



EUROPEAN SENIORS' UNION (ESU)

Position Paper on a United Nations Convention on the Human Rights of Older Persons Adopted by the Joint Presidency and Executive Committee

Nicosia, Cyprus, 24 September 2026

Introduction

The European Seniors' Union (ESU), representing older persons and senior citizens' organisations across Europe and as an active member of AGE Platform Europe, strongly welcomes the decision of the United Nations Human Rights Council to advance the drafting of a United Nations Convention on the Human Rights of Older Persons. Building on the ESU Strategic Action Plan 2030, the conclusions of the ESU Summer Academy in Bruges (September 2025), the ESU Spring Conference in Budapest (April 2026), and the exchange with Claudia Mahler, UN Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, during the Joint Presidency and Executive Committee meeting in Budapest on 28 April 2026, the ESU reaffirms its commitment to a strong, ambitious and future-oriented international legal instrument.

The ESU welcomes the growing recognition within the United Nations that demographic change requires a comprehensive human rights approach which fully values the contribution of older persons to society and guarantees every older person the right to live with dignity, autonomy and equal opportunities. The ESU calls upon its member associations, governments, regional organisations and international institutions to actively support the development of a legally binding United Nations Convention on the Human Rights of Older Persons that strengthens protection against age discrimination while promoting participation, solidarity and inclusion throughout later life.

The ESU supports the positions developed by AGE Platform Europe and welcomes constructive engagement by governments, international organisations, national human rights institutions and civil society, including organisations of older persons, in the UN process.

The ESU recognizes that older persons are a diverse population and that vulnerability is not an inherent characteristic of older age. The Convention should protect rights where older persons experience discrimination, exclusion, dependency, abuse or other barriers to the equal enjoyment of human rights, while recognizing their capacities, contributions and responsibilities as members of society.

Therefore, the ESU calls upon its member associations to promote a UN Convention on the Human Rights of Older Persons, to support national delegations in the negotiation and drafting process and to play a constructive role.

I. Principles Guiding the Convention Process

1. a meaningful role for civil society

The ESU insists that organisations representing older persons must be recognised as indispensable partners throughout the negotiation, drafting, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Convention. The principle of “nothing about us without us” must guide the entire process. Older persons and their representative organisations must have meaningful, effective and adequately supported opportunities to participate at international, national, regional and local levels, taking account of the diversity of regions, cultures and circumstances.

States should be encouraged to include older persons and their representative organisations in relevant delegations and consultative and monitoring bodies, so that their lived experience informs the development, implementation and review of the Convention.

2. Coherence with existing human rights instruments

The Convention should reinforce and complement existing international and regional human rights frameworks, including relevant regional human rights instruments, while addressing the current protection gaps experienced by older persons.

The ESU supports a Convention that strengthens implementation, visibility and enforceability of rights without diminishing protections already guaranteed under existing treaties.

3. Effective implementation and monitoring

The future Convention must include robust implementation, reporting and monitoring mechanisms, together with accessible complaint and redress procedures.

At the same time, reporting obligations should be coordinated with existing international human rights mechanisms in order to avoid unnecessary administrative burdens while ensuring effective accountability.

The ESU considers implementation and monitoring to be central to the Convention’s impact. The instrument should facilitate States in translating agreed rights and principles into practical improvements in living conditions, with clear responsibilities, measurable progress and meaningful participation of relevant stakeholders.

4. Global cooperation and regional contributions

The Convention is a global instrument. All regions and States should contribute to its development on an equal footing, drawing on diverse legal systems, cultures, experiences and good practices. Regional organisations, including the European Union and other regional bodies, can contribute experience and leadership while remaining attentive to global diversity and avoiding a specifically European framing of universal rights.

II. Why a Convention is Needed

The ESU considers that a dedicated Convention is necessary because older persons continue to experience age discrimination, exclusion, poverty, inadequate access to services, barriers to participation and violations of their dignity and autonomy in many parts of the world.

Children, women and persons with disabilities are each protected by a specific, legally binding United Nations convention. Older persons, however, do not yet benefit from a dedicated UN human rights convention.

While older persons are protected under the general international human rights treaties, there is still no specific, legally binding UN Convention dedicated to their rights.

At present, United Nations instruments specifically addressing older persons, such as the United Nations Principles for Older Persons (1991) and the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (2002), provide important guidance but do not create the same legally binding obligations as a human rights treaty. The ongoing UN process towards a Convention on the Rights of Older Persons therefore represents a historic opportunity to close one of the remaining gaps in the international human rights framework.

