



**EUROPÄISCHE SENIOREN UNION
EUROPEAN SENIOR CITIZENS' UNION
L'UNION EUROPÉENNE DES SENIORS**

*Mitgliedsorganisation der Europäischen Volkspartei (EVP)
Member Organisation of European People's Party (EPP)
Organisation membre du Parti Populaire Européen (PPE)*



Hold on to Solid Values in a Changing World

**Remarks by Leif Hallberg,
Vice President, European Senior Citizens Union**

**IRL Senior Citizens' Conference
Tartu, Estonia, 27 September 2008**

The times are changing, and so are we. *Tempora mutantur nos et mutamur in illis*, as the old Romans said. But it is also true that – as we identify and discuss the changes to our world – those changes already occurred.

As we look to the future, the world seems very uncertain.

We were only recently reminded of the instability of the world's financial markets – the credit crunch that bites severely also into European savings.

Over the last months we also had new proof that even in our own neighbourhood area political hubris and over-nationalistic ambitions too easily find violent ways to express its desire for power. The Georgian-Russian conflict is just one example of this, but it is indeed a blatant one.

Many uncertainties stock up as dark clouds at the horizon,

- The energy crisis and connecting geopolitical tensions;
- The climate change and the threats to our environment;
- The ageing of our populations with big question-marks for the labour force and for our pensions and social security systems;
- Too much of illegal immigration and too little of legal immigration;
- International terrorism and organised crime that steals secretly into our communities
- Food security and the safety of medicines in a growingly globalized world;
- Et cetera, et cetera.

Will the world in 2025 be a safe place, the world that we are to hand over to the next generations of young people and younger seniors?

I wish to bring to your attention three necessities, absolutely necessary requirements without which our world will NOT be the safe place that we want it to be. And I am convinced that today's senior citizens, with all their experience, will understand what I am talking about.

We cannot stop change, and we should not stop development. But we should look carefully to that change and development takes the right course.

First,

Peace, security and stability. Today's generations of senior citizens know better than others that in times of international conflicts and war there is little welfare if any at all.

And let me remind us all that with the European Union, this unique historical project, Europe has lived in peace for now more than sixty years. What a great political project!

So, when others speak threatening words and parade in a show of arms, let us not allow ourselves to be provoked but instead continue to demonstrate our will for peace.

When others seek to divide us and put us up one against another, let us then close our ranks in Europe and stand united in a peaceful resolve. Always ready and open for a dialogue but still firm on our principles.

Second,

In an uncertain world, and in times of economic distress, we need more than ever to practice and deepen our ideas of solidarity and cooperation. The world will never be a safe place if each one looks only to his own good and not to that of his neighbour.

There is a lot more that we can achieve through cross-border cooperation, for example,

- In the protection of our environment;
- In our defence against organised criminality and terrorism;
- In developing trade and inter-cultural contacts;
- In building stability and prosperity.

A great deal was already accomplished through European Union collaboration and mutual aid. Still more can be done.

Personally I am convinced that Europe stands much better united, as China and India and the US grow to dominate the world economically and therefore also politically. Not to mention the Mr Putin's ambitious Russia!

Dear Seniors, dear European neighbours, dear Friends: United we stand, divided we fall.

Third and lastly,

No state and nation will last without solid values that are shared by its components and elements. And no political project will succeed if it is not based on clear, strong and undisputable values. When basic values are shattered or forgotten, then even empires go down.

Again, which were the ideas and values that motivated the founders of the European Union? Originally and fundamentally? In three short words they were peace, partnership and prosperity.

It does not matter which political or historical project, without a good and safe compass to show the true value-bearings any man-made scheme will go down, like a ship when

storms arrive. And those who brought the EU into being understood very well that the compass for the European project must be found in the ideas and values of our Christian and humanitarian heritage. If Europe abandons those values, where will it then go?

- To show respect for other human beings, young and old ...
- To practice solidarity and cooperation ...
- To help offer a dignified life also to the most needy ...
- To seek dialogue instead of stirring up conflict and raising the fist ...
- To take on and share responsibility for our common good goals ...
- To see our next and stretch out a hand, instead of passing by in silence ...

Those deeply human values in our society may have many faces, but they all need to be thoroughly secured. Again and again! And they must be demonstrated in concrete and practical action, not just in nice words!

Family

The smallest and most basic of communities was always the FAMILY. And through the thousands of years of mankind, we built our larger communities on that smaller and basic structure.

As young we grew up within a family structure. It was there that we tried and erred, learned and came to understand. It was there we accommodated to the good principles of cooperation. From older family members we inherited traditions and values.

