

Some Key Insights into the Ageing Conditions in European Countries

Božidar Voljč, MD, PhD

Emonicum Institute for Healthy and Active Life, Ljubljana, Slovenia

The meaning of such an insight is to understand the complex issues connected with the increasing longevity in all member countries of the European Union. The reasons for longer lives as well as prospects for next decades are quite well known and easily accessible. It seems more important to understand considerations connected with the ageing of European populations particularly in times of economic and social crisis. At the end of September 2013 I had as a representative of AGE Platform Europe a presentation about life of older Europeans at the Galician geriatric congress in A Coruna in Spain. Its title and content matches the meaning of my today's lecture. In spite of recent signs of an economic improvement public does not feel any improvement in their lives yet which means that circumstances in which older Europeans lived 20 months ago are still actual. I am going to talk about them with minor changes in Celje as well.

There is a broad range of issues in time of the current economic and social crisis in which the living conditions of millions of Europeans have deteriorated to poverty, great part of which are older people. The average quality of life and social security of the European citizens declined since the escalation of the crisis in 2008. In the continuation I'll concentrate myself on issues such as quality of life, well-being, health, poverty, social isolation etc. and compare some key data about the life of older Europeans in different European environments.

What's **quality of life** all about? It has been generally described as well-being of an individual and society. It covers broad spectrum of subjective and objective indicators. Subjective represent personal experience, how people feel about their life, while objective are considered as living conditions. Indicators are numerous and differently influence quality of life in different periods of life. In case of older people it mostly depends on life satisfaction, happiness, income, health, housing and family. Social and economic differences influence levels of the quality of life among European countries. Citizens of Nordic countries, Netherland, Belgium, Luxembourg, Great Britain, France and Germany are more satisfied with their lives than citizens of the central and southern part of Europe, Italy, Spain, Greece, Portugal, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Slovakia, Poland, Estonia and Hungary.

Let me present you the contents of some mentioned indicators a little bit more in detail.

Subjective well-being is self-assessment of the level to which one's needs and expectations are being met. It is a combination between life satisfaction, happiness and optimism. Life satisfaction evaluates life as a whole, while happiness is an emotional aspect, accumulation of happy experiences, one of the most valued goals in life. Optimism depends on political and economic situation, social circumstances and personality. Only 44% of Europeans over 65 years express optimism. Life satisfaction and happiness do

not coincide necessarily. Some people remain happy in adversity while others are unhappy at the best of time. In all European countries, except Denmark and Sweden, the level of happiness surpasses that of the life satisfaction in all periods of life. The more one country is well off the smaller is difference between life satisfaction and happiness and vice versa. The difference is the smallest in Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Luxembourg, Netherland and Austria, the highest in Bulgaria, Hungary, Greece, Latvia, Estonia, Slovakia and Czech Republic. The way in which one lives is also important. Those with partners are happier than single, widowed or divorced people. High educated old people are more satisfied with their lives. There are big differences in optimism across countries as well. Only 20% of Greeks are optimistic compared to 85% of Swedes. It is interesting that the level of the GDP does not importantly influence feelings of the subjective well-being. Poland and Hungary have approximately the same GDP, nevertheless Polish people are expressing much higher level of happiness than Hungarians; Romania and Italy show the same level of happiness in spite of 50% lower GDP in Romania. As in case of countries is the material status important on personal level. People with high income are happier and more satisfied with their lives. Among poor people are those, who are able to make ends meet more satisfied and happier than those who cannot do it. Considering age groups the most satisfied and happy are young people in the age from 18 to 24 and those over 65 years. The figures are not uniform. Cyprus, Ireland, Sweden and Great Britain demonstrate constant rise in life satisfaction and happiness over all age groups, opposite to Bulgaria, Portugal and Slovakia with a constant decline, while the level of both values is more or less the same across all age groups in Netherland. In Bulgaria, Lithuania and Romania is the life satisfaction significantly below the European average.

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Health is an important part of subjective well-being in old age. Those who consider their health as good or very good, enjoy higher level of life satisfaction and happiness. Illness and disability decline both feelings. It is important however that old people with chronic illnesses, which do not cause limitations in daily activities, demonstrate similar level of subjective well-being to those without a health problem. Another important message is that prevalence of disability in oldest old is declining in Italy and Netherland, which makes endeavours for its further reduction in other countries meaningful. Satisfaction with health is gradually declining with the increasing age and reduced social participation. Optimism shows a similar decrease with age as health and happiness.

Significant changes in subjective well-being have been registered in years of exacerbating crisis from 2007 on. On the general European level life satisfaction surprisingly increased, pictures on the country level are however different. Estonia, Greece and Slovakia dropped even lower as they were before and a subtle increase has been noticed in Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania and Romania. Spain too increased its life satisfaction level despite of its economic problems. It was again confirmed that the higher the income the higher and more firm is life satisfaction. People over 65 expressed higher satisfaction as well, except for a drop in happiness which was mostly pronounced in Estonia, Lithuania, Malta, Romania and Slovakia. Happiness and optimism declined in nearly all European countries in last four years with the biggest decrease in Greece, Malta, Slovakia and Slovenia. All changes are relatively small, however significant. People with the lowest income suffered mostly. Their feelings of life satisfaction, happiness, health and family life decreased more than in others. This change is particular important for those in old age.