A dedicated Convention would make the rights of older persons more visible and actionable, strengthen protection against age discrimination, abuse and neglect, and provide States with clearer standards for dignity, autonomy, participation and equal access to health care, long-term care, social protection and justice.

No one should lose their human rights simply because they grow older. A dedicated UN Convention should ensure that the rights of older persons are recognised, protected and fulfilled on an equal basis with those of all other population groups.

A dedicated Convention would:

- make the rights of older persons visible and enforceable;
- support adequate income and social protection in old age;
- provide clear guidance to governments and institutions;
- combat ageism in law, policy and practice;
- strengthen accountability and monitoring;
- support inclusive, age-friendly societies that benefit all generations.

The ESU emphasizes that ageing is not a separate stage detached from the rest of society. Human life is a continuous journey. Ageing is living, and living is ageing. The Convention should therefore be rooted in a life-course approach that recognizes changing needs, capacities and contributions throughout life while preserving equal dignity and equal rights for all.

The Convention should combine a rights-based approach with recognition of the agency, capacities, social contributions and responsibilities of older persons. Intergenerational solidarity should be understood as a shared responsibility across generations, not as a duty imposed on older persons that could restrict their rights.

III. ESU Priorities for the Substance of the Convention

1. Dignity, equality and participation

The Convention must establish a clear prohibition of age discrimination in all areas of life and actively combat ageism.

Older persons must be recognized not merely as recipients of care or support, but as citizens, volunteers, workers, family members, consumers, voters and community leaders with the right to participate fully in society and democratic life.

The ESU calls for older persons to be meaningfully represented and included in democratically elected and representative organisations and institutions, including political and civic structures, in accordance with national legal systems. Human Dignity extends to every stage of life without any restrictions to years or age.

2. Autonomy, legal capacity, independent living and housing

The right to autonomy and self-determination must be at the heart of the Convention.

The Convention must recognise that older persons enjoy legal capacity on an equal basis with others in all aspects of life. Age, disability or health status cannot, by themselves, justify any restriction or removal of legal capacity.

The ESU calls for explicit recognition of the right of older persons to retain control over their personal, medical, financial and property-related decisions; the right to access appropriate, accessible and individualized supported decision-making when required; and safeguards ensuring that any support respects the person's rights, will and preferences and protects against conflicts of interest, undue influence and abuse. Supported decision-making must strengthen autonomy.

Older persons should have the right to choose where and how they live, supported by accessible services and age-friendly environments. The ESU calls for explicit recognition of:

- the right to adequate, affordable and accessible housing;
- the right to independent living and community inclusion;
- the right to accessible public spaces, transport and services;
- protection against homelessness, neglect and social isolation;
- the right to lead a life of dignity and independence and to participate in social and cultural life.

3. Health, care and long-term care

The Convention must recognize access to health care, long-term care and support for chronic illnesses as fundamental human rights.

The ESU calls for equal access to affordable, age-appropriate and community-based mental-health services, including prevention, early diagnosis, treatment and psychosocial support; accessible, person-centred and rights-based dementia care and support; appropriate information, counselling and practical support for persons living with dementia, their families and caregivers; and safeguards against discrimination, neglect, abuse, involuntary treatment and unjustified restrictions of autonomy in mental-health and dementia-care settings. Mental health must be treated as an integral part of the right to health.

The ESU advocates:

- person-centered and integrated care;
- high-quality and affordable long-term care services;
- support for family carers and informal caregivers;
- access to prevention, rehabilitation and palliative care;
- safeguards for dignity, autonomy and informed consent in all care settings.

Care systems should empower people to remain active, independent and socially connected for as long as possible, as well in rural, as in urban areas.

4. Digital inclusion, digital citizenship and artificial intelligence

Digital participation is increasingly a prerequisite for exercising fundamental rights.

The Convention should therefore recognize:

- the right to digital inclusion and digital literacy;
- equal access to digital public and private services;
- protection against digital exclusion;
- accessible and age-friendly digital design.

Digitalization must never result in the exclusion of older persons from public services, healthcare, banking, justice or commercial services. Older persons must always retain the possibility of accessing essential governmental, commercial and social services through meaningful human interaction. Digital services should complement, but never replace, personal contact or decision making, where this is necessary to guarantee dignity, accessibility and inclusion.

The ESU welcomes the opportunities created by artificial intelligence to improve health care, mobility, communication, independent living and public services. At the same time, the Convention must address the risks of algorithmic discrimination, surveillance, manipulation, exclusion and loss of human oversight. Technological progress must serve human dignity, strengthen autonomy and remain subject to appropriate human rights safeguards and democratic accountability.

