

Speech for the 20th Anniversary of Zveza Seniorjev Nova Slovenija (N.Si)

06.09.2024

Dear Friends of the Senior Organization of Nova Slovenia,

It is a great honour and a personal pleasure to be here today, celebrating the 20th anniversary of *Zveza Seniorjev Nova Slovenija* (N.Si). As the newly elected president of the European Seniors’ Union (ESU), I am deeply appreciative of this opportunity to address you on behalf of our organisation. This occasion is not just a milestone for your group but also a moment to reflect on the broader mission we all share: advocating for the rights, dignity, and well-being of seniors across Europe.

**Celebrating 20 Years of Dedication and Service**

Sustaining an organisation for two decades is no small feat. It speaks volumes about the commitment, dedication, and perseverance of the many volunteers and leaders who have made this possible. I extend my heartfelt congratulations to each of you. Bringing people together, developing meaningful themes, and organising activities consistently over 20 years requires immense effort and a shared vision. Your work is not only vital here in Slovenia but also resonates across Europe, where the interests of seniors often remain on the periphery of public discourse.

Your accomplishments are a testament to what can be achieved when people unite around a common cause. The fact that we are here today, celebrating this 20th anniversary, is a reflection of the passion and determination that each of you has brought to this organisation. It is also a reminder of the importance of community, of the bonds that have been forged through shared experiences, challenges, and triumphs. These connections are the lifeblood of any organisation, and they are especially crucial in the work that we do, as we seek to empower and uplift the senior community.

As we gather here today, I want to emphasise the importance of continuing our efforts to advocate for seniors' rights. The ESU has a critical role to play in ensuring that the respect we all seek is upheld at every level: local, national, and European. As I enter this stage of life myself, I am aware of the diversity within our senior community. We are a diverse group with different experiences, needs, and aspirations, yet we all share a common desire to be treated with respect, to be heard, and to be valued.

Respect is not just a matter of politeness or social niceties; it is about recognizing the inherent dignity and worth of every individual, regardless of age. It is about ensuring that seniors are not marginalised or sidelined, but rather, that they are fully integrated into all aspects of society. This is not just a moral imperative; it is a practical necessity. As our population's age, the contributions of seniors will become increasingly important to the fabric of our societies. We must ensure that seniors have the opportunities to continue contributing in meaningful ways.

**Five Key Areas for Senior Citizens**

Let me outline five key areas that I believe are crucial for improving the lives of senior citizens. These areas are not just important for the senior community, but for society as a whole. Addressing these challenges will help create a more just, equitable, and inclusive society for everyone.

1. Decent and Independent Living:

First and foremost, how can we ensure that seniors have the right to a decent and independent life, with ample opportunities to engage in social and cultural activities? We must focus on securing sufficient income, enabling seniors to live independently in their communities, ensuring access to senior care services, and maintaining their decision-making power. This is not just about financial security, though that is important. It is also about creating environments that support independence, that allow seniors to live in their own homes, in familiar neighbourhoods, with access to the services and support they need. Addressing the stigma of ageing and raising awareness about senior depression is also essential. We must recognize that ageing is not a burden, but a natural part of life, and we must create a society that supports people at every stage of life.

2. Affordable, Personalized Care and Housing:

Second, how can we make care and housing affordable and personalised for seniors? Government support is crucial in making care and housing both affordable and tailored to the individual needs of seniors. Seniors should not have to choose between paying for housing and paying for essential care. We must work to ensure that seniors have access to safe, comfortable, and affordable housing options that meet their needs.

3. Social and Personal Safety and Mobility:

Third, how can we ensure social and personal safety and mobility for seniors? Technological solutions and conventional mobility aids are vital in supporting the independence of seniors. The growing demand for care services, especially due to demographic shifts and changing family structures, presents new challenges for the healthcare system. We must invest in technology and infrastructure that supports mobility and safety for seniors, whether it’s through better public transportation, accessible buildings, or the use of technology to monitor health and well-being. At the same time, we must also ensure that these technological solutions are accessible and user-friendly for seniors.

4. Building a Tolerant, Multicultural World:

Fourth, how can we create opportunities to build a tolerant, multicultural world? Senior care centres often struggle to address the diversity of the senior population. In an increasingly globalised world, it is essential that we recognize and respect the cultural diversity within our senior communities. This includes understanding different cultural perspectives on ageing and caregiving and ensuring that care is provided in a way that is respectful and inclusive.

5. Combating Injustice and Ageism:

Finally, how can we continue to combat injustice and ageism?

I agree with Claudia Mahler, the UN independent expert who argues that *“Countering ageism and eliminating age discrimination is a starting point for the full enjoyment of the human rights of older persons.”* Ageism and discrimination against seniors must be actively countered. A more inclusive, equitable society is beneficial for all. Ageism is a pervasive issue that affects every aspect of life, from employment to healthcare to social interactions. This includes advocating for policies that protect the rights of seniors and ensure that they are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve.

**The 34th United Nations International Day of Older Persons (UNIDOP)**

As we consider these challenges, it’s important to recognize the global trends in population ageing. The 34th United Nations International Day of Older Persons will focus on the theme [*"Ageing with Dignity: The Importance of Strengthening Care and Support Systems for Older Persons Worldwide.*](https://www.decadeofhealthyageing.org/find-knowledge/resources/events/unidop2024-ny)" This event will highlight the urgent need to enhance care systems, expand training, and recognize the critical contributions of caregivers. It’s a call to action for more robust and equitable support systems that allow seniors to age with dignity.

