

Statement on the 9th Ferpa Congress

by

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Dear delegates, companions, friends and guests, it has been four very difficult years since the 8th Ferpa Congress.

We have lived through a terrible pandemic that caused over six million deaths worldwide, a quarter of which were in Europe alone, and the majority of them among the elderly population. Before we begin the business of our Congress, it is only right that we commemorate all the people who lost their lives as a result of the pandemic. Many unfortunately died in isolation, without the comfort of their loved ones.

We must not forget this tragedy, both out of respect for the victims and because of what it has taught us. Indeed, the pandemic has shed light on the shortcomings and fragilities of health systems in all countries, caused by widespread cuts in health and social spending as a result of the deplorable austerity policies adopted in recent years.

We have spoken in depth about the pandemic, its consequences and the actions taken by Ferpa at our mid-term conference, held on 21 and 22 October 2021.

However, I think it would be worthwhile to briefly summarise the efforts we made.

First of all, in the initial stages of the pandemic, Ferpa, together with ETUC and EPSU (the European Federation of Public Service Unions), alerted the European institutions to what was happening in the Social Care Facilities for the Elderly, where guests and workers were losing their lives and often left without clear guidance and the equipment needed to protect themselves against the virus.

Then, after months of trials, the first vaccines were finally approved, and Ferpa, together with ETUC, asked the European institutions to ensure that the vaccination campaign started with the most vulnerable and elderly populations and health workers, a strategy that was subsequently adopted in many countries.

We therefore supported campaigns to promote Covid vaccinations and encouraged the elderly to get vaccinated, contributing to the dissemination of accurate information and challenging the misinformation of anti-vaxxers.

But the difficult times are not over: we are now confronted with the war waged by Russia which began on 24 February 2022 with the invasion of Ukraine, a sovereign and democratic state. The war has resulted in the exodus of several million women, children and elderly people from Ukraine; it has caused, and is causing, tens of thousands of deaths among the population; it has resulted in, and is resulting in, the destruction of infrastructure, hospitals, schools and civilian housing.

Ferpa has always condemned those who instigated the conflict and we would like to express our full support and solidarity with the Ukrainian people in their fight for democracy and territorial sovereignty. But we also believe that, after a year of war, Europe, with its principles of peace and democracy, must do everything in its power to overcome this tragic situation by pursuing all diplomatic avenues to create a genuine peace process in accordance with international law.

It is also necessary to start thinking about the reconstruction of Ukraine and how to help a population that has suffered this terrible destruction, especially the elderly who are very attached to their country.

Unfortunately, the war in Ukraine is not the only reminder of how much suffering exists in the world: in recent years we have witnessed wars in other countries and the tragedy of so many men, women and children who have lost their lives at sea in an attempt to find work, freedom and a better future in our Europe.

European institutions and national governments must develop more effective and supportive common reception policies to give stability to those who arrive. They must also establish common preventive measures to combat human trafficking. Tragedies like the one that occurred at the end of February off the coast of Italy must not be repeated. The Mediterranean Sea cannot continue to be the graveyard of impoverished people.

We must also remember the many countries, such as Afghanistan and Iran, where women are denied basic human and civil rights, their dignity is trampled upon, and their very lives are at stake. Nonetheless, many women subjected to these brutal and totalitarian regimes have rebelled and fought for freedom and democracy with true courage and heroism. Europe must not turn its back on them! ETUC and trade union organisations from various European countries have expressed solidarity and support for these struggles, starting with those that are ongoing in Iran. We must keep up the momentum because international pressure and attention can really help these movements.

The context in which we have been operating in recent years has therefore undoubtedly been a difficult one. At Ferpa we have continued to demand protection and rights for all elderly people in Europe. We have stressed the need for a more cohesive and inclusive Europe. The need for budgetary regulations aimed not at austerity policies, but at growth policies and reducing inequality. The need to increase spending on social protection, going above and beyond the Stability Pacts.

Today, in the European Union, people over the age of 65 account for more than one fifth of the total population. And this number is expected to increase. But European policy has often treated – and continues to treat – the elderly population as a burden on the economy, seeing them only as a cost.

Instead, we should ask ourselves what would happen if all these elderly people, in their respective countries, stopped carrying out their activities within their families and in society, and stopped volunteering in communities and care institutions. Society would suffer enormous damage and would be unable to function properly.

