



Contribution by Dirk Jarré
President of the European Federation of Older Persons, EURAG
to the
celebration of the 60th anniversary of EURAG
Graz/Austria, City Council Hall, 15 September 2022

Dear distinguished guests,
Dear friends and colleagues,

As President of the European Federation of Older Persons, EURAG, it is a great privilege and pleasure for me to share with you all, at this important event, my

Reflections on the past, present and future of EURAG.

To start with, just some brief information on my background and why the European Federation of Older Persons has become so important in my life. I was born in 1941, in the middle of the Second World War – and thus 21 years before EURAG was born. The really important things for my life I learned from my grandmother, my Babushka, the person I adored most. From a Swedish-Russian background she spoke six European languages, perfectly, and thus represented for me a truly European person. With a deep understanding of the difficulties one can experience in life, she managed for a long time a social foundation, created by a Lord Mayor of the City of Frankfurt, supporting disadvantaged people like older ones, poor persons and artists without decent income. Already in my early youth she enshrined in me an intrinsic understanding of key aspects of life – like basic and social values, the role of human virtues, the importance of culture in society, and so on. This oriented my whole life and even my professional career.

In 1962, when I reached majority (with 21 years), EURAG was founded by a few “activists” from Austria, England and Germany who worked with the aged – at that time a totally underdeveloped field of social work. They wanted to create the very first European civil society network for the exchange of experiences and concepts to address the growing phenomenon of “loneliness” of older persons in a rapidly changing society with declining family cohesion, growing mobility and an increasing participation of women in the labour market.

In the early 60s of the last century ageing society and the ensuing issues were not yet really in the focus of politicians and other important decision-makers. Just bear in mind that the First World Assembly on Ageing of the United Nations only took place in Vienna in 1982 (20 years after the creation of EURAG), followed by the Second UN World Assembly on Ageing two decades later in Madrid in 2002. Awareness raising often takes a long time, indeed.

During the first four years of its existence, EURAG grew rapidly in membership – from 3 to 10 already in 1966 – including Austria, the United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Belgium, France and Iceland. And again 20 years later the number of participating countries had grown up to 30. Membership came from all over Europe, from the West



to the East. EURAG was at that time the only European civil society organisation reaching well beyond the Iron Curtain. This was due to the fact that its leaders considered ageing issues and policies to be of paramount importance to all European societies, irrespective of their ideological background.

This approach and the professionalism of the network had as an effect that EURAG very quickly received strong recognition by international organisations. Already in 1966 it obtained consultative status with the International Labour Organisation (ILO), followed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). In 1969 consultative status was granted by the Council of Europe in Strasbourg and, most importantly, 1979 by the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC) with the distinction of Category I, which provides privileges for submitting position papers and recommendations for issues to be put on the agenda. Interesting is also the fact that EURAG was one of the earliest members of the Brussels located “Social Platform” (Platform of European Social NGOs) which, with its now almost 50 networks in membership, is the main dialoguing partner from civil society with the European institutions on social matters.

The City of Graz has had high significance for our organisation. While EURAG was created in 1962 in Lindau, Germany, and legally registered in 1966 in Luxembourg, it had its first secretariat in Switzerland. In 1974, on the initiative of two board members of the Austrian NGO “Aktiver Lebensabend” (“Active Old Age”), Karl Stoiser and Eduard Pumpernig, the secretariat was transferred to Graz and received, in recognition of its objectives and achievements, generous and very appreciated support in terms of location and funding for personnel, in particular also by the then Lord Mayor Alfred Stingl who, by the way, is one of our honourable guests today. A warm welcome to him!

EURAG celebrated its 25th anniversary in Graz with a big topical conference. And it did that again 25 years later, in 2012, combining its 50th anniversary with a program focussed on the “European Year on Active Ageing and Solidarity Between Generations 2012”. Now we are back again in this beautiful Styrian capital Graz for the celebration of our 60th anniversary in this magnificent Council Hall, enjoying the hospitality of the City.

After having started its work by addressing the issue of “loneliness of older people in a changing society”, EURAG quickly expanded its concerns to crucial other aspects of the situation and the needs of older people in Europe – like autonomy, integration, social security, health services, care inside and outside the family, housing conditions, etc. - but also on issues related to the situation of migrants and minorities, older women and, in particular, the rights of older persons.