This focus on dignity is essential. Dignity is not just about being treated with respect; it is about having the ability to live a life that is fulfilling, meaningful, and aligned with one’s values and beliefs. It also means recognizing the important role that caregivers play in supporting seniors and ensuring that they have the training, resources, and support they need to provide high-quality care.

What are Europe's Response to the Challenges

What is Europe doing to address these challenges? The European Care Strategy, introduced by the European Commission in 2022, is a significant step forward. It emphasises accessible and affordable long-term care, the expansion of care services, support for informal caregivers, and the need for sustainable funding. The strategy also includes a framework of indicators to monitor progress, ensuring that the care provided meets high-quality standards.

This strategy is a critical tool in addressing the needs of our ageing population. It recognizes that long-term care is not just a personal or family responsibility, but a societal one. It calls for a comprehensive approach that includes not only professional care services but also support for informal caregivers—those family members and friends who often provide essential care to their loved ones. The strategy also emphasises the importance of ensuring that long-term care is affordable and accessible for all, regardless of where they live or their financial situation.

**ESU Reflections**

The ESU wholeheartedly supports the vision outlined in recent European documents, which aim to shift the care debate towards a sustainable model. This includes closing the territorial gaps, particularly in rural and depopulating areas, and paying close attention not only to the rights of those who require care but also to the needs of carers, families, and professionals. The ESU believes that a sustainable approach to care is essential for building resilient communities and ensuring that all individuals, especially seniors, have access to the support they need, regardless of where they live.

The choice for Respectful Care and Human-Centred Approaches

At the heart of this vision is the absolute priority of surrounding every person in need, including older individuals, with respectful and dignified care. While technical and digital tools are valuable in supporting the independence of older people, the caring relationship remains central to our human-centred approach. This relationship is fundamental to the quality of care and the overall well-being of those receiving it. It is about more than just meeting physical needs; it is about fostering connection, understanding, and trust between carers and those they support. The ESU emphasises that the human touch in care must not be lost, even as we embrace new technologies.

An other issue is the Underinvestment and Workforce Shortages

In many European countries, long-term care facilities (LTCFs) are suffering from chronic underinvestment and an important shortage of workers. The ESU calls on Member States to make full use of the financial support and resources that the European Union can offer to address these critical issues. This includes tackling staff shortages, improving training programs, and enhancing the mental well-being of care workers. By investing in the workforce, we can ensure that care remains a viable and fulfilling profession, attracting new talent and retaining those who are already committed to this vital work.

Innovative Solutions and Community Involvement

The ESU advocates for a multifaceted approach to care that includes the creation of innovative co-housing initiatives, the expansion of community services with the active participation of older persons, and a mix of social and health services. This approach encourages cooperation between professionals and volunteers, ensuring that care is not only comprehensive but also deeply rooted in the community. By involving older persons directly in the design and delivery of care services, we can create more personalised and effective care solutions that truly meet their needs. This collaborative model not only enhances the quality of care but also strengthens the social fabric of our communities, making them more inclusive and supportive for all.

Transforming the Care Sector: A Call to Action

The transformation and optimization of the care sector now rest in the hands of national authorities and stakeholders at all levels. While the European Commission offers guidance and support throughout this process, it is ultimately up to Member States to take decisive action. The ESU recommends that Member States actively communicate with the Commission, sharing their progress and challenges to foster a collaborative approach to care reform. We call on all stakeholders—governments, care providers, and civil society—to participate actively in this transformation, to exchange good practices, and to listen to the experiences of older persons. By doing so, we can optimise the change process, ensuring that it is both effective and responsive to the needs of those it aims to serve.

Better Care: A Benefit for All of Society

Giving and receiving care is a fundamental aspect of the European way of life. Caring for those in need—whether through support, assistance, or companionship—is a hallmark of European societies.

The ESU believes that cooperation between Member States offers unique benefits for all Europeans. In line with the principle of subsidiarity, we must address care challenges as close to the individual as possible, engaging in dialogue with those who need care. At the same time, sharing experiences and engaging in respectful reflection can create opportunities for mutual learning.

In conclusion, the ESU is committed to supporting the transformation of the care sector and to ensuring that all older persons in Europe can live with dignity, respect, and the highest quality of care. Let us make better care a reality for the benefit of everyone in our society.

**Looking ahead after the European elections:**

As seniors and members of the ESU, part of the European People’s Party (EPP), we warmly welcome Ursula von der Leyen as the new President of the European Commission. While we would have preferred more explicit attention to seniors in her proposed policies, we are hopeful that the new Commission will continue to focus on safeguarding the rights of older persons and addressing the critical need for long-term care.

We believe that seniors have a vital role to play in society, not just as recipients of care, but as active participants in all aspects of life. We have the experience, knowledge, and wisdom that can benefit younger generations and society as a whole. The work you are doing here in Slovenia and within the EPP is incredibly important, and we are grateful for it. We must continue to advocate for policies that protect the rights of seniors, ensure access to high-quality care, and promote the well-being of all seniors.

This celebration is a moment to reconnect, reflect, and draw new energy from meaningful conversations. It is a time to look back on all that has been accomplished over the past 20 years and to look forward to the future with hope and determination. May this anniversary serve as a day of encouragement—a recognition of the immense social capital you have built and continue to build. The ESU counts on you, and you can count on us.

Thank you for your attention. I wish you all continued success in the future.

Stefaan Vercarmer

*ESU President*