Old age can be in case of material and physical independence, emotional and life satisfaction very nice period of life. However, it is also time of tectonic life and social changes, time of slow physical and mental decline, health problems, loss of partners and friends, reduced income, poverty, social isolation and discrimination. Older people have been confronted with them as autodidacts, socially and emotionally unprepared, which negatively influences their lives. The existent crisis in Europe supports the severity of the regression in old age. The longevity has been interpreted as a societal burden rather than a great achievement of humanity. Demographic challenge remains a kind of shock for European societies still immersed in old cultural norms. The picture of a society as a bunch of different generations is a societal construction, which causes splits between them, misunderstandings and ageism. Life is a way, on which everybody meets older and younger people all the time. Each age, with its pluses and minuses, should be an active part of a society. Demographic revolution is a great historical cultural opportunity which challenges our understanding of both social values and specifics of old age.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Committee of the Regions organised in 2012 in Brussels a seminar on the impact of the crisis on older people, on which some recommendations were formulated on how well-being and specific needs, dignity and quality of life of the most socially exposed older people should be protected. In European countries the average **poverty** level of older people exceeds the level of poverty in public. Since older populations are not homogenous, there are significant differences in poverty risk among older people as well. It is the same in case of Europe; a mosaic of large social variations in the risk of poverty among those over 65 years varies from 6% in Luxembourg to 56% in Bulgaria. The less financial resources one has, the higher his/her social vulnerability. In the time of budget constraints the rights of older people are under increasing risk. In many cases rights have been not realised, albeit legal.

Inequalities within **social gradient** in health are widening with co-payments for drugs, services and hospital care. The right to health and access to health and social services, both important heritage of the European solidarity, have been endangered with decline of disposable income. Poor old people consequently either do not care for their health anymore or are performing it on the informal lay and low level. The wish of most old people to live independently at their homes as long as possible, is difficult to be realised among the poor in front of increasing housing rents and prices of home services. Rents of housing are increasing social gaps between poor old people and societies, e.g. in France, Spain, Italy and Greece. Housing supplements for poor residents are reduced or removed in the Czech Republic, Poland, Ireland, Italy and Sweden. In countries where supporting benefits in housings still exist - UK, France, Ireland and Germany – more rigid eligibility conditions limit the number of beneficiaries. Increasing energy prices limit the ability of poor old people to keep their home warm during winter months. Consequently winter months took a heavy toll among old people, as for instance 22.000 additional deaths among 65+ people in England and Wales during winter 2010-2011. In such a way winter is becoming again a harsh time for some European citizens and heating a kind of luxury. The capacity of the poor old people for social participation, even for performance of normal daily activities, is reduced. They are losing their self-esteem and dignity and some of them commit suicide as the only possible outcome.

Mediterranean countries had been known as countries with the lowest suicide rates in Europe. This has changed dramatically since the crisis. In Greece suicide rate was at very low overall rate of 2.8 per 100.000 in 2008. In the period January-May 2011 there was a 40% increase over the same period in only one year. Even if politicians and economists do not consider suicide as an important problem, its increasing rate is a proof that ways with which they are trying to solve problems do not sufficiently include respect of human nature.

Since the level of income represents a turning point between poverty and more or less normal way of living, it is necessary to preserve adequacy of pensions on their minimum level as to prevent poverty and social exclusion. It would be devastating for those old people, who saved all their life for an independent old age, to lose their savings. The European supervision and regulatory system for financial markets and institutions should prevent an unsafe destiny of savings in banks.

There are different groups of the poorest among poor in Europe and all of them are a kind of a mirror for each society. Among those without sufficient resources and care there are many lonely old women with all kinds of existential problems. It is unfair that living neglected in an anonymous poverty is the final step after a life spent raising children and caring for their family. Years which they spent as mothers or family carers should be recognised with compensation benefits to their pensions. Some of these women are exposed to unregistered and thus “non-existing” abuse and violence. Another category represent the oldest-old, those who retired years ago with sufficient pensions, which have not been sufficiently valorised during the years. One of consequences of longevity is many years in retirement; an indexation of pensions, based on country standards, goods and services should prevent the increasing poverty of the oldest-old. Among most discriminated groups of people in Europe are ethnic minorities, Roma people and migrants. It is especially hard to their old members who are not only without income but alone and socially isolated. The belief that it is somehow a part of their destinies is unsocial and should be changed in a sense of Europeanism.

There is a tendency that **informal care** should become the most important form of home care. In such a case, some social and financial changes are necessary. The value of informal caregiving should be acknowledged with the official rights of carers and informal care as a kind of employment with the right to carer’s leave etc. with an increase of public investment in this field of social activities. Years spent in informal care should not be a reason for poverty any longer.

A lot has been written and talked about age-friendly cities and communities, much less about **age-friendly workplaces**. Older workers with low income often experience poorer health than older people with high income. Their knowledge, experience, diligence and loyalty unfortunately do not represent a value for their employers. Those unemployed and over 40 years have hardly any or almost no chance to find a decent job. It is an evident discrimination supported by governmental budgetary austerity measures for solution of problems caused by crisis. They do not count on diligence and capacities of people, which are not of any interest for budget stakeholders in spite of fact, that only diligence of citizens is a right way out of crisis.

The number of **socially isolated old people** is growing and the public awareness about conditions in which they live is scarce. They represent a group of people mostly exposed to violence and abuse and to public neglect. Governmental measures should not be directed by ministers for finance only, who by principle do not care for social consequences of their decisions. It is a responsibility of prime ministers that budgetary interventions take into account the well-being of citizens as well. The goal of a financially successful however unhappy society is a wrong one. It seems that the role of human rights declined in crisis' time in spite of existing charters and declarations. Values such as dignity, freedom, security, respect for difference, social participation, access to life-long learning etc. should remain European values and a part of the European social heritage. Europe is a continent where the global culture and social rights were created and should further be followed by other parts of the world. Longevity changed the nature of old age and social role of older people. It is broadening our social horizons and the meaning of life. The current crisis should be an opportunity to enrich our societies with a more comprehensive understanding of economic and social values.

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