

A GOOD LIFE IN OLD AGE? MONITORING AND IMPROVING QUALITY IN LONG-TERM CARE

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Abstract: *Since the early 1990s, the issue of an aging population has become one of the priority issues of the current Member States of the European Union. Historically, at least, individual concerns within each state have emerged long before we can discuss about a European policy in this direction. These concerns have naturally flowed from the evolution of European societies. The improvement of living conditions and scientific progress, especially in the medical field have led to the gradual prolongation of life expectancy. The average age of the European population has risen rapidly, while the fertility rate has fallen. The European demographic trend, visible since the 1990s, continued in the first decade of the 2000s, in parallel with unprecedented social and economic changes, which culminated in the economic crisis of a decade ago. During all this time, at the level of the European Union, but also at the level of the Member States, numerous measures and recommendations have been implemented to correct the negative effects of the aging population, promote active aging and increase the standard of living for this age group. In this study, we will analyze the most important statistical trends and policy adopted in this field at European level.*

Keyword: *active aging, population aging, European social policy, quality of life of the elderly, pension policy, pension systems.*

1. Introduction

The growth of the dependent population, combined with the imperative to meet the needs of this age group, has exerted and continues to exert strong pressure on social protection resources, given the logic of distribution systems in contemporary states: secondary expenditures (health care, care long-term, pensions, etc.) come from contributions and taxes paid by a younger workforce, which is in an alarming decline. The problems of the elderly are, in many cases, the general problems of vulnerable groups, which require special care and satisfaction services, as well as special conditions for carrying out professional activities, where appropriate (Otovescu, Calotă and Cioacă, 2019). Therefore, "the phenomenon of demographic aging has been manifesting itself for several decades in many states of the world. Reducing the birth rate and increasing the number of elderly people are constantly changing the balance between generations in all countries of the world." (Stanciu, 2020, p. 304)

The pressure exerted by the European Union on the Member States is even greater, as the short-term and long-term social spending of each country is limited by the budgetary constraints imposed by the new EU economic governance framework, which we will discuss below.

National social protection systems oscillate between the desire to maintain and even improve the services provided and the need to ensure the financial sustainability of the national economy. This is a challenge common to all EU countries, although its

magnitude varies according to the economic situation and the particularities of development that each society knows.

2. Quality of life and its indicators

The transition process meant an important objective change in people's living conditions. An overview of the quality of life in Romania reveals points where individuals' assessments of some aspects of life are positive, representing supporting elements in their lives, while other components remain in negative areas, constituting permanent sources of dissatisfaction in people's lives. and risks of marginalization and social exclusion (Marginean, 2003).

Perceptions and self-evaluations include a whole set of expectations, interests, motivations, moods, norms, values, political, philosophical, religious options, as well as public and group opinion and other elements that can influence them in one way or another. Personalizing perceptions and self-assessments makes them unsustainable from the outside. In the various normative judgments issued by one evaluator or another (researcher, politician, any other person) regarding the desirable values of quality of life indicators, one cannot ignore the personal meanings that people attribute to their own life, if wants to maintain in the area of plausibility, credibility, it is known that people act based on impressions, judgments, knowledge they have about a certain aspect of life in attention at a given time.

The field of quality of life can be defined by the set of elements that refer to the physical, economic, social, cultural, political, health, etc., in which people live, the content and nature of the activities they carry out, the characteristics of relationships and social processes. participate in the goods and services they have access to, the consumption patterns adopted, the way and lifestyle, the evaluation of the circumstances and the results of the activities that correspond to the population's expectations, as well as the subjective states of satisfaction / dissatisfaction, happiness, frustration etc. In order to obtain an image of society as it is filtered by people's perceptions, we chose to address the following issues: quality of education, quality of health care, quality of social assistance services, quality of company management, evaluation of local government activity, perception of social conflicts, access to education and the possibility of obtaining a job.