To better understand the nature, the spirit and the objectives of the European Federation of Older Persons it is worthwhile to consult the following guiding documents:

1. The Statutes emphasise that EURAG is an international, non-governmental, non-profit organisation with no political or religious affiliation. It comprises a wide spectrum of national and regional members (organisations and individuals) and is committed to advancing the well-being of older persons and their participation in society.
2. The Mission Statement provides details of the set objectives of the organisation. It puts light on the working methods applied and on the main areas of activities. It also defines with which kind of partners EURAG chooses to cooperate and which decision-makers it intends to advise and influence.

3. Another very interesting document is the declaration of the “Rights of the Elderly” which dates from 1965 (only 3 years after EURAG was created!), which was conceived in collaboration with the “International Senior Citizens Association” (with then headquarters in Los Angeles) and became an attachment to the statutes of EURAG. Interestingly the issue of an international charter of rights of older persons is still under heavy debate in the United Nations and in the European Union.

Now, which conclusions can we draw from the past of our organisation?

Definitely EURAG addressed the precarious situation of older persons in a rapidly changing European society in a most timely manner – long before public institutions did. We were successful in raising awareness about the dramatic shifts in the living conditions, the problems this creates for older persons, and the gaps to be covered. The clear identification and definition of these issues were the basis for the spelling-out of older persons’ needs, rights and possible options – and, eventually, their preferred choices.

EURAG communicated these aspects and its positions via its own regular conferences which occasionally brought together more than 1.000 participants, through its monthly bulleting which was published in 4 languages, but also by input into other important processes like the United Nations’ World Assemblies on Ageing, other topical national and international conferences, relevant Green Papers of the Commission of the European Union, and alike occasions requesting or allowing input of the results of its work.

Another area where its expertise was asked for were counselling demands of governments looking for advice in processes of policy and strategy formulation concerning the older population. Likewise, it is important for EURAG to provide support to its member organisations in their relationship with national public authorities. A particular focus was always help to mainstream ageing issues in governmental policies and monitor their implementation.

Thus, we can be proud of a very successful past of the European Federation of Older Persons during many decades.

But when we look back to the more recent past, we must state that EURAG went through a very difficult period that started in 2006 with the most unfortunate move of the secretariat out of Graz. Various reasons lead to this move and a change of structural environment which resulted in a total loss of public subsidies. The financial assets of our organisation were abruptly reduced to the sole relatively small membership fees.

About the same time, the Age Platform Europe was created with the strong support of the Commission of the European Union, including a generous budget which allowed for numerous staff and the coverage of travel expenses of the personnel and of its adherents when they participated in statutory meetings or working group sessions. This most comfortable arrangement available only to members coming from EU member countries led to the fact that many members of EURAG quitted our organisation and changed affiliation in order to benefit from the advantages offered by the Age Platform Europe. EURAG members from non-EU countries did not have this option.

Hence, we faced, at that time, a serious danger of disintegration of the European Federation of Older Persons. But the remaining members of EURAG became quickly aware of the fact that they belonged to a unique organisation with a set of unique members from so many countries, representing the realities of the life of older persons all over Europe, with precise objectives defined by themselves, with a high reputation, and recognition by its various civil society and public partners. However, it was clearly difficult to envisage a continuation of the common work without



public support, with no supportive administrative secretariat, with no regular information and communication bulletin.

Nevertheless, the members decided to not only maintain but also revitalise the organisation by enhanced commitment and involvement as well as generous contributions of members. Since then, all functions are purely voluntary, and everybody covers personally her or his travel expenses when coming to organisational meetings or conferences.

Despite these difficulties and complications, EURAG was able to achieve impressive results during the past one and a half decades. Over some 15 years it was a EURAG representative who represented all accredited civil society organisations in the Working Group on Ageing of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (with 57 member states), even sitting on the Board of this body. In this capacity EURAG had the chance to work in subsequent drafting committees of the Political Declarations and the 5-years Working Programmes of the UNECE member states.

Since more than 12 years, EURAG has had an expert-delegate in the Consultative Commission on Industrial Change which is part of the European Economic and Social Committee of the European Union. In this function, the EURAG representative put forward a number of own-initiative opinions on issues addressing the situation and the needs of older persons in European industrial society and he worked in many study groups on important opinions to be submitted to the European Commission and the European Parliament.

It is also interesting to mention the latest topical international conferences organised together with member organisations, which resulted in important outcomes documents that seem to have impact on policy making in various countries: In Moscow, in September 2019, we concentrated on prerequisites for adequate education possibilities in advanced life and in Budapest, in September 2021, the central issue of contributions and debates was on the need and the effects of citizens' political participation.

EURAG is, further, proud to have participated, in a leading role, in a 5-years research project of the European Union on "Social Innovation for Active and Healthy Ageing", carried out with some 20 partners from science and research, important European cities and other civil society organisations. At the end of the project, the EURAG representative became the author of a "White Book" containing more than 130 "Recommendations for Decision Makers" – published in 14 European languages.

