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The European Federation of  
Older Persons

Fédération Européenne des  
Personnes Agées

Bund der älteren Generation  
Europas

Federazione Europea  
delle Persone Anziane

**International online conference  
of the Slovenian Presidency of the European Union  
on the topic  
“Human rights for all ages: Promoting a life course perspective  
and intergenerational cooperation to combat ageism”**

**Online, 18 November 2021**

**Contribution by Dirk Jarré,  
President of the European Federation of Older Persons, EURAG  
on the topic  
“Using a Life Course Perspective to Shift Attitudes to Ageism”**

Thank you very much for the invitation and the honor to contribute some reflections to this important conference

When I was still a young man, many years ago, I had an experience in a small town in Southern Norway, named Kristiansand, which impressed me deeply:

While walking in the street, a man in a car stopped at my side – pointed at a wheelchair in the back of the car and shouted “Help me!”. I did so and tried to be as supportive as possible. But then that became too much for him and all of a sudden he said “Stop helping me. Can do alone!”

I was very much surprised by his attitude and then understood that he lives in a very different society from mine – with very different attitudes.

No “handicapism”, as one could call it, no discrimination against persons with special difficulties – but a positive integration into society with considering them as normal persons, one must be attentive and respectful to.



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As a young sociologist I was fascinated by my Norwegian experience and started reflecting on the issue of discrimination.

With “ageism” in European society we have the opposite – a negative view of a certain group of the population

It is connected with prejudices and rejection – meaning also isolation, marginalization and even social exclusion.

Older persons are very often considered as less valuable persons, non-productive, and not presenting a promising target of investment - but rather as a burden to society

Somebody once said about them quite ironically that they are labeled as “Old, frail and forgetful” – and this also means as unhealthy, undynamic, costly, helpless, with need of organized care, attention, time, etc.

There is a major difference with children, who are also helpless and need care. They are considered quite differently: they will learn and grow, they are a good investment, they secure our future, etc.

We can also notice that there is a general refusal of the recognition that the older ones in our society have imagined, created and developed our today’s appreciated living conditions, our possibilities, our comfort, etc. No real gratitude towards them and their achievements.

So, the problem is not a matter of individual disregard or attitude towards older persons, but it is in reality a generalized attitude based on the background of an “ideological” concept of society at large.

People may say easily “I have nothing against older persons”, or “I know very nice older persons”, or “my grandfather and my grandmother are just admirable” and we love them so much, etc.

Still, the absolute fundamental right of “Dignity” is too often refused to older persons. Other considerations seem to be more important: productivity and efficiency connected with an

underlying concept of a monetary value of the persons – or, on the other side, the costs they may produce – with a view of first growing and then declining when ageing.

But Dignity is not an earned nor merited feature – it has to be understood as an unconditional attribute that every person is entitled to, young or old, in whatever condition, under whatever circumstances

I would like to offer from these reflections the following statements:

- Ageism is not, in the first instance, a matter of individual deliberate behaviour but the result of a fundamental societal misconception on the value and position of its members during their life course and under specific conditions.
- Ageism cannot be healed in an effective and sustainable manner by just enhancing intergenerational cooperation - considering that the concept of “generations” includes already a kind of segregation based on age.
- Ageism as a matter of a tacit non-respect of fundamental rights of a particular segment of society must be dealt with by a holistic approach aiming at a general change of awareness, understanding, and attitudes.

As a kind of summary, I would now like to submit to the appreciation of stakeholders and decision-makers four simple recommendations on how to effectively address “ageism” through advanced political strategies involving all citizens at all ages.

The first issue to be dealt with is the need to fully recognise that “ageism” patterns – together with “racism”, “sexism” and alike phenomena - belong to a category of negative and aggressive attitudes in our society directed towards specific groups of people deliberately judged as inferior, respectively considered as of minor value, and which, on these grounds, become innocent victims of exclusion and are seriously discriminated against. Consequently, it is of paramount importance, and certainly of the state’s responsibility, to create and maintain - through well-conceived information campaigns and public debates - a general awareness, better understanding, and firm rejection of such unjustified behaviours in our society, which otherwise definitely erode fundamental human rights and consequently

undermine very seriously social cohesion as a precondition of a humanistic democratic society.

The second important measure to be taken is to familiarise our growing-up children with the declared ethical principles, fundamental values, and central virtues of our society. As families, for various reasons, are decreasingly able to properly perform this task, the responsibility must be entrusted to the care of educational institutions, starting at very early age with kindergarten. Children must learn, understand, and internalise as early as possible on which rights, obligations, and other fundamental principles a humanistic, value-based society can best function and they must be intensely trained in social competences grounded on the recognition of diversity, the respect of everybody, and readiness to listen and to dialogue. Today's prevalence of natural sciences, technical knowhow, foreign languages, and other profession-oriented disciplines in most education curricula must be counterbalanced by other so-called "soft skills" like problem-solving, cooperation, and virtues like tolerance, respect, understanding, and solidarity, etc., which are the glue of society and determine its quality.

A third aspect of major concern must be the issue of why and how specific groups of the population are segregated, and often discriminated against, in society. This is particularly true for older persons, but also for persons with disabilities, foreigners – and even children. All too often they are confined, against their own preferences, to live in physical, mental, linguistic, and cultural ghettos which can constitute strong barriers against outside contacts, information, communication, learning from each other and acting together. Patterns of segregation and exclusion, even if not voluntary but called "without alternatives", necessarily lead to prejudices, misunderstandings, erroneous judgements, and conflicts and thus clearly counteract the principle of integration that promotes cooperation and mutual acceptance. Social policies and strategies must aim at creating more hospitable enabling forms of living together – in forms of multi-age housing, multi-cultural neighbourhoods, in setups with a great variety of socio-economic and professional groups – in all of which the rules of co-existence must be negotiated and agreed upon through dialogue and co-decision.

The fourth area that merits particular attention of decision-makers is how to overcome the prevailing confinement of people "in their specific environment" or even isolation and solitude – be it homes, educational institutions, work environment or other structures. The challenge is to find out by which easy ways and means one can create new crosscutting

opportunities for persons of different ages and paths of life to meet each other under conditions that enhance exchange, dialogue and even cooperation. There are lots of needs, interest, and preferences that people have in common at more or less all ages: the use of medical services, participation in sports activities, cultural or leisure options, and alike. Most of them can and should be organised in a manner that practically all members of society may easily benefit from them jointly – and encounter each other in attendance rooms, mixed activity structures, mutual support groups, and so on. The issue just needs some explorative innovative thinking – in contrast to the slogan “We have always done it this way!”.

Marcus Tullius Cicero – more than 2000 years ago – wrote, when he had already lived 62 years, in his treatise “De Senectute” meaning “On Old Age”, the following which has still a high significance for us all:

*“Undoubtedly, the most suitable defenses of old age are **the principles and practice of the virtues, which, if cultivated in every period of life, bring forth wonderful fruits at the close of a long and busy career because they never fail you even at the very end of life.**”*

So, let’s keep in mind the following nice and poetic sentence: *“Age is a matter of mind – if you don’t mind, it does not matter”*.

Thank you very much for your kind attention!

Dirk Jarré, President of EURAG

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