Secure and healthy ageing in EU: A myth or a reality?

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Older people should not be perceived as a burden on society, writes Ivo Vajgl.

A certain level of social security is a fundamental prerequisite of healthy ageing. An older person, lacking the essentials required for a decent life, or facing material poverty, cannot age healthily.

The issue of healthy ageing cannot be successfully tackled without taking into account the social dimension of older people’s everyday lives. In the EU, tangible differences in older people’s social circumstances remain, but there is room for optimism - in the last few years these issues have risen up the EU political agenda.

The question of a longer-living society should not be considered as one-dimensional; on the contrary, it is necessary to tackle its social implications by following a coherent, multidisciplinary approach.
Assuming that a healthy, independent and fulfilled life should be the common goal for European citizens in their ‘silver years’, it should also be acknowledged that all major EU institutions need to step up their efforts to achieve a more socially equal and just society.

Older people should have the right and possibility to live in dignity and have equal access to medical and social care, without facing the risk of living in poverty. This primarily refers to the notion of a pension, which is not a form of social help or social transfer, but is compensation for the work older people provided during the active phase of their lives.

This is, and will remain, an important challenge at EU level. We should therefore think more seriously about the possibility of unifying standards and the sustainability of pension systems in the EU.

In addition to improving the awareness of decisionmakers regarding the importance of issues linked to a longer-living society, another major concern is the public’s perception of ageing and older people.

Healthy ageing also involves the way older people feel in a society. Do they feel welcome, accepted and respected, or are they perceived more as a ‘social burden’ by other generations?

Recently, there have been numerous warnings from a range of experts and intellectuals highlighting that there is increasing ageism in the public sphere as well as at institutional level. As the WHO defines it, ageism is “the stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination against people on the basis of their age”.

Instead of being included in society and public life, older people frequently face social exclusion due to their age. This ultimately results in their marginalisation, which undoubtedly impacts their health and wellbeing.

A longer-living society is a great achievement - for the first time in human history most people can expect to live into their sixties or longer. This should not be perceived as a burden for society.

Let’s join forces towards a more secure and healthy ageing.

About the author
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