

United Europe – Homeland and Mission for the Generations

Implications of demographic change / 2nd ESCU “South East” Regional Conference

Vienna (29/30 May 2008). “The Political and Economic Response to Demographic Trends in Europe” proved to be a good choice of topic for the 2nd ESCU “South East” Regional Conference organised by the Austrian Senior Citizens’ Union (ÖSB) and its partners.

For ten hours, politicians, diplomats, academics and economists engaged in a lively exchange of views. Representatives from six of the region’s countries spoke: Austria in its capacity as host, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia and, for the first time, Bulgaria; also Germany and Vice Presidents Maria Mantziafou-Kanellopoulou, Carlo Fatuzzo and Leif Hallberg of Greece, Italy and Sweden respectively.

General Secretary Ingeborg Uhlenbrock (D) presented an academic paper written by gerontologist Prof. Dr. Ursula Lehr (D) to serve as the basis for a thorough examination of this topical subject, which is of relevance to us all.

Demographic change

Among other things, Prof Lehr established:

- The (average) life expectancy of Europeans rises annually by 3 months. Whereas it was 45 years 100 years ago, it is now past 80.
- The proportion of over-60s and over-80s is on the increase; Germany expects to have more than a million over-100s by 2020.
- Since 1950 the number of births per woman has been going down – in contrast to Asia (except Japan) and Africa.
- The consequences: increase in childless women and single households; lack of family ties, which leads to loneliness in old age and shortcomings in the care of family members.

Ingeborg Uhlenbrock announced a position paper on this problem by the European People’s Party (EPP), on which ESCU representatives had collaborated. When we rightly make demands “to bring more life to the extra years” (quoted from Lehr), we – the senior citizens’ associations in all 24 ESCU member countries – should not neglect to call on politics and business to create the necessary “framework conditions”.

Strengthening Europe

The ESCU has been working towards this end for years and it was now possible – according to President Dr. Worms – to detect greater press interest in our concerns. It also indicated our growing reputation and increased assertiveness. Based on the 2002 “Magna Charta”, the declaration issued at the VI Pulheim Congress in 2007 and other ESCU position papers (all of which are available on the website: www.eu-seniorunion.info) a stronger awareness was needed on the part of all the generations in Europe of a shared responsibility for shaping the future. At the same time, it would be a good contribution to the preparations for the European Parliament elections on 7 June 2009.

The ÖSB had already taken the important decision of nominating its General Secretary Heinz Becker as a candidate in the European elections. One of the reasons put forward for this

before the conference by Chairman Prof. Andreas Khol was that 50 per cent of the voters are senior citizens and they need a passionate advocate.

Hannes Missethon, General Secretary of the ÖVP, emphasised: in spite of differing socio-political conditions in the EU countries (which were specified in the discussion), “the quality of life in Europe” was “unprecedented”. Euro-sceptics and populists had to be countered with a superior argument. “Austria has gained a great deal through the EU,” he stated.

In this context, Vice President Dr. Marilies Flemming (A) complained about myths relating to the EU that were spread by the Vienna “Kronenzeitung” newspaper day in day out. She called on her fellow-Austrians to counter such reports and comments with their political experience from two wars and the “Cold War”.

Political action

Several speakers were of the opinion that political action was called for wherever food and energy prices were soaring unchecked and, if anything, also without cause (Missethon), and where there was no longer any social security in old age. Speakers from Slovakia, Hungary and Bulgaria gave relevant and moving examples of this.

For instance, Dr. Sc. Mikloško (Slovakia) declared: “We have socialist pensions but capitalist prices.” Zoltan Prengny of Hungary took the view that the level of pensions in his country was “a gigantic burden in the light of price rises”. The population and senior citizens in particular were “completely at the mercy of world market prices”. However, given the unstable political conditions in Hungary, a proposed independent “pension commission” was unlikely to reach any early agreement on increased payments. In the words of Andreas Pelle (Hungary), the tough situation is also marked by high unemployment in the country, widespread illiteracy among children, corruption and tax fraud. Rezső Fuszek (Hungary) added: “The gulf between rich and poor is becoming wider and wider. It is worse for people with children.” The people of Hungary had high hopes of a victory for FIDESZ in the parliamentary elections, which had been brought forward. Even the embassy counsellor, Ivan Kali, declared that prices in Hungary were “going higher and higher”.

Embassy secretary Stefan Arnandov drew a picture of social problems in Bulgaria. From July old-age pensions will range between 105 and 250 Euro. The social distinction between town and country was substantial. “Pensioners make up 98 per cent of the rural population, the rest is over 55.” The amount of “self-provision” in rural areas was high. Many Bulgarians had “not coped with the changes to the system in the 1990s”. Arnandov summed up: “Bulgarians and the older generation of our country have not gained from political and social changes.” Radical change to the precarious situation would need “very much money”.