The relationship of the individual with the society in which he lives represents a result of the conditions that he experiences on a personal level and of those that this society offers, on a macro level. This relationship refers to trust in people, trust in institutions and participation in political and social life. Finally, the evolution of an indicator that is a result of all the conditions that people experience in their lives, namely life satisfaction, will be taken into account.

3. The situation worldwide

Given the global dimension of the problem, international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and its agencies - the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Labor Organization (IMO) - but also the World Bank (WB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have developed analyzes and strategies to record the consequences of demographic aging and propose measures to improve them. The ability of individuals, companies and societies to adapt, as well as the ability of

decision-makers and institutions to generate major structural and behavioral changes, are the guidelines of these modal social policy documents. Despite the intra- and interstate efforts of such a policy, WHO experts stressed, almost two decades ago, that "in all countries, and especially in developing countries, measures to help older people to staying healthy and active are a necessity, not a luxury." (World Health Organization, 2002: 6) Although general enough to give freedom of action to each state, in accordance with the particularities of the national context, the World Health Organization emphasizes that global social policy in the field of the elderly should it must have a central core, namely "to be based on the rights, needs, preferences and capacities of the elderly. It must also adopt a perspective that recognizes the importance of previous life experiences" (World Health Organization, 2002: 6), hence the idea of active aging.

Active aging, a recurring theme in most European documents addressing the issue of the elderly, "is the process of optimizing health, participation and security opportunities to improve the quality of life as people age." (World Health Organization, 2002: 12) In the same report, prepared by the World Health Organization, it is argued that "active aging allows people to realize their potential for physical, social and mental well-being throughout life and to participate in social life, while providing them with adequate protection, security and care when they need it." (World Health Organization, 2002: 12).

Therefore, the concept of active aging extends the scope of policy action from the financial sustainability of systems to social inclusion, participation in social life and increasing the quality of life of the target age segment. Being active means continuing to participate in social, economic, cultural, spiritual and civic life and it doesn't just mean having a job. Although the need to maximize employment, in particular by encouraging older people to remain as active as possible, has become one of the main measures behind political reforms in EU countries, the scope should also be taken into account. wider range of active aging (Apostolu, 2015).

Despite existing legal provisions at European and national level, which prohibit age discrimination, and despite the financial incentives provided to encourage the employment of older people, organizational cultures do not always seem to favor this age group. Discrimination is justified and rationalized by employers by invoking arguments about alleged declines in productivity, along with higher wage costs incurred, as shown in a 2009 study by Lallemand and Rycx (2009) on discrimination against the elderly. Other prejudices stem from the idea that older people are less open to change, innovation and adaptation to new professional requirements and contexts, especially with regard to new technologies. However, beyond prejudice, other studies show that older employees tend to be less involved than young people in the training and lifelong learning processes, resulting in higher levels of non-correlation of personal skills with the requirements of the job, requirements that have a fluctuating and dynamic character. (European Center for the Development of Vocational Training, 2015). In addition, impaired mental processes and physical abilities, associated with old age, make it more difficult for older employees to perform more complex tasks, as well as their adaptation to sudden changes, which require high levels of functionality of neuropsychic parameters, such as memory. working power, concentration, distributive attention, etc.

According to studies by Naegele and Walker (2006), European entrepreneurs use eight key types of policies at the organizational management level to manage the

aging workforce: recruitment policies, training policies, lifelong learning policies, career development and planning, flexible working hours policies, policies to increase adaptability, redistribution policies, policies for managing retirement and the transition to retirement and, finally, an integrated policy, recommended by the two authors, which brings together all the types of policies mentioned above, becoming part of the organizational culture and codes of ethics in the company.

4. The first attempts to regulate the social protection of the elderly in Europe

The issue of active aging has been explicitly mentioned in European documents since the mid-1990s. 1993 has been declared the "European Year of Older People and Solidarity between Generations". Four years later, a chapter on employment was introduced in the Amsterdam Treaty, which allowed the launch of the European Employment Strategy (EES). It was introduced in 1997, when EU Member States decided to set a common set of employment policy targets. Its main purpose is to create more and better jobs for all citizens of the Union" (European Commission, 2013). The EES was the framework document for the development of a European policy on active aging in the coming years.

