

For a **better*** tomorrow



Reflections after 10 years in the presidency of ESU

Speech by An Hermans at the Election Congress in Leuven

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Dear Colleagues,

Dear friends,

Most of the times I have stood in front of you, I was in a rush to look ahead, eager to share new plans. But today it is different. Today, all I want to do is share some memories and express my thanks. Thank you for your loyalty, your cooperation, and your friendship. Thank you for the incredible 10 years of my life that I've been able to share with you all, dedicated men, and women from across Europe, united by the European dream, the dream of a better tomorrow for all generations.

Allow me to highlight some of the aspects that made the past decade so meaningful for me as President of the European Seniors' Union (ESU).

How It All Began

It was during the preparations for the regional ESU conference in Eupen on March 17, 2009, that I, then chairperson of the CD&V seniors, first encountered the ESU. I quickly realised that the ESU didn't have many rigid 'rules', but that it offered 'room for action': opportunities for engagement and commitment to Europe. It was Elisabeth Dispaux-Cornil (1936-2024), who sadly passed away in January of this year, who encouraged and supported me to develop initiatives and ultimately paved the way for my presidency of the ESU. For this presidency, I was bringing in three crucial building blocks:

1. My short experience as a Member of the European Parliament during a pivotal period in the European unification (1989-1994), which underscored to me the essential nature of Europe for all of us - echoing the sentiments of Adenauer in 1954, *'Europe was a dream for a few, it was a hope for many, and... it became a necessity for all.'* Since that time, my 'window on Europe' has remained wide open;
2. My lifelong passion for 'working with people', a passion not learned from textbooks or acquired through degrees, but nurtured through practical experiences in youth work (Chiro) and educational work with women (KAV) in the Christian social workers' movement;

3. Lastly, my determination to comprehend and address societal changes. It's no surprise that I began my presidency by delving into scientific insights and international trends on demographic change.

A Decade in the Presidency

In November 2013, I was elected as President of the ESU, and subsequently re-elected in 2016 and 2019. From the outset, we felt a strong interest from Dr. Bernhard Worms, my predecessor. Throughout this period since 2013, most of the tasks, including financial responsibilities, managed by Etienne Vanderroost, were shared by a small group of volunteers, coordinated by our Secretary General, Guido Dumon. Over the years, Guido and I learned to work as a team, sharing tasks and optimising each other's efforts. Some of our Vice-Presidents, organised interesting regional conferences, or, like Heinz Becker, played crucial roles in European People's Party (EPP) task forces and ESU meetings. Thank you for this support!

We were fortunate to have a valued circle of experienced speakers in European policy and scientific research. From Herman Van Rompuy, the first President of the European Council, to MEPs, researchers from universities and think tanks. Moreover, through Professor van Hecke, some job students came every year to take their first steps on the European field. Sometimes I still meet some of them. It always gives me great pleasure when I suddenly hear some one next to me on the street in Leuven or in Brussels: Hello An, do you remember me? I'm Idris, or Tom, or Arne... And no... I usually don't recognize them: dressed as young professionals, they completely look different from the boys they were 10 years ago. But their young voices and the sympathy across the generations, sound like music.

Among the many speakers, two stand out for their enduring contributions to the ESU. Professor Steven Van Hecke was our exceptional expert, keynote speaker, interlocutor, and moderator, offering invaluable support throughout. I also want to mention Patrick Penninckx, in the Council of Europe Head of Department of Digital Governance and Development, who guided us through the complexities of digitization amidst the COVID-19

crisis. Despite we were an unconventional audience for him, he engaged and challenged us like no other. With our 'INGO participatory status' recently awarded by the Council of Europe, we hope to count on his inspiration to continue embodying the Council's fundamental values.

Being Part of a Prominent Societal Trend

During the recent period in the leadership of a seniors' association, we felt day by day that we were part of a prominent societal trend. Ageing, demographic shifts, and the rise of ageing societies have become significant trends in the 21st century, with roots tracing back to the mid-20th century.

Ageing Societies

The term "ageing societies" reflects the increasing number of individuals reaching old age, alongside declining birth rates. Scientific research has shed light on shifting attitudes among older generations, dispelling stereotypes that presumed an inevitable decline with age. In 1982, the first World Assembly on Ageing convened in Vienna, uniting Member States, specialised agencies, and organisations like the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the World Health Organization (WHO). The resulting Vienna International Plan of Action on Ageing laid the groundwork for international efforts on ageing, emphasising an inclusive society based on human rights principles. This agreement paved the way for ongoing efforts to address ageing populations worldwide, with subsequent plans building upon its principles and objectives.