Far from being a cost, in fact, elderly people offer vital services to the community and provide essential help, often financial, to their families. They are a valuable source of knowledge and memories. Furthermore, many older people keep working, thus continuing to make use of their professional skills. It is therefore clear that older people are a vital resource for European society as a whole and for individual countries.

Ferpa has always advocated the value of older people and their right to be protagonists in their own lives and in the social, economic and political fabric of their communities.

Over the years, we have worked hard to make the European institutions aware of our demands to protect the people we represent. For example, in 2019 we prepared and sent Ferpa postcards stating our demands to all candidates in the European parliamentary elections. Thanks to the efforts of Ferpa's numerous member organisations, this initiative received positive feedback from many candidates in various countries and also from the then President of the European Parliament, David Sassoli (who sadly unexpectedly passed away), who also participated in the Ferpa Executive meeting with a video recording and fully backed our demands.

Next year, when the new elections for the European Parliament are held, it will be important to organise similar initiatives to make all candidates aware of the content of our Manifesto.

Our Manifesto, unanimously approved by the Ferpa Executive Committee, is undoubtedly an important text. We have sent it to the European institutions and

presented it in a series of meetings with representatives of the Cabinet of the President of the European Council and of the President of the European Parliament, from whom we received positive responses. We have also received a letter from the President of the European Commission expressing her full support for our considerations and demands.

The Manifesto is the result of a thorough study and analysis of the condition of elderly people in all European countries where we are present as Ferpa. It is the outcome of the joint efforts of all member organisations. As a result of this work and dedication, we have created a fully-fledged European demand platform for the defence of the rights of the elderly and pensioner population.

In the Manifesto, the main issues affecting older people are addressed. I won't talk in too much detail about its contents, which we are all familiar with. I will just give some general observations.

As far as pension systems are concerned, we reject the neo-liberal approach whereby pension expenditure is only considered from the point of view of economic sustainability. We reject the idea that in order to ensure the sustainability of pension systems, we have to cut pensions and raise the retirement age. As has happened in Italy. As is happening in France. Indeed, we would like to express our full solidarity with our French colleagues who contest this decision.

Instead, we are calling for a full revaluation of pensions in line with inflation in every European country and the establishment of a minimum pension above the poverty line in each respective country. These are key demands to combat the continuing increase in poverty among older people, especially older women, who are living in worse conditions because of the pension gap between men and women, which stands at around 30%.

Living in poverty is unacceptable and in direct contradiction to the rights set out in the European Pillar of Social Rights. This is why we have actively supported ETUC's two years of intense activity in order to obtain the European institutions' approval of the Action Plan, as was the case in Lisbon in 2021, with the aim of finally implementing its 20 principles. However, as yet, there has been no concrete action.

With regard to health protection, cuts in public spending have diminished the quality of healthcare in many European countries and jeopardise the right to quality medical care and long-term care in the event of loss of autonomy or the onset of disability. Moreover, medical care is often too expensive and therefore unaffordable for many people, especially those living in poverty and the elderly, who often need it the most.

Another important point in our manifesto and platform relates to housing policies. Most elderly people want to grow old in their own home, in a familiar environment. For this reason, we demand adequate and widespread home care. All residences where elderly people live must also be made accessible. Local communities would then be required to organise social support networks to prevent older people from living in isolation.

Joint housing projects for the elderly should also be promoted in areas within easy reach of shopping centres, municipal services and health facilities. Cultural, social and recreational activities, including intergenerational ones, organised by the elderly themselves, should be provided in these homes, with the aim of promoting relationships and combating loneliness.

In addition, accessible, affordable collective services are of paramount importance not only for the elderly, but also for every citizen: from access to water, sanitation, energy, and transport, to financial services and digital communications. The increase in privatisation has introduced so-called ‘market mechanisms’ into these essential services, thereby putting private profit before social benefits. This has resulted in poorly functioning transport services; high energy prices and consequent energy poverty; financial services being out of reach of the elderly; and digital communications being inaccessible to a large part of the elderly population. Fortunately, water and sanitation are still a public service in most countries, but at Ferpa we demand that all collective services be made public. These services are crucial for the well-being of the entire population and play a vital role in combating poverty.

