

XXX EUFASA CONFERENCE

Rome March 30 - April 1, 2014

The XXX EUFASA (European Union Foreign Affairs Spouses, Partners and Families Association) Conference was hosted in Rome, where in 1985 the first Diplomatic Spouses Symposium was held and later the XII Conference in 1996. The Italian Association replaced the Greek one (whose Country holds the UE Presidency in the first semester 2014) due to their current difficult situation.

The newly appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs, Federica Mogherini, addressed the opening remarks, acknowledging the important role of spouses/partners and the difficulties they must overcome while the public opinion is unaware or even hostile, in fact diplomats are viewed as privileged civil servants. It is therefore paramount to value the best practices shared through EUFASA and make community at large aware of the value-added represented by diplomats and their accompanying members.

The President of the Italian Association (ACDMAE), Francesca Vattani greeted delegates by stating that 'MFAs pay 1 and get 2'. The latter are spouses and partners who play an active role with commitment, sacrifice, goodwill and intelligence but in the backstage. EUFASA celebrates its XXX Anniversary in Rome and it has gone a long way ahead, with 24 member countries, a rich intranet and public website, joining forces to achieve best practices and support spouse/partners at their best. She hopes that this network can further progress. The Conference will present a talk on 'Communication (social networks) and the diplomatic world' as well as a new web portal for the diplomatic families community in Rome (developed by the Italian delegate).

Maria Gabriella Lay took the floor as the founder of the First Symposium held in Rome in 1985, which laid the foundation of this network and exchange between EU member countries (EUFASA). The life and role of a diplomat requires great professional skills, culture, sensibility, open-mind and curiosity that are the result of constant commitment and effort. However, an effective diplomatic role necessarily involves the spouse/partner who complements with her/his personal skills and qualities. Challenge and change have been her drivers in converting difficult situations into new opportunities to grow and earn satisfaction. The art of diplomacy promotes principles of justice, equality and mutual respect vital to live in our globalized world.

PRESENTATION: Milena Padula, Vice-President and Verena Heingaertner founder of **LESA** (Local Expatriate Spouse Association) in Montreal presented this Association at the Conference. LESA was originally reserved to UN staff families posted abroad but Verena in Montreal decided to open it up to the International community, businesses and individuals. The aim is to help settling in Montreal and provide a variety of services including job search. LESA is a non-profit organization with a Board of elected members, a charter and an annual Meeting. The innovative feature of LESA Montreal is precisely the fact of being open also to businesses and foreigners working there. The proposal is to contact LESA in Rome and try to collaborate with EUFASA.

WORKING GROUPS:

1. EUFASA Welcome Team (EWT) chaired by Portugal with France, Germany and Italy as members. The initiative, launched in 2012 with a few pilot projects, aims at welcoming families posted abroad and support them while settling abroad.. There are currently nine EUFASA Welcome Teams in Europe and beyond, which aim to welcome newly arrived families of Foreign Affairs Officers and share practical information. These Welcome Teams have produced post reports, which are shared among all EUFASA members. At the Rome Conference, a web-portal for the diplomatic families community in Rome was presented and gathered much interest. The Working Group that provides support to the Welcome Teams recommends the creation of Welcome Teams in cities outside of Europe.

The Web Portal, presented by the Italian delegate, and discussed later in a workshop, is aiming at providing an on-line constantly updated database and the exchange of practical information, including

job vacancies. It would also provide special rate services and products (through a wide range of conventions with local companies) as well as contact point in each city district. The portal should be regularly updated and maintained by a moderator. Sponsors will cover its development cost, and it can be replicated for a much lesser cost for National Associations interested in the project. In the longer term, it would be ideal to create a central hub owned by EUFASA with sub-domains for each National Association. The project should become operational in Rome in September next.

2. EUFASA Work and Employment (EWE) was introduced by its coordinator, Nicki Epinay (France) who highlighted the improvements made since last year to the intranet area concerning this topic, adding new sections such as: Allowances and Pension Schemes funded by MFAs for working spouses/partners, and a space for job vacancies to the use of EUFASA members Associations. Ilaria de Franchis (Italian delegate) presented 6 profiles of professionals in the private and public sector (which can be read in the intranet). These different career paths show that it is possible to pursue a high quality career but this requires a strong will, flexibility, adaptability, pro-activity and openness to new and innovative solutions. In Italy, thanks to the ‘Signorello’ law it is possible to keep one’s job in the public sector although losing pension rights and career progression while abroad. Ambassador Elisabetta Belloni explained the initiatives adopted to support double career couples by providing day-care and health care units within the MFA. The Director General stressed that women must be able to choose freely their career and must try not to give up their aspirations. Ambassador Belloni valued the best practices adopted by member countries and expressed interest in considering these solutions now that the MFA has to reform its regime of allowances for diplomats. A lively debate of Q&A followed. MFA Social Security Coverage for Working spouse/partners on posting. Marianne Repo from Finland illustrated the results of the questionnaire, which shows that the situation at EU level is not harmonised. Belgium, Cyprus, Estonia and Latvia provide coverage for spouses also on posting while Austria, Finland, France, Portugal and Sweden do not. Spain and the EEAS (EU) require a complementary pension contribution. In Italy the MFA will provide coverage only if legally married. At EU level, there isn’t a single regime since the principle of subsidiarity applies. Self-employed and portable careers. Daniela Lauer (CH) as Chair presented a wide range of examples of portable careers (best fit for an itinerant life) which are the result of a great creativity, innovation, flexibility and capability of discovering market niches or providing specialized solutions. Even a male spouse/partner can take advantage and enjoy his role and the Belgian delegate (spouse of a female diplomat) encourages not to be ‘career minded’ but rather value family well being and a happy atmosphere in the couple eliminating frustration since career paths can be different from conventional male ones. In conclusion, it is important not to abandon one’s motivation, aspirations, pursue life-long learning and to achieve the dream of your life (although adapted to reality). Additional details and the list of testimonies are available on the EUFASA intranet.

