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AUTHORS' PREFACE

Throughout Europe, there is a booming interest in the Elderly. In the context of the “European year of the Elderly and of solidarity between Generations”, in 1993, the living conditions and attitudes of older people have been described statistically for the first time on the European level. In 1999, the Commission of the European Communities published its communication paper “Towards a Europe for all ages – promoting prosperity and intergenerational solidarity” in which amongst other things the rights of older people in the labour market, the sustainability of pensions, and a high-quality standard of health care have been pointed out as tasks for European politics.

This widespread attention is motivated mainly by the demographic development, which results in an increase of the elderly population. Historically, this development is unique, and the respective societies are not properly prepared to deal with its consequences. The growing proportion of older people is considered often as an economic and social-political burden, which will overstrain the social security system and impede innovations. On the other hand, the social situation of the elderly has improved remarkably. Most people survive until old age, which does not necessarily mean poverty, illness and social isolation any more. But this very progress of the social conditions and social political provisions turns the elderly into a target group for cuts and limitations of resources like pensions, health and social care. Older people aren't a “problem group” per se but they remain vulnerable and being at risk of social exclusion. Cultural values and norms of respect and legitimacy of old age security limit the specific vulnerability of older people, as we have understood it up till now. The more these moral and normative boundaries become fluid, and the more productivist and utilitarian orientations gain a dominant role, the more difficult a policy will be which considers itself being committed to the aim of “adding life to years” (Commission 1999).

Against this background we deal in our book with the processes of ageing and the social conditions of the elderly in Europe. First we give an overview of the most important theoretical approaches in social gerontology, the methodological problems of research in the field of ageing, and the main elements of the demographic development. The social conditions of ageing and of older people's lives are considered in the light of important transitions in the later phases of the life course,

followed by an outline of the social political regulations of the risks connected to these transitions. We also consider questions of social exclusion and inclusion on the basis of selected examples. The visions of ageing in future Europe are neither clearly optimistic nor pessimistic. They are based on a view on society, which is characterized by an increase of risks, which in our present society have to be mastered in an individualistic manner.

For a book, which primarily serves as the basis of a study course module, we had to make compromises between the wealth of information and the restrictions of size. Important issues like the history of old age or the social situation and life perspectives of ageing migrants could not be included in this text. However we hope to present a sufficient and comprehensive overview, which can be useful for the pursuit of detailed studies of individual and societal aspects of an “ageing Europe”.

Because of the lack of empirical data and information in hand we refer to the 15 present member nations within the union (until May 2004). The conditions described in the empirical chapters will take on new dimensions through the admission of 10 new member states, which will require renewed studies in the future.