As I have mentioned, the meetings with the European institutions in which we presented our Manifesto and our demands were positive. We have made our voice heard in Europe. But this is not enough.

In order to achieve what we set out to do, our demands must also be supported by ETUC.

ETUC is well versed in our Manifesto and the General Secretariat has also shared it with all members of the Executive Committee. We have promoted our Manifesto and our proposals at all meetings of the ETUC bodies and, at the same time, supported ETUC’s activities as a whole. We have also achieved some positive results. For example, in April 2019, Ferpa spoke at the ETUC event in Brussels. We were also successful in having our demands regarding the cost of living crisis included in the current European action plan launched by ETUC, in addition to the six points in the Action Plan approved by the ETUC Executive Committee in October 2022.

But this is not enough. Too often, in fact, ETUC's proposals do not adequately take into account the specific needs of the elderly population. We must therefore succeed in getting ETUC as a whole to agree on more of our demands. It is clear that our action in ETUC meetings is not enough if the various trade union confederations present in the ETUC bodies do not take on board and support our demands.

To achieve this goal, we need the commitment and cooperation of everyone, including all Ferpa organisations. We must involve our confederations more in our proposals and in the content of our Manifesto to gain their support from within ETUC as well.

We must promote closer cooperation between Ferpa and ETUC affiliates. We have already spoken to ETUC General Secretary, Esther Lynch, about this. And we have agreed to arrange a further meeting to discuss precisely these issues.

Of course, Ferpa should also continue its efforts to obtain voting rights in the ETUC bodies, for example in the Youth Committee and the Women's Committee. We cannot continue to be considered a mere working group of ETUC.

At ETUC's mid-term conference, held in Lisbon, our amendment was rejected once again, along with the amendment calling for abstention not to be considered as a vote against.

With regard to the forthcoming ETUC Congress in Berlin in May, we have unfortunately noted that this time too there will not be the numbers to pass the amendment. I would also like to point out that confederations that have their own pensioner representatives within Ferpa will also continue to vote against our right to vote. (I checked this when meeting them).

Together with ETUC General Secretary Esther Lynch, we therefore decided to find a different solution, namely not to resubmit the amendment, in order to avoid yet another defeat and further explicit discrimination against us in such an important forum as the congress. Instead, we will work together to find a political solution. Secretary Lynch therefore personally agreed to set up a study group in ETUC for the first time in order to find a positive solution to our request to present at the mid-term conference. This decision was supported and approved by ETUC's Executive Committee last week.

We must also strengthen alliances within ETUC.

It is therefore important that the agreement between Ferpa and the ETUC Youth Committee is updated and expanded, something we have not been able to achieve in recent years. As stipulated in the agreement, a representative of the Youth Committee could be invited to attend Ferpa Executive Committee meetings and, vice versa, a Ferpa

Executive Committee member could be invited to Youth Committee meetings. Strengthening relations with younger generations is important for many reasons. After all, without memories of the past (and without the elderly people who pass on these memories) there is no future. And the future cannot be built without young people.

Another fundamental alliance, which will be important to consolidate, is the one between the ETUC Women's Committee and the Ferpa Women's Committee. This alliance could perhaps be strengthened through the organisation of regular meetings between the two committees' representatives. At the same time, we must also strengthen the activities of the Ferpa Women's Committee to overcome the difficulties of recent years. I am confident that the President, who will be elected in the coming days, the Coordination Committee that will be set up, and Ferpa's Women's Committee as a whole will dedicate themselves to a work programme that will bear fruit in the years to come. In fact, we have already achieved our first positive result: for the first time, half of the nominations to our Steering Committee are women. Moreover, 40% of those attending our Congress are women.

We should also look for new members among the organisations in ETUC that do not yet have their own pensioner representatives in Ferpa.

We must also try to gain back previously affiliated organisations, e.g. Bulgaria (already expired), Poland and the United Kingdom, which no longer pay their membership contribution and with whom we no longer have a close relationship.

Consideration should be given to the position of organisations that have observer status within Ferpa.

We should also pay special attention to our Turkish colleagues, given the difficulties they are experiencing in their country as a pensioners' organisation and, more generally speaking, given the situation of the trade unions in their country.

Overall, Ferpa should create opportunities to make its voice heard more loudly, particularly on special occasions. The International Day of Older Persons, on 1 October, is of course the ideal opportunity.

