



## Letter from Secretary General – Winter 2024, A Year of Hope

January 2024

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Dear Readers,



The new year has just begun, with a bit of frost and sunshine here and there in Europe, and everything seems to be looking like a typical start of the year and a typical winter season. But have typical years and seasons ever existed? It doesn't matter, because 2024 will be far from typical.

Europe, at least its western part, has long been protected from the major turbulences and crises that other parts of the continent and the world have been facing for decades. It's true that we experienced the financial crisis of 2008, it's true that we had to lock down in March 2020 as anyone else in the world because of the Covid-19 pandemic. But overall, Western Europe, since the end of the World War II, consolidated by European political and economic integration, has enjoyed a historically long period of prosperity, growth and peace. Europe is home to the most equal societies in the world, the highest standards in working conditions, and broad social protection. Older people have actively contributed to the success story of the European project. This undeniable democratic and economic strength of post-war Western Europe contributed, with the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, to the reunification of the continent and the enlargement of the European Union to new countries, many of which were deprived of the freedom to shape their own destiny.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the European Union's biggest enlargement, when ten countries from Eastern and Southern Europe enthusiastically joined the European family on 1 May 2004. This historic enlargement was followed by two further enlargements in 2007 and 2013. Today, new countries are negotiating to join the EU, although over the years the complexity of European integration in a fragmented world has led many to question the added value of a united Europe. The 'Leave' victory in the Brexit referendum in 2016 and the UK's final withdrawal from the EU in 2020 came as a shock to many and marked the end of continued progress in European integration.

In 2024, the challenges are even greater... Anti-European rhetoric is on the rise and movements that challenge democracy are strengthening. The EU is struggling to help Ukraine in the aftermath of the Russian invasion that brought war to our doorstep. Our governments differ on how to manage the refugee crisis, which continues to bring people to Europe fleeing poverty, violence and war, or simply the consequences of climate change that is making their home countries and regions unliveable. Finally, the despicable Hamas attacks on Israel and the ensuing escalation, which have caused far too much suffering on both sides, have made the prospects for global stability even more difficult.

And yet, at the start of this year, we have only one viable solution: to strengthen the European Union. It is not perfect, it needs reform, but it is our home, the best home we have been able to build so far. Defending and strengthening the European values of democracy, dignity, solidarity and equality must guide our individual and collective actions in 2024.

AGE will continue to urge decision-makers at national level and here in Brussels to seize the opportunities offered by an ageing population and, at the same time, to reinforce the EU so that we can collectively address the internal and global challenges. We will also be committed to a Union that is closer to the concerns of its citizens. The Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, which has just begun, and the forthcoming European elections in June will be crucial in this respect. Anti-European voices will probably gain more power in the new European Parliament, but this is not a major problem; democracy allows differences, and even extremes, to coexist. In the run-up to the elections, AGE will use alliances with all pro-democratic and European forces to build a Union of democracy and equality. We will continue to mobilise around a European Strategy on Age Equality. To do this, we will influence the objectives of the new European Commission, which will be appointed in the autumn, and, in parallel, we will build alliances within the new European Parliament and do our best to re-establish an intergroup on ageing and intergenerational solidarity.

Despite the myriad of internal and external challenges facing the EU, we, older people and civil society as a whole, must remain focused on our advocacy objectives. Our efforts to build inclusive societies where everyone's rights are protected are more relevant than ever. We contribute to society and economy through different forms and means of paid or voluntary work, informal care, political participation, sharing skills and knowledge. Together with other generations, we can contribute to the unity of Europe; we can make demographic, technological and climate changes a success for all generations; we can combat inequality, poverty, intolerance and extremism; we can share our prosperity with those in need and; finally, we can create societies where everyone – regardless of sex, gender, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation – lives life to the full.

As members of the older generation, we have a duty to defend the European dream that our parents and grandparents built over the several decades. Our goal is a European Union of peace and solidarity, of growth and prosperity for all, respectful of diversity and open to cooperation with other regions of the world.

At the start of this new year, I would like to extend my best wishes to AGE, our partners, allies and friends, as well as to those who may have different opinions. Together, we can make 2024 *A Year of Hope*.

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Happy and peaceful new year to all!

Maciej Kucharczyk,  
Secretary General