Given the scale of demographic change, governments worldwide are compelled to address the challenges and opportunities arising from these shifts. In recent years, international organisations- also the Council of Europe and the European Union- have initiated measures to promote seniors' rights. We were pleased to welcome, for the first time, a member of the EU Commission responsible for Demography and Democracy, Vice-President Dubravka Šuica. She stated that demographic change is: "*One of the 'deepest-lying challenges' for European societies*", when she started in 2019 her mandate as responsible for the development and coordination of European initiatives in the field of 'better ageing'.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear friends,

The involvement of civil society is crucial for the success of social change also when it comes to responding the challenges of demographic change. Governments must leave room for participation, the life experience of the older persons, their life history must be considered in proposed policy initiatives. In this complex process of creating age-friendly societies where all generations can live in dignity, civil society associations like ESU can play a crucial role.

European History Through the Life Stories of Fellow Citizens Across Europe

Dear friends,

Thank you for being an eye-opener for me and for many of our fellow-citizens.

Meeting people from all corners of Europe was a profoundly moving experience for me, particularly in the early years of my presidency. Educated in a the post-war era, I held a perception of Central and Eastern European countries as very distant and fundamentally different from the West I was living in. However, encountering men and women of my age, from those countries—who had moreover joined the EU since 2004—I found a common hope of overcoming distance and fighting for reunification.

Dear friends,

You told me about your life under autocracy and oppression shattering your youthful aspirations. I learned about your struggle for freedom and democracy. It left an indelible mark on me. Your stories were more than just enlightening; they stirred something deep within me, inspiring a commitment to fostering a Europe of mutual respect and solidarity, bridging the gaps between North and South, East and West. The path to a united Europe isn't merely a journey for individual nations and peoples; it's about journeying together across borders and generations, a movement of civil society.

I was therefore delighted that we recently welcomed our Romanian colleagues as member organisation of the ESU, and that we explicitly advocated for solidarity between generations and across borders in our EPP Manifesto. I hope that all member parties of the EPP will support the idea of associations for seniors. It deepens our understanding of citizenship in changing societies and paves the way for more conscious action. And we know that conscious citizens can truly make a difference.

What our ESU stands for: Empowering Seniors & Action for Inclusive Societies

Now, let me shortly share some examples of how we promote the interests of seniors, enhance living conditions, and pave the way for a brighter future for all generations.

Empowering seniors at the occasion of 'International Days'

In our meetings, conferences, and online platforms, we strive to uphold the fundamental rights and dignity of every senior citizen, banning ageism and promote solidarity between generations.

The celebration of some 'International Days' are low-threshold moments to draw attention to the rights of older persons. We're thinking about this European Day for Cooperation between Generations (April 29), the World Elder Abuse Awareness Day (June 15), and the United Nations International Day of Older Persons (UNIDOP- October 1). These occasions are not just dates on a calendar; these initiatives underscore the ESU's commitment to fostering a society where seniors' contributions are respected and valued, promoting solidarity, and understanding between different age groups, and advocating for policies that ensure active participation and dignity for all. We are always pleased to see that our concerns also resonate at national and local level.

Some Background

[World Elder Abuse Awareness Day](#) sheds light on the issue of abuse of older people, a grave concern affecting many seniors worldwide. The day serves as a platform to

educate society about recognizing and preventing various forms of abuse, such as neglect, financial exploitation, and emotional mistreatment. By promoting awareness, we strive to create a safe and respectful environment for the older generation, fostering a culture of empathy and support.

[The European Day for Cooperation between Generations](#) emphasises the value of intergenerational relationships and cooperation. It encourages solidarity and understanding between different age groups, promoting an inclusive society where the knowledge and experience of older generations complement the energy and innovation of the younger ones. Through intergenerational initiatives, we can bridge gaps, reduce stereotypes, and build stronger communities.

[The United Nations International Day of Older Persons](#) celebrates the contributions of senior citizens to society. It advocates for their rights, dignity, and well-being. As the global population ages, this day reminds us of the importance of addressing the challenges faced by older persons and promoting policies that ensure their active participation and respect.

Together, these awareness days remind us to honor and cherish the older citizens, fostering a society that values their wisdom, experience, and unique perspectives. By standing united, we can create a more caring and inclusive world for all generations.

Empowering Seniors: Lifelong Learning for Active Citizenship

At the heart of the ESU's mission are the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities, fostering active citizenship among seniors across Europe and building bridges between policymakers and citizens.