Given the diplomat’s comments, the foundation of Bulgaria’s first political senior citizens’ association under the chairmanship of former ambassador Nikolay Andreev in May this year appears to be a special symbol of hope – and, at the same time, of a determination to share in shaping the political landscape. Named “SGERB”, the association is active in seven towns according to its President. The number of members is expected to have risen to 5,000 by the end of the year. All its reserves were being channelled into the success of elections for the national parliament “Narodno Zabranie” (National Assembly), due to be held on 7/6/2009, the same day as the European elections. This was important for a thriving Bulgaria and for Europe.

Participation in society imperative

During the Vienna Conference, politicians were also called upon to enable older people, and particularly their political representatives (the ESCU member associations), to participate in the life of society. Prof. Dr. Konrad Weckerle, Chairman of the CSU Seniors' Union (Bavaria), hit the nail on the head with his observation, "We want to be active rather than passive in policy-making". And he continued: "We will not be restricted to issues specific to senior citizens." In defiance of the current "fixation with youth", he added: "We will not be dictated to by those who have seen nothing of the world outside the maternity ward and the lecture hall." Weckerle closed – to the amazement of many listeners – by stating: "We are working for a just society with the focus on fairness for the people of each generation."

"Demographic promise"

Impressed by the progress of the conference, the host ÖSB Chairman Khol (A) expressed a wish for these discussions to be resumed in the near future. To the applause of the 50 delegates, he declared in the home of the Political Academy: "We do not have a demographic threat, but a promise!"

And, in response to critical comments made by the former German president Herzog, Khol observed: "Hopefully, we are becoming a pensioner democracy!" Although the Austrian Seniors' Council was acknowledged to be the country's 5th social partner, policy-making for the elderly was still too often confused with "alms policy". "Demand political codetermination everywhere," he called on those in the hall, and, "Don't allow the generations to be played off one against the other!"

Vice President Dr. jur. V. Roubal (CZ) gave examples of hidden discrimination. For instance, women who care for elderly ladies are refused material recognition for their efforts, even though they relieve the burden on care homes.

Responsibility of authorities and business

Business is called upon to join with "big" political players and the authorities to come up with answers to the demands of an ageing society in terms of transport services, access for the disabled and similar measures to promote mobility. This entails the design of products, their ease of use, and service. In her presentation Prof Lehr mentioned relevant examples of products which, when closely examined, often cause problems for younger people.

Dr. Krista Schüssel (A) addressed the theme of the conference with a few real-life anecdotes and opinions, which also raised a chuckle. It was clear: Older people, in the "prime of life", are present in all walks of life. They have become the economic engine that drives tourism, cosmetics, financial services and the leisure industry. Advertising in Austria is slowly adapting to this. The subject of "age" has moved into society's spotlight. She appealed for mental fitness to be linked with lifelong learning. She referred to the forgetful phase as "Dings-Zeit" ("thingy time"). Dr Schüssel concluded with the observation: "It's not about how **old** you become, but: **how** you become old!"

Helmut Kritzinger, who at the age of 80 recently became President of the Austrian Federal Council (second chamber of the Parliament), spoke out for greater use of the potential of older

people in jobs. Out of all the countries in Europe, the Austrian economy – according to Dr. Wolfgang Tritremmel (Industry Federation) – had the lowest number of older people in employment. Employers and companies were now involved in measures to reverse this state of affairs. A government programme would be running accordingly until 2010.

Tomi Huhtunen (A), Director of the Centre for European Studies, paid tribute to the ESCU as “the leading force on the subject of demographic change”. His institute would like to work with the ESCU, all the more so as the Political Academy of the ÖVP, which was hosting the conference participants, was seen as the “founding father of the Centre”. He called on the ESCU to take part in the production of a position paper on the subject of “Integration of older people into the employment market”.

As a seasoned observer of the “growth market of age”, Dr. Bernhard Fürst (A) stated:

- Product designers are as a rule young people, who find it hard to imagine the requirements of older and/or disabled people.
- The products in question cater for demands ranging from those actively engaged in sports to those in need of constant care.
- Many senior citizens reject products aimed at their age group (feel too young), whilst having (as yet) no experience of handling modern technology.

He concluded from this:

- Representatives of **all** generations should have a say in advertising (media).
- “Senior citizens’ advisors” in development companies and “introduction courses” could be helpful.
- Focus less on products aimed specifically at senior citizens, and aim rather for “universal use”!

Summarising the discussions, ESCU President Dr. Worms asserted:

Demographic change is a commission for all senior citizens’ associations to act locally. Responsibility began with housing developments in the towns, included easing everyday burdens (removal of stumbling blocks, specially designed toilet doors, etc.), and finished with partnership with the production industry. All generations were to be taken into account! In Vienna – according to Worms – the second phase of ESCU development had begun. He invited everyone to make it a success in word and deed – for themselves, their families and surroundings, for Europe.

Ulrich Winz