3. EUFASA Contemporary Diplomatic Spouses & Partners (ECDS&P) The Working Group chaired by Switzerland, was composed by Austria, Belgium, France, EU, Ireland, Poland and Portugal. It aimed at defining the new profiles of spouses/partners in the current world. As stated ‘the role hasn’t changed but rather the way of playing it’. Indeed, today there is a growing number of dual careers, same-sex couples, male spouses/partners (37% in the UK), high rate of divorces (Denmark). Experiencing the diplomatic life and world is enriching yet spouses/partners are less keen to leave their careers when MFAs are often not supportive or completely absent (few bilateral agreements, no precise and defined incentive schemes for accompanying members, difficulty in obtaining permits, loss of pension rights, no career progression etc.). The role of a spouse/partner requires great professionalism and sacrifice, younger generations are less available to take on this responsibility as a volunteer, with no official status which prevents them to progress in their career, develop a personal network of contacts. ‘We are foreigners both abroad and at home’ these words of the Portuguese delegation mirror the psychological condition of spouses and partners. To re-enter in the job market when at home, to value their experience abroad and to preserve the balance of the family is a big challenge and public administrations should provide concrete support.

4. EUFASA Think Tank (ETT). This Working Group composed by the delegates of Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia and Switzerland and led by Florence Cunningham (EEAS) acknowledged the achievements of EUFASA’s various member Associations, which are registered in our “Charts”. These need to be constantly updated; transparency is important! Professional collaboration and Human Resources

personnel should be invited to assist EUFASA in pursuing its objectives. To become more effective, EEAS delegation will examine the possibility of obtaining legal recognition for EUFASA at European level: possible solutions will be presented at the next Conference in Riga in 2015.

Workshops: The first, on Communication in our time, was presented by an Italian diplomat, Minister Stefano Baldi, with a very interesting and lively overview of the wide variety of existing communication means, such as social networks and others. However there are actual threats and challenges for the diplomatic world, which must be carefully considered. A Power Point presentation is available in the Intranet (in the EUFASA Intranet). Another workshop was held by Eleonora Durante Mangoni on the Rome Web Portal designed and implemented for the diplomatic families community posted in Rome.

Webmaster: Report and Contract renewal (2014-2015). Thanks to the precious collaboration of the webmaster, Evelyn Knolle, the EUFASA website has been enhanced over the last year. It has been opened to all Associations' members, new sections were opened among which an updated vacancy notice board (new). The growing number of visitors confirmed its improvement. By unanimous vote, all delegations agreed to renew the contract at the annual fee and thank with gratitude the Webmaster for the excellent work accomplished.

Steering Committee's meeting.

A group of former delegates, AGE (Alumni Group of EUFASA) will be formed and led by the delegates of The Netherlands and Finland who already can count on a number of "alumni" from various Associations.

The SC will be composed by the Associations of : Italy (past Chair), Latvia (Chair), the Netherlands (future Chair), the EEAS, Switzerland, the UK and the Webmaster.

Working groups 2014-2015:

- EUFASA Welcome Team (EWT) composed by Portugal (Chair), Estonia, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Poland. *Objective:* Extend to extra-European capitals the welcome team project and share the implementation of the Italian web portal.
- EUFASA Work & Employment (EWE) composed by Switzerland (Chair), Austria, Cyprus, Finland, France, Ireland, Portugal and Spain. *Objective:* Explore possible collaboration with the LESA network.
- EUFASA Think Tank (ETT) composed by EEAS (Chair), Belgium, France, Ireland, Latvia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Switzerland. *Objective:* EUFASA's legal status and promote through joint targeted actions greater visibility to EUFASA.

Follow-up. The ECDS&P (European Contemporary Spouses &Partners) group will present a follow-up of the report presented in Rome.

A questionnaire, proposed by France, will gather information on the topic: 'Measures to compensate survivors'.

Conclusions. The Chair invites delegations to limit the length of presentations at the Conference, encouraging reading the papers before, on line, and reserving more time for Q&A and comments. She thanks all delegations for their active and lively participation as well as the Italian team and the donors, and wishes the best to the Chair 2014-2015 for the next EUFASA Conference in Riga.