One notable initiative in this regard is the annual 'Summer Academy', a collaborative effort between the ESU, the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, the Österreichische Seniorenbund, and Polak. It all started with the enthusiasm and dedication of Marilies Flemming (1933-1923) and a passionate team from the Austrian Seniorenbund.

Since its inception in 2009, this event has been a beacon of learning and inspiration for leading figures in seniors' associations. Initially held in Vienna for over a decade, the Summer Academy expanded its horizons to Leuven, Belgium, in 2023.

But the Summer Academy isn't just only about lectures and presentations. It's about the connections we forge, the experiences we share, and the knowledge we bring back to our communities. As participants, we leave

with more than just information; we leave with a renewed sense of purpose and a commitment to driving positive change.

Through initiatives like the Summer Academy, we empower our seniors to remain active participants in society, continuously learning, growing, and contributing to the collective well-being of our communities.

Action for inclusive societies: seniors' voices in Decision-Making

The final aim of the ESU is of course the active participation of seniors in all parts of society, including politics and decision-making processes, in particular in processes related to seniors' issues. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of this mission. The ESU has then called repeatedly for treating seniors with the respect they deserve.

One key focus area has been the inclusion of seniors in the digital society. The pandemic highlighted the essential need for digital literacy and participation, making it clear that digital engagement is not merely a personal choice but a collective necessity for everyone in today's digital era.

In alignment with our initiatives, the Council of Europe's Department of Media and Information reached out to me to prepare a comprehensive report on age-related challenges in digitization. The project came alive and after lots of research in 2022 and was titled "The digital era? Also my era!" This report underscores our firm advocacy for the inclusion of older persons in today's information society. I am proud that this project was warmly welcomed by our ESU members and is now available in 7 languages.

The Digital Era? Also My Era!

On the invitation of the Council of Europe to compile an informative brochure on the subject of digital literacy within the senior generation was made, this is how "[THE DIGITAL ERA? ALSO MY ERA! Media and information literacy: a key to ensure seniors' rights to participate in the digital era](#)" was born.

In the context of ageing populations and digital transformation, the brochure highlights the need for inclusive societies that respect human dignity and ensure

active participation regardless of age. Emphasising Media & Information Literacy (MIL), it advocates for empowering older adults to navigate digital spaces safely, promoting freedom of expression and democracy. It stresses the importance of technology addressing daily concerns across generations, fostering accessible environments. It also calls for policies safeguarding human rights and democracy in the digital era. Lastly, it urges stakeholders to prioritise MIL initiatives, recognizing its role in ensuring equitable access and informed participation in the digital age.

Over the years the ESU has developed crucial resolutions addressing significant issues affecting seniors. The close cooperation with the European People's Party (EPP) ensures that relevant information is shared, and European policies are aligned with the needs of seniors. I am grateful for the openness and respect we were able to experience in the EPP.

We highlight only some statements and resolutions from the last years. You can find them also on our website or in our Annual Reports. For instance, our 'recovery-resolution' prepared during the COVID-period (2020-2021) calls for building fairer and more resilient societies in the wake of the pandemic, while our statement on Digital Inclusion highlights the importance of addressing age-related challenges in digitization and promoting strategies to close the digital divide. The ESU, in line with the EPP-group, has played a pivotal role in advocating for accessible and high-quality care for seniors through our Care Strategy Resolution. We've also been addressing concerns of age discrimination, as evidenced by our critique of the recent EU Commission's drafts on changes in the driver's licences. It taught us that working together in civil society and with MEPs assures the best results. Advocating for fairer and more inclusive policies and strategies concerns the whole society.

An overview of some of our crucial statements and resolutions on relevant issues for Seniors in Europe around which we have convened and debated as ESU.

- (2020)The ESU's resolution: "[Europe's Recovery; Building the future of fair and resilient societies – including all generations](#)," calls on the EU to lead in implementing lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasising the need for a fairer, more resilient society.

- (2021) With our statement: "[Older persons and digital inclusion in today's information society](#)," We commend recent policy efforts to foster inclusion in the information society and urge governments and stakeholders to ensure full participation, particularly for older generations, in combating the digital divide.
- (2023) The ESU's resolution: "[The New European Care Strategy: towards affordable quality care for all people who need it](#)," emphasises the importance of providing accessible and high-quality care to all who require it.

Looking ahead

Over the years, I've witnessed the potential we hold as an organisation, and I've encouraged our members to make the most of this potential. Our work relies heavily on seniors being engaged and involved in their local communities. This is essential to our mission. Moreover, I don't see a contradiction between being engaged on the local level or at the European or international level. In the difficult times we are living in, we feel more than ever how problems and solutions at different political levels are interdependent and how we need each other!