At the beginning of the millennium, with the launch of the Lisbon Strategy, which covers the period 2000-2010, the emphasis was placed on active aging in the field of Community social policy. Moreover, the Stockholm (2001) and Barcelona (2002) European Councils set two targets for 2010. The Stockholm target was to increase the average employment rate for women and men. from the age category 55-64 to 50%. The Barcelona Council undertook to gradually increase the average retirement age by about 5 years, in the context of one of the priority axes of the Strategy - pension reform. Also, according to the vision adopted by the Lisbon Strategy, all European citizens, regardless of age, should have access to a decent job and life, even after retirement (European Commission, 2009). An evaluation of the Strategy by the European Commission (2010a) showed that the two objectives were not met, but points out that the Strategy helped to build a broad consensus on the reforms the EU needed at the time to ensure its sustainability. and unitary of the processes of social and economic development and for the development of social protection systems.

The Europe 2020 Strategy, which continued the reforms initiated by the Lisbon Strategy, includes direct references to promoting active aging and reforming pension systems, without taking on quantitative, measurable targets, such as those in Stockholm and Barcelona, which have proved impossible within the assumed time interval. Unlike the Lisbon Agenda, Europe 2020 focuses more on correcting the effects and reducing the costs of an aging European population. The economic crises that affected European economies a decade ago have accentuated this trend, which has become an important milestone in the EU's economic governance. Europe 2020 emphasizes that it is the responsibility of the Member States to develop new forms of work-life balance and active aging policies (European Commission, 2020), and that the Commission will work to assess the adequacy and sustainability of protection systems. social security and pensions and identifying ways to improve access to health systems (European Commission, 2020).

Also in 2010, following the adoption of the Europe 2020 Strategy, the European Commission develops and adopts the Agenda for new skills and jobs, which aims to

increase employment and optimize the employment rate in areas facing labor shortages. According to the Agenda, “reforms of pension systems should go hand in hand with policies to support the transition of older people to the labor market, especially reintegration into employment after a period of unemployment” (European Commission, 2010b). In order to achieve these goals, harnessing the potential of older Europeans, able to pursue professional activities, becomes a priority solution. Also, reforms of national social protection systems, in particular pensions, health care and long-term care, are defined as priority directions for action, given that, in addition to regulating the labor market, by widening the range of the active population, they respond satisfactorily to the problem of population aging and represent a form of concretization, at the level of politics, of the doctrine of old age. The financing of social protection systems has been affected by the economic crisis, which has led to high deficits in national budgets and an increase in public debt. In that context, hampered by economic instability and unpredictability, one of the issues raised by the Agenda was to identify measures to rebalance public finances and ensure the sustainability of social protection systems, without undue costs for the younger generations.

The year 2012 resumes the tradition started in 1993 and is declared the European Year for Active Aging and Solidarity between Generations. German MEP Martin Kastler, the initiator, said at the time: “Maintaining the vitality of older people, respecting the dignity of all, strengthening their involvement in society, family, associations, church and politics and removing barriers between generations are the main objectives of the European Year of Aging. and solidarity between generations – 2012.” (European Parliament, 2012) 2012 was the year in which active aging was most visible on the European agenda. The European Year had the following objectives: raising awareness of the importance of active aging and solidarity between generations, organizing debates and intercultural exchanges on this topic and promoting activities that help to combat or reduce age discrimination. Also, in the same year, the active aging index was developed, developed in collaboration with the United Nations. Hundreds of initiatives dedicated to active aging have been launched, both at the level of the European Union institutions and at the level of the nation states. A special role was played by the exchange of good practices, ie successful social policies pursued by public authorities and private companies in the Member States.

