initiatives** has to be discussed and adopted following the EU **legislative procedure**, finding agreements between the EU Commission, the Parliament and the EU Council.

It will be a challenge for the ESU and all citizens to be involved in these policy processes, as well in the preparatory period as in the implementation phase, as well at the European level as in the Member States.

### **Society's digital transformation**

The ESU-attention towards digitalisation can be seen as one of the results of the recent COVID-19 pandemic. As never before we learned how technology influenced our world and how a human-centered, trustworthy digital transformation is offering opportunities in all areas of society.

More than ever, it was, and it is obvious that digital connectivity and frequent use of the internet is needed not only in a professional context, but that 'all and everyone' is supposed to

be able to use the internet and to be integrated in the digital era. Mastering digital technology has become a key component of what it means to participate fully in society.

**If we do not provide technology access, digital literacy, and training to older persons, then the risks of social exclusion and loneliness will increase. Older persons have the right to participate in all areas of society. Digital integration is a crucial condition for connectivity and to participate and contribute to society.**

The ESU welcomes recent policy plans from the EU (The EU 2030 Digital Compass<sup>4</sup>), governments at several levels, public and private stakeholders, and civil society, responding to the need for strategic and operational actions to build inclusive digital societies. Almost always the principle of 'digital inclusion for all' and the need for digital literacy are highlighted, but goals, roadmaps and action plans are mostly totally linked to formal education, schooling, and professional employability. Older persons, nor targeted nor reached by most initiatives, are risking digital isolation and this is intrinsically intertwined to social isolation.

The ESU defends the rights of senior citizens to participate in society, as well online as offline, and to enjoy the advantages and opportunities of digitalization in private and public life. .

- Our societies have to cope with the obstacles that limit digital inclusiveness: lower digital skills, low education level, financial vulnerability, remote areas...;
- Governments at different levels, stakeholders, internet service providers, non-formal education services, seniors' associations, young people and seniors in mutual learning connections... all have a role to play to build 'inclusive digital societies.
- **The EU and international institutions can be the stimulus and the engine of the implementation of the principle of digital inclusiveness.**

**Media and Information Literacy are the first steps to participate in digital societies, are the building blocs to digital active citizenship. The ESU is urging governments, all stakeholders and civil society itself, to create a diversity of initiatives, not only to be developed for seniors and with seniors, but for all generations. (See ESU Statement; see ESU Resolution to be adopted by the Congress:**

**Towards an active and competent participation of all in resilient digital societies:  
THE NEED OF MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY FOR ALL AGE GROUPS**

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<sup>4</sup> The EU digital Compass : [2030-Digital-Compass-the-European-way-for-the-Digital-Decade.pdf](https://eufordigital.eu/2030-Digital-Compass-the-European-way-for-the-Digital-Decade.pdf) ([eufordigital.eu](https://eufordigital.eu))



# Together for resilient and sustainable societies

'Europe can only recover together' that was as a refrain repeated in view of the recovery after the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis. COVID-19 has highlighted how interdependent we are; that we needed to stand together to find effective responses to problems.

This 'standing together' was needed in several fields. In the process to attain results for a vaccine, in the distribution of the vaccine, in the organization of the vaccination process....

Also in the economic recovery process, the availability of resources, the re-start of industrial processes and so much more. Moreover, it was only in standing together in global responses that we could respond to the shared threats of the pandemic.

Also, other challenges such as climate change, geopolitical considerations or cybercrime require the same global response. And what about demographic change?

And.... we felt it all. We felt how we needed each other. No where more than in family live, between loved ones, in associations and in societal life, we need interpersonal relations, to meet and love, to care for each other, to plan and play, to learn and work, to celebrate, to look ahead, to enjoy live, to create the future....

We, as ESU, as seniors, we want to express and underline that as a senior generation, we like to meet and stand together with the young generation. Everyone knows, how there is a solid boundness between grandparents and grandchildren. How they listen to each other and learn from each other. If only such a small permanent ray of trust and hope could be the building stone of our intergenerational relations with young generations in societal live! Then it would be clear that older generations don't won't to steel the future of young generations, that we respect and believe in each other, ready to tap all the talents and experiences, ready to explore the new aspirations, expectations, and competences of young generations. And that, standing together and looking in a same direction, we can build a strong, resilient, and sustainable future.

Without discrimination.

Without ageism.

In solidarity.

I am convinced that we must rethink the way our society is looking at age and ageing.

Growing older, is a dimension of the life course. Healthy ageing must start in the childhood. A life, a hopeful long and healthy life expectancy, a life course that we got as a gift and an opportunity, with talents and capacities to develop, is a treasure to develop and to share. But nobody can do it alone. We need each other. We need the framework of an inclusive society. My generation knows how important human-oriented policies, creating equal opportunities for all children, girls and boys were /and are. We all together in this unique meeting in Madrid, thankful for the chances we got, ready to continue the road ... we call on younger generation, leading persons in governments and society to stand together and meet and listen to each other to open new perspectives. Because we are stronger together. Without barriers between ages, Participating and taking responsibilities together. For inclusive societies, where no one is left behind.

The history of our ESU will continue.

We will continue, supported by all the experience we have gained over the years

and looking forward with new eyes, because tomorrow is a new day, with new challenges in an ever-changing world and...

the future does not invent itself.

We, all together, we must build that future. We are driven to shape a better tomorrow. Together we must find the answers to tomorrow's challenges.

An Hermans  
ESU President  
11 September