Our collaboration with the EPP on the Manifesto for the European elections underscores the significance of our collective efforts in shaping the future of Europe. I hope that we will engage all together to defend the EPP Manifesto and in particular the general orientation and the basic values.

Together with the European People's Party and member parties in the Member States we stand for a strong Europe, where people come first. Europe is our home, it is not perfect, and it needs reform, but it is our home, the best home we have been able to build so far. We will continue to improve it, guided by the European values of democracy, dignity, solidarity, and equality and promoting peace, security, prosperity and sustainable living.

We will remember the words of Vaclav Havel (1936-2011). He said in 1996: Europe is a task and described the task of Europe as "*To rediscover its conscience and its sense of responsibility not just with regard to its own political architecture but also with regard to the world as a whole.*" Mr. Havel

highlighted the political need for European unity. He described the EU as an unprecedented attempt to make Europe into a unified, democratic space of solidarity. Today, all these years later, his words sound like a crystal-clear call for European unity, founded on the fundamental values of the European project. And we know how important European unity and solidarity are!

Dear Friends,

I would like to ask you: keep going!

For a better tomorrow!

For Europe!

Keep going and make our ESU stronger!

I thank you!

An Hermans

The European Seniors' Union

The ESU embodies an inspiring community of volunteers, propelled by their commitment to advancing European societies and enhancing the well-being of their fellow citizens. Serving as intermediaries, they bridge the divide between their national associations and European policymakers. At the heart of the ESU's mission is the promotion of a human rights approach in ageing policies and the advocacy for the rights of older persons throughout their entire lifespan.

A defining characteristic of their efforts is the promotion of 'active citizenship' across various policy levels through education and political engagement. Leveraging their deep understanding of European history and their dedication to volunteerism, the ESU contributes significantly to fostering an inclusive and equitable society where the voices of seniors are heard and respected.

From the EPP Manifesto

Our Europe, a safe and good home for the people

Europe is our home. As EPP, we have built a Europe where people's dignity, security and freedom always come first. We, as Europeans, are more than the sum of our national identities. Our history, our heritage, our Judeo-Christian roots, and our cultural diversity define us. United in diversity is a unique strength that has made peace and prosperity possible for most Europeans.

Faced with a complex world, some believe that everyone should dream of being a 'global citizen' without roots. Others want to close all doors and retreat into national egoism. We do not agree! We are proud of our roots and confident about the future. We do not tell citizens what to believe or what to fear, but we listen to them, respect them, and deliver for them. We are bridge-builders. EPP invented our social market economy, which balances economic freedom with social responsibility. EPP stands for a strong democracy based on rule of law which means that it is the citizens who really decide. EPP fights for a strong Europe that protects its people.

We believe in our European way of life. Freedom is key, but freedom without security is an empty word. Our people expect a Europe that makes them feel safe in every facet of their life. Our people want secure jobs that ensure a good life and support growing families. Our people expect Europe to champion a life with freedom, justice, and democracy.

We stand for a strong Europe that speaks with one voice on democracy, rule of law and freedom. A Europe that confidently stands up to autocrats and stands by those who fight for our European way of life, as Ukrainians are doing against Putin's aggression. A Europe that protects its borders and tackles illegal migration.

We stand for a competitive Europe that boosts its economy and creates quality jobs, while building a good economic future for everyone. We believe in European leadership in climate protection not only to safeguard our planet, but also to promote economic prosperity and food security with less bureaucracy, while boosting innovation and a future-oriented energy union. We want Europe to shape and lead the future by investing in state-of-the-art infrastructure, innovation, and digital technologies. An open Europe that also protects its own interests. We want to provide our citizens and companies with access to global markets by concluding smart, reciprocity-based trade agreements with like-minded partners.

We stand for a citizens-oriented Europe that supports families, creates opportunities for all, promotes equality between women and men, and solidarity between generations. A Europe that protects and cares for the most vulnerable in our society, online and offline. A Europe that ensures every technological innovation puts people first. A Europe that turns brain drain into brain gain. A Europe that invests in health research, guarantees high health and care standards, and fights diseases.

We stand for a democratic Europe where the people decide, a Europe that upholds its core values, within and beyond its borders. A Europe which guarantees that citizens are equal before the law and regains the trust of those who feel unheard or left behind.

Europe holds all the right cards to shape the future. As the EPP has done over the last decades, we will keep Europe together, we will defend the European way of life based on freedom, pluralism, subsidiarity, solidarity, democracy, the rule of law, and promote sustainable economic growth and development. With the EPP in Europe's driving seat, Europeans will be stronger and safer.