A commendable initiative was the drawing up by the European Employment Committee (EMCO) and the Social Protection Committee (SPC) of a list of 19 guidelines for promoting active aging in EU Member States. These principles were adopted by the European Council in the 2012 Declaration on the European Year for Active Aging and Solidarity between Generations (European Council, 2012). These principles have been structured into three main areas of policy action: employment, social participation and independent living. In any case, it must be borne in mind that the EU's powers in this area are de facto limited, as most of the levers for change are in the hands of states and businesses.

5. The role of social dialogue in European social policy for the elderly

In December 2016, following the European Year for Active Aging in 2012 and in line with the guidelines set out in the Europe 2020 Strategy, the European social partners started negotiations to conclude an autonomous framework agreement on active aging and an intergenerational approach. The framework agreement was signed

on 8 March 2017 by ETUC (European Trade Union Confederation), Business Europe, UEAPME (European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises) and CEEP - European Center of Employers and Enterprises providing Services of Public Interest (European Commission, 2016a). The purpose of the agreement is to promote exchanges of practice designed to ensure adequate working conditions throughout working life and to allow the extension of the legal retirement age, in the context of optimizing working conditions in companies and adapting them to the needs of the elderly. The agreement also emphasizes the need for intergenerational solidarity, facilitating the transfer of knowledge and skills in the field.

The 2016 Framework Agreement is a commitment by the European social partners to cooperate in five priority areas: strategic assessments of labor demography, safety at work, skills management, organizing work for a healthy life and promoting intergenerational solidarity. Strategic assessments of workforce demography involve a scientific approach, methodologically based on the use of tools such as the age pyramid and specific social indicators, which, the Agreement emphasizes, should be operated in the day-to-day management of the company, beyond the steps taken by the community. scientific. These assessments must take into account the local context in which the company operates and are based on specific measures, in line with national and Union policies and practices, but adapted to the particular demographic situation of the community (European Commission, 2017).

Promoting safety and health at work is the priority objective of the 2016 Agreement and of social dialogue in general. The agreement emphasizes the need for relevant information to identify particularly demanding tasks, both physically and mentally, in order to anticipate, prevent and assess risks to the health and safety of older employees. The agreement undertakes to implement concrete measures to achieve this goal and implements the EU Framework Directive on Health and Safety at Work (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2020).

The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) insisted that the Agreement be binding on the member organizations of the signatory parties. The binding nature of the measures, which goes beyond mere recommendations, was the main obstacle during the negotiations. However, one of the problems with previous European documents, which we have already brought up, was the low level of implementation by the Member States. The agreement therefore commits the signatories to implement the established measures and to report annually to the Social Dialogue Committee on the concrete ways in which they have been implemented. A full report on the implementation actions and the results obtained would be prepared and published by the Social Dialogue Committee in 2020. Until the date of this analysis (October 2020), we did not identify the report on the websites of the European institutions responsible. implementation of the Agreement.

Most social protection policies for the elderly have involved the restructuring of pension systems in the Member States. Almost all European countries have raised the retirement age, only Poland has reduced the threshold from 67 to 65 for men and from 65 to 60 for women in 2017 (Center des Liaisons Européennes et Internationales de Sécurité Sociale - Cleiss, 2017). Some of policies have also been developed to encourage older employees to postpone their employment for as long as possible. Many countries have decided to phase out or significantly tighten early retirement conditions (e.g. Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Austria, Italy). Other

countries (eg Finland, Estonia, Cyprus) grant a financial bonus to pensioners who decide to postpone retirement. Several states have developed specific unemployment schemes for the elderly to encourage them to remain professionally active, in parallel with the first period of retirement - in which case retirement does not exclude or limit the receipt of other income, including salary (for example, Germany, Greece, Italy, Hungary, Finland).

Another recurring principle of European social policies is that older people with insufficient resources are eligible to receive a certain amount of money (for example, in the form of a guaranteed minimum income) to meet their subsistence needs. Some countries also offer specific social assistance to those over retirement age. This may take the form of an increase in the amount granted in direct proportion to aging (for example, in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Portugal, Lithuania), a fixed-value allowance, which is granted after reaching an age threshold (eg Belgium, France, Italy, Portugal, Slovenia) or some forms of lending (United Kingdom). However, in recent years, the conditions for access to various forms of social assistance have been tightened, and the continuation of professional activity tends to become quasi-mandatory for those who are (partially) fit for work (Penacasas and Ghailani, 2016).