5. Economic security and adequate income

The ESU considers economic security to be an essential prerequisite for the effective enjoyment of all human rights. The Convention should recognize the right to an adequate income in old age; protection against poverty and social exclusion; sustainable, adequate and non-discriminatory social protection and pension systems; equal access to financial services; and protection against financial exploitation and abuse. Economic insecurity should never prevent older persons from participating fully in society or living in dignity.

6. Protection from abuse, violence, exploitation and neglect

Older persons have the right to live free from all forms of violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect. The Convention should establish safeguards against physical, psychological and emotional abuse; financial exploitation and fraud; neglect in institutions, communities and families; age-related violence and discrimination; and abuse arising from dependency relationships. States should ensure effective prevention, accessible reporting mechanisms, protection measures and legal remedies.

7. Access to justice

Equal and affordable access to justice is indispensable for the effective protection of human rights. The Convention should guarantee accessible judicial procedures, age friendly administrative services, legal assistance, supported decision-making and effective remedies against discrimination.

8. Older persons in emergencies, disasters and humanitarian crises

Recent crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, have demonstrated that older persons may face particular risks during emergencies, while also showing the importance of avoiding discriminatory assumptions about vulnerability.

The Convention should require States to ensure equal protection and meaningful participation of older persons during heatwaves, floods, fires and other climate-

related events; pandemics and other public-health emergencies; armed conflicts; humanitarian crises; and food, medicine and energy shortages.

Preparedness, response and recovery plans should explicitly include older persons and take account of diverse needs, capacities and circumstances.

9. Education and lifelong learning

The Convention must recognize the right to education and lifelong learning at every stage of life. Older persons should have equal and affordable access to learning opportunities adapted to their needs, interests and experience. The ESU calls for explicit recognition of equal access to universities, adult education and vocational training; access to digital and financial literacy programmes; accessible and age-friendly learning environments and teaching methods; and protection against age discrimination in education and training. Lifelong learning is essential for autonomy, active participation, social inclusion and the ability to adapt to technological, economic and societal change.

10. Volunteering and active citizenship

The ESU strongly believes that older persons are contributors rather than passive beneficiaries. The Convention should recognize and facilitate volunteering, civic engagement, democratic participation, informal caregiving and intergenerational knowledge transfer.

11. Employment

Older persons who wish to continue working should enjoy equal opportunities.

The Convention should promote protection against age discrimination, equal access to employment, lifelong learning, flexible working arrangements and freedom to determine retirement within national legal frameworks and applicable international labour standards. Longer lives should create opportunities rather than barriers.

12. Intergenerational solidarity and positive ageing

The wellbeing of older persons is a shared responsibility. The Convention should encourage stronger community support; support for family carers; cooperation between governments, civil society and voluntary organisations; and intergenerational solidarity.

The ESU calls for a vision of ageing that emphasises opportunity, contribution and solidarity between generations.

The Convention should promote positive perceptions of ageing, recognise the social, economic, cultural and civic contributions of older persons and encourage policies that foster cohesion across generations.

Demographic ageing must be understood not as a burden but as a societal achievement and an opportunity to build more inclusive communities for all.

Intergenerational solidarity should recognise the reciprocal contributions of people of all ages and support the transfer of experience, knowledge and skills between generations.

13. Freedom of thought, religion, belief and cultural identity

Older persons retain all fundamental freedoms throughout life. The Convention should guarantee freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief; access to

spiritual support if desired; protection against religious discrimination; and respect for cultural diversity, in accordance with universal human rights.

14. Dignity and rights at the end of life

Human dignity extends to every stage of life. The Convention should recognise access to high-quality palliative care, effective pain relief, informed consent, advance care planning, support for relatives and caregivers, and respect for personal wishes at the end of life, in accordance with applicable international human rights standards and taking account of diverse legal, cultural and religious contexts.

Every older person has the right to compassionate, person-centred and dignified care until the end of life.

Conclusion

The European Seniors' Union strongly supports the development of a comprehensive, ambitious and legally binding United Nations Convention on the Human Rights of Older Persons.

Such a Convention is necessary to close existing protection gaps, combat ageism, strengthen participation and ensure that all people can age with dignity, autonomy, security and full enjoyment of their human rights. The ESU stands ready, through its own structures and through its active engagement within AGE Platform Europe, to contribute constructively to the negotiation, implementation and monitoring of the Convention and calls upon governments, regional organisations, international organisations and civil society to ensure the full and meaningful participation of older persons and their representative organisations throughout this process.

The ESU also encourages States to view the Convention not only as a set of obligations but as a framework that facilitates practical improvements in the living conditions of older persons and strengthens cooperation, accountability and exchange of good practices.

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