

# **Statement**

**H.E. Ms Viera Tomanová**

**Minister of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic**

**Panel: Social protection, work and education in an  
ageing society**

**2007 UNECE ministerial conference on ageing**

**León, Spain, 8 November 2007**

## **Chair, Excellencies, Ladies, and Gentlemen**

I would like to begin by thanking you for the opportunity to speak at this conference, whose theme is of high current importance, and I would like to praise the organiser, Spain, for the excellent care it has shown us.

I have to say that ageing of population has cancelled participation of the Slovak Minister of Labour, Social Affairs, and Family on this important meeting on ageing. Unexpected parliamentary changes in an amendment of pension law, forced Madame Minister to stay at home country. Therefore, on behalf of Minister Viera Tomanova, I am going to deliver this statement to you.

I would like to begin my speech at this third ministerial panel in a somewhat non-traditional and not very modest way. By talking about myself, since I completed my studies and throughout my life I have worked and continue to work to increase understanding of older and the disabled persons. These two categories do not always go together. Therefore, I have spent my whole life fighting the idea that ageing is something bad. That ageing brings only problems, where young people are forced only through higher moral principles to take care for their seniors and to look with respect at “the wisdom and the autumn of life” in a “selected people” who have preserved their health to an advanced age.

Our ageing and the extension of human life is not a threat. This is not a catastrophe that we need to avoid; as it is for example in the case of global warming. To have the good fortune to be on this Earth for more years is a gift for both, individuals and society as a whole.

At the start of my career, in the 1960es, I was the manager of an old people's home, which was the only one in Slovakia at that time to employ the services of a professional psychologist. The community of inhabitants in that home was like a microcosm of society. There were optimists who were ill, pessimists who were healthy, abandoned seniors and persons who were old in years but young at heart. Together with the staff, we formed one entity, one society, one community.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The very title of the draft ministerial declaration: "A Society for All Ages: Challenges and Opportunities" convinces me that we will find a common approach to extending life expectancy and that we will see it as the successful outcome of our endeavours and the objective of our social policy. We are gradually moving our thoughts and measures in this direction.

I am not thinking only of the partial adaptation of social policy but the direct creation of conditions in which the ageing of the population is not seen as something that needs to be dealt with in a special way, separate from general policies on education, vocational training, and employment. I would like politicians to be aware that if the part and the whole are in some sense one, then what belongs to the whole, also belongs in some sense to the part of it.

There is nothing bad about population ageing; what we are aiming for is an older population. Social solidarity is one of the basic pillars of the European social model, contributing to the quality of life of the whole population, including the

elderly and the ageing. It helps to bring together work, family and personal life, social and territorial cohesion, local and regional development, and the dynamic creation of new jobs.

The population of Europe is growing older. That is a fact. Nevertheless, we continue to see the image where one day a future pensioner is working and the next morning the pensioner sits at the window, depressed, watching former colleagues going to work. Socially, he/she has adequate security and protection, but what this person misses is work and the feeling of usefulness.

The priority for governments, whose duty is to take care of the good of society, is to care equally for all parts of society, preserving distributive justice with rigorous impartiality.

I see here a need for the following:

- A focus on full employment and social inclusion;
- Motivation and the provision of springboards to success in all areas of life in the new, knowledge-based economy;
- Preservation of rights, responsibilities, and duties for individuals and society as a whole.

In Slovakia we have also programmes for the education of older persons, there is the so-called University of the Third Age, which is attended by pensioners, there are pensioners' clubs and facilities to make their life easier, but the main thing is to change stereotypes. Like many of the states in our region, we are suffering from the departure of educated people seeking a better life abroad. At the same time, there is a shortage of workers in some professions and we have difficulty in filling such positions. Efforts to import cheap labour from

abroad can only extend the life of this dysfunctional model and will not solve anything fundamental. The permanently sustainable solution is to provide appropriate training and work for all the population, including older persons. Disseminating successful examples of the engagement of all generations in economic and social life should be one of the tasks of the international community and organisations like the UNECE.

Ageing populations are said to be a threat to the financial sustainability of pensions systems. Such sources give a crooked reflection of ageing as a threat. I am sincerely convinced that it would be a sin to forget our obligations to our parents and children. In the fairy tale of the three coins, the middle generation loans one coin to the younger, gives back another coin to the older, and lives on the third coin. To focus on ourselves alone and not take into consideration the needs of the parents who raised us, and our duties to our own children, is something that I will not accept. Ageing cannot be segregated from the whole and “solved” separately.

As I said, it is not a threat but a gift that we receive in the form of people living longer. We should establish flexible systems for ageing people, who see the purpose of their life in creative work, and create appropriate modern labour, job-creation and training programmes – not because older people need them but because we all need them, regardless of our age.

I would like to return to the start of my speech, where I mentioned that in the old people’s home we formed one entity, one society, one community.

Let us therefore work to create “a society for all” just as our joint declaration says. Not for the social protection, work and education of ageing societies but for societies where progress has allowed people to achieve a long life.

We cannot be satisfied with achieving such objectives in one part of the world if there is a vast inequality with the rest. We must also feel the same as if just one part of the world becomes a region of prosperity and social progress.

Thank you for your attention.