And, of course, we must not forget other important topics promoted by the European Union on which we have been working as Ferpa in recent years, such as the *Conference on the Future of Europe* or the *Green Paper on ageing — demographic change in Europe*. Furthermore, for the past year and a half we have been working with the Civil Society Liaison Group, a body of the European Economic and Social Committee. We have also sent our Manifesto to many participants but received few responses.

I would like to emphasise the important role that could be played by our website which, as you know, has been revamped and made more user-friendly. In this regard, I'd like to thank Uilp for its financial and professional contribution to the creation and updating of the site. In particular, I express my thanks to Maria Sole, who is here among us in the Uilp delegation, and Omar, the graphic designer at Uilp.

Updating the site, however, is not just a matter of who posts the news, but also of who provides it. Indeed, providing the news is not only the job of the Ferpa Secretariat but, above all, it is the job of us all. I therefore encourage all Ferpa organisations to send us news and documentation about their activities, so that we can create an up-to-date Ferpa website that can be used to share our news both within and outside our Federation. I would also recommend that you check the logos and links of your organisations to ensure that they still give an accurate representation.

This past year has also been dedicated to preparing for this Congress. Please allow me to express my gratitude for this. I would like to thank my colleagues in the Steering Committee for preparing the draft congress resolution, the Statute Change Commission and in particular President Dick for their good work, and all members of the outgoing Executive Committee for their invaluable contributions.

Preparing for the Congress has also been complicated by the operational difficulties of recent months. In December 2022, ETUC, and therefore also Ferpa, left their old premises and have since been operating from temporary premises while awaiting news of their permanent office. This move has caused, and is continuing to cause, so many organisational disruptions that we are unable to schedule the next Executive Committee and Steering Committee meetings because we have not yet found suitable premises to hold them.

In recent months, we have also been closely following the ugly story of the so-called 'Qatargate', which saw the arrest of MEPs and the detention of the Secretary General of the ITUC worldwide trade union, Luca Visentini, who suspended himself from his post and was later acquitted by the judiciary, but not reappointed by ITUC to the post of Secretary General.

Dear delegates, companions, friends and guests, this month Ferpa will celebrate 30 years since its Constituent Congress held in Madrid on 29 and 30 April 1993.

With its 41 member organisations (across 24 EU and non-EU countries) it is the leading organisation representing older people in Europe and can draw on the many years of trade union experience of its members.

We should be proud of our Federation and the long road that has led us to this Congress. We have demonstrated that we are a proactive and representative trade union federation. We have played an important role in asserting the rights of Europe's elderly population.

As I mentioned at the mid-term conference, this has only been possible because we have successfully built a strong and cohesive leadership group thanks to the commitment of all and the joint efforts of the members of the Executive Committee and the Steering Committee, who I would like to thank again for their great contribution.

I would also like to emphasise the important role played by the Secretariat, particularly during the months of the pandemic. Thanks to the work of the Secretariat, which monitored all activities, took minutes of the weekly meetings and the meetings of our bodies and ETUC, Ferpa was able to continue its mission without interruption. This was made possible thanks to the dedication of Jessica and Henri, who I thank for their availability, hard work and belief in the important role of the Secretariat.

Special thanks must also go to President Lajos for his excellent teamwork; to Deputy General Secretary Angeles for her support and availability; and to the President of the Women's Committee, Mireille, for her commitment.

A heartfelt thank you also goes to our ETUC colleagues Evgenia and Julienne, who are always available and ready to cooperate and who allowed us to hold our meetings at any time, even via video link; and to the interpreters whose professionalism allowed us to communicate with each other.

Finally, warm thank yous must be made to Werner for the years and passion he has dedicated to Ferpa, and also to the entire Ogb for their great hospitality and help, which were essential in organising this Congress of ours in the best possible way.

We must now look ahead and work together to strengthen Ferpa through increasingly cohesive and determined teamwork.

In recent years, Ferpa has demonstrated the importance of the role of the European pensioners' union in defending the rights and dignity of the elderly population. Now, working together as a team, we seek to use this Congress to give more strength to this indispensable role, to build a Europe of solidarity and inclusiveness that knows how to respect the rights of older people and people of all ages.

I am confident that we will succeed together. Have a great Congress and long live Ferpa!