Employment policies have followed the same path as pension systems. Employment policies for the elderly can be divided into three categories: those aimed at keeping the elderly in employment, those aimed at reintegrating the unemployed into working life and those included in general, non-specific reforms, but which indirectly affect the elderly. Of the reforms adopted by EU states between 2010 and 2014, 30 refer directly to older employees, 42 target older unemployed, and 18 are more general reforms, but with a major impact on this age group (Penacasas and Ghailani, 2016, p. 51).

Some countries, including Romania, have developed national strategies to promote active aging and implement international recommendations in the field. These strategies create the regulatory framework and conditions necessary to facilitate a long-term professional career, in parallel with increasing the quality of life. National strategies have also been adopted in Bulgaria, Estonia, the Czech Republic, Ireland, Portugal and Spain. Other countries (Cyprus, Finland, Hungary and Lithuania) have included initiatives to support older employees in more general strategies for labor market reform, without developing specific public policy documents in this direction (Penacasas and Ghailani, 2016). Policies on equal opportunities, lifelong learning and increasing the quality of life of older people, even if not taken as distinct national strategies, can also be equated with the category of general reforms targeting active aging. In some countries, these policies have resulted from social dialogue between the partners involved and as a result of civil society efforts, for example, in Belgium, Germany, France, Finland, Denmark and Ireland (Penacasas and Ghailani, 2016).

Between 2010 and 2017, a number of labor tax reforms were also implemented, mainly in terms of contributions to social security schemes paid by employers (e.g. Belgium and Italy) or employees (e.g. Austria, Slovenia). The reforms required changes to labor protection legislation, mainly as regards the conditions for collective redundancies (e.g. Belgium, Luxembourg and Spain) or the definition of fair dismissal (Bulgaria). Many reforms have focused on supporting the elderly unemployed. These included providing subsidies to companies that employ older unemployed people (e.g.

Austria, Slovenia, Latvia, Portugal, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, France) and direct job creation (e.g. Greece, Slovakia, Bulgaria). Granting subsidies to companies for recruiting older unemployed and tightening redundancy measures for this category are two of the main types of reforms adopted at EU level. A number of studies have recently examined the effectiveness of these measures. Granting to companies tends to lead to the employment of unsubsidized labor, probably due to the low value of subsidies (perverse effect), generating very limited increases in employment, although such measures seem to have some positive effect on the employment of older women. third, but statistically insignificant and only in certain regions (Boockmann, 2015).

6. Conclusions

Increasing the employment rate of older people should help reduce social protection spending, in particular by reducing the growing burden of pensions as a share of general social spending. However, a recent European Commission report (2016b) suggests that a 10% increase in the employment rate for older employees (aged 55-64) in the period 2013-2060 would have a very low impact on the social spending budget, ranging from -1% to -0.1%. In several countries, the effect would even be to increase pension spending, especially in France, Estonia, Latvia, Czech Republic, Finland and Italy. This is due to the interaction of two contradictory effects. On the one hand, a reduction in the inactive population would lead to an increase in gross domestic product, a reduction in the number of pensioners and an extension of the rights enjoyed by employees to a wider segment of the population. On the other hand, longer working life would also involve the acquisition of more significant pension rights, which would lead to additional expenditure for the pension system (European Commission, 2016b).

To date, a number of European policies have been adopted in the field of active aging, some legally binding and others with recommendations. However, we cannot say to what extent national reforms are the result of European policies, rather than addressing specific national needs.

Currently, Member States are most effective in generating policies and strategies for older people, especially the Scandinavian countries or Germany, which carried out reforms well before the beginning of the millennium and the introduction of mandatory and recommended European incentives.

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