In recent years a number of new individual and associative members joined the European Federation of Older Persons – to mention in particular the Russian Union of Pensioners, a non-political organisation with around 1,7 million members.

To maintain and further develop contacts with and communication between its members during the peak of the Covid-19 Pandemic, EURAG organised regular tele-conferences on important general topics and questions of actuality. Altogether there were, so far, 15 successful virtual come-together sessions with large numbers of participants.

The extensive program of Memory Training Courses, a long-standing and highly recognised central pillar of EURAG's services to members, went on in various countries – and was even implemented in the United Nations Institute on Ageing, located in Malta.

Now what about the future of EURAG?

Clearly, we must be aware of the fact that European society undergoes rapid changes and is constantly leading to new conditions, patterns and types of living together. Increasing longevity and

declining numbers of children are some of the important demographic features that we have to keep in mind.

In 1881, only some 5 generations ago, the average life expectancy in Western Europe (for example in Austria, Germany, Switzerland) was around 35,5 years for men and 38,5 years for women. Just 140 years later, in 2021, the average life expectancy has gone up to 78,5 years for men and 83,5 years for women. This means an impressive plus of 43,0 years for men and of 45,0 years for women. On average men gained 3,07 years per decade and women 3,21 years.

Factors for this remarkable increase in life expectancy have to be seen in particular in the progress of medicine and health care, the advancement of sanitation and housing conditions, in the improvement of food quality and hygiene, the adaptation of working conditions in terms of work load, duration and safety, but also in the establishment of new and better transportation and communication systems.

However, society still functions with old and often totally obsolete structures, with institutions implementing frequently outdated concepts, policies and strategies. This, most unfortunately, relates to health and care, education and training, communication and information, food and drugs, services provision, utilisation of resources, environmental conditions, distribution of wealth, leisure time organisation and accessibility to culture, just to name some important ones.

Obviously, we urgently and strongly need to think about the future and in particular to where do we want to go from here.

For the European Federation of Older Persons, the orientation is clear: We are committed to contribute to “A Society for All” which follows the principle “Leave No One Behind”. Thus, we strongly plead for policies for all.

In order to be successful in this attitude, we have to be very attentive to the following issues: To fully understand how people age. To acknowledge that people are very different in various life phases and also individually in age groups. To find out how needs, preferences and choices change according to living conditions and available options.

In particular we must recognise that we do not yet sufficiently understand what people feel and claim when talking, for example, about personal capacities, individual choices, fundamental rights, independence, self-determination, participation, recognition, values, sense of life, identity, status, diversity, tolerance – to mention again just some significant examples.

Thus, we have a huge agenda of issues to be addressed and in which we will have to prioritise the most important according to our mission and from our actual – and with time certainly changing - point of view. Allow me to offer some catchwords to stimulate our common reflections: Where and how (under which conditions) to live and to age; personal security under increasing mobility; work chances and conditions; adequate income and social security; social relations and social integration; socio-economic discrepancies and tensions; civil, political, economic and cultural participation; access to goods, services and property; possibilities of co-creation and decision-making in the aforementioned areas.

How can we proceed in the near future – and develop coherent steps in our short term and long-term work programme?

To start with, we have to distinguish clearly between, on the one side, problems or barriers and, on the other side, opportunities or chances – and fully recognise them all. On this basis, we should enhance optimism and the sense for creative thinking among our members. For this we need to



value and use the capabilities, the experiences and the wisdom of all – and not only of the older persons. Then it is indispensable to recreate reasonable and supportive trust in the public bodies responsible for our society, in governance and in administration. Not least we need to go back to long-term views and projects – including in all concepts the main challenges, namely the maintenance of peace and the protection of our environment.

Strategically it is indispensable to involve, in particular, the young in our reflection and discussion processes. We must interest them in the need of investing in society and their own future by explaining the rationale of doing so. We should not refuse to listen actively, taking into account advanced, sometimes radical, ideas, concepts, technologies – i.e. robotics, artificial intelligence, etc. We should invite all possible partners to think and express their views on the following statements: “We are all integral parts of the future and responsible for the next generations – even for those not yet born” and “We will shape the future of our society according to our values and our understanding of the sense of life” and “Only together we can achieve these intentions”.

Dear distinguished guests, dear friends and colleagues, many thanks for having listened to me so patiently. I do hope that my review of the past of the European Federation of Older Persons and my views on the future of our organisation has been of interest to you.

Dirk Jarré, President of EURAG

15 September 2022