Dear friends, it is in the safe and social environment of the family that we learn and prepare for our adult life. So do also the animals, for that matter.

But change has come also to the family concept and structure. And not only change but even defiant dispute and anarchistic challenge. How should we then react? What should be our response?

They say that not even a chaffinch, this small and common bird, can look anyhow. But can family?

It is an undeniable fact that there are in our communities many kind of family concept. In today's world a great number of children grow up with only one parent, sometimes only with a mother and sometimes only with a father. In other families there are the children of mummy who live together with the off-springs of daddy and perhaps with a few more of both mummy and daddy.

What's more, in many families children have to adjust to their parents' rushing off to work early in the morning only to be seen again late at night. Not much time then for

the young ones to tell mom and dad about what happened during the day and to ask about this or that!

Certainly we must see to that working parents can have ample time with their children. Day nurseries and child care-centres nursery should be easily reached to make the daily life of working mothers and fathers a bit easier, and mothers who have to work could perhaps have lunch with their children in the staff canteen.

It is well known that the very first years of a child's life are just so crucial for a good upbringing, not least for securing a close, warm and lasting relationship between the child and its parents. Well, then we should allow for both mothers and fathers to spend more care time with their new-born. Also, when there is a need for it, working parents should have the right to public financial support for allowing them more time with their children.

I believe we must accept that families can take different shape in today's world. We cannot stop change. But there is one thing that we can do and that we should do: we must uphold the idea of the family as the foundation upon which societies are best built. The smaller human community, the safe haven which for the very most has proven to be the ideal starting point for life in a larger community.

The elderly in the family

Now, another question that I want to raise with you is the following:

Have we come to exclude the elderly from our families? Or, do we really commit ourselves to facilitating the integration of our elderly – socially, economically and practically – in continued family life?

There is clear evidence of the vulnerable position of many older people in the European Union according to European statistics and various evaluation reports. Figures that were published in 2003 showed the at-risk-of-poverty rate for the total population of the then EU15 to be 15 percent. The at-risk-of-poverty for the group of people aged 65 years and over was 19 percent. No age group in this report had a higher risk of poverty.

Such average figures hide, however, much greater differences between the situation of older people and the rest of the population. In one country the at-risk-of-poverty rate of women over 65 in 2001 was 51 percent compared to 15 percent of women aged 16-24 or even 10 percent for men aged 16-24.

As well as the risks of monetary poverty, issues around living alone, reduced social and family contact, mobility and health, accessibility, fear and even abuse can lead to greater risks of social exclusion for many older people. A recent study in Germany shows that new tools for information technology – communication over the internet or

by mobile phone calls or sms – have created an IT gap between the old and the young. In Germany a majority of elderly people still have no computer and not even a mobile phone.

Additional needs can turn an adequate income into an inadequate one, and tragic events involving older people only serve to highlight the often particular risks faced by many older people, often unseen by the public eye.

In closing, I wish to suggest two things,

1. That we set as a major political goal to preserve the family as the basic social and economic structure in all communities and societies. Because it is in the family that we learn to live and to live together with others. It is within the family that we learn to understand the principles of peace, partnership and prosperity, of solidarity and cooperation, of dialogue instead of conflict and fighting.
2. That we set as a major political goal, equally important, to effectively include our elderly in the family. For their own right but also for enhancing inter-generational understanding.

There is seldom any better nanny than grandmother and seldom any better storyteller than grandfather. Many elderly can step in as child carers and guardians when parents are at work, both for their own grandchildren and for other young ones who are in need of a good adult role model.

So many lessons learnt, so much experience to bring to the next generations! So many stories from life to tell!

We really must build bridges between the young and the old. Bridges of interest and curiosity, bridges of trust and respect and friendship. For a young person to get to know older people is also to understand about ageing and about life.

Our elderly must not be strangers to the young generation, they must not be some faceless persons that we remember and think of only at times, people that we only occasionally stay in contact with and then only by telephone or a short sms.

Furthermore, dear friends, our older family members must not solely be our own next-of-kin. There are many older people in our communities who live alone by themselves, older people in our vicinity to whom nobody talks, older people whom we frequently bypass but who are seen by no one. Let us open up a new window for them in their loneliness and social isolation. Let us include them in our fellowship and solidarity! We might as well start with a simple “Hallo, how are you today?”

If we do this, if we demonstrate that we want to live in peace with other human beings and that we care about their well-being as we care about our own, then we also show that we hold on to solid and precious human values to better navigate in a changing and uncertain world.

Thank you for your attention!