

## **11th Session of the Open-ended Working Group on Ageing**

**Ombudswoman of Croatia – statement to be delivered by mr.sc. Tena Šimonović Einwalter MJur, Ombudswoman of Croatia on Tuesday, March 30th, 2021 (High-level Panel on COVID-19 and Older Persons)**

### ENNHRI Joint Statement

Distinguished Chair, distinguished Members of the Bureau,

I am speaking as the Ombudswoman of Croatia and on behalf of ENNHRI, the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs). The NHRI's welcome the opportunity to speak at this important part of the session, and we would like to congratulate the chair and the all the Members of the Bureau for facilitating this High-level Panel on Covid-19 and older persons.

The COVID-19 pandemic has put human rights to the test like never before. As the outbreak rapidly developed, governments have taken broad and strict measures to reduce the virus' spread, prevent a breakdown of healthcare systems and save lives. Such Government measures must protect the rights of *all* people and cannot discriminate. Their impact on the rights of particular groups, such as older persons, requires particular scrutiny to avoid older persons being disproportionately affected or discriminated against.

In practice, however, European NHRIs witnessed first-hand how the COVID-19 pandemic and Government measures affected the lives of older persons across the region.

As confirmed by the new WHO Global Report on Ageism, this global pandemic amplified existing ageist behavior and practices. Restrictive COVID-related measures are too often based on age, thereby limiting older persons' access to health care, to work, to volunteering, and even prohibiting them to take care of their own grandchildren. Such age limits are rooted in the false assumption that all older persons are vulnerable and that they constitute a homogenous group. Ageist stereotypes were also widespread in press coverage and social media contents regarding the pandemic. In certain instances, older persons were even blamed for the restrictive Government measures and intergenerational tensions rose.

The pandemic had a grave impact on the lives of older persons in residential care settings, who not only faced substantial numbers of infections and deaths, but continue to face restrictions on visits from family members, as well as restrictions on their freedom of movement outside the institution or even their own rooms.

More importantly, older persons' voices were not heard. They were not adequately consulted about the far reaching restrictions they had to endure and in many cases not treated as full and equal participants in society.

As the UN Independent Expert Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, Claudia Mahler, notes in her report, the pandemic has not only shed light on the barriers preventing older persons from fully enjoying their human rights, but has also shown

that older persons are left behind. It has made very evident that there is a protection gap and therefore an *urgent* need to strengthen the human rights framework for older persons.

ENNHRI therefore firmly supports the adoption of a comprehensive binding instrument at the international level and calls OEWGA to commence the drafting of the instrument. We can no longer allow older persons to be left behind and their voices to go unheard.

Thank you.