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Towards a family-friendly Europe: policy recommendations for demographic renewal

Report[1]
Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development
Rapporteur: Mr Georgios STAMATIS, Greece, Group of the European People's Party

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1. Reference to the committee: Doc. 16121, Reference 4861 of 7 April 2025.

A. Draft resolution[2]

1. Europe is facing a profound demographic change due to its shrinking population. After decades of vivid growth, its total population of about 751 million is flattening and is set to slowly fall during the 21st century unless significant policy changes intervene. This demographic change includes persistently low birth rates, population ageing, shrinking cohorts of working-age people and the depopulation of rural and peripheral regions, with far-reaching consequences for society, economy and social systems. The demographic question has thus become a critical policy issue in Europe which requires a long-term vision to bridge the gap between people's needs and aspirations and the reality they face.

2. The Parliamentary Assembly notes that over the last ten years, deaths have outnumbered births (natural population change) in the European Union and many other countries across Europe, with population remaining overall stable or growing slightly only thanks to net immigration. It views the changing demographic outlook as one of Europe's major challenges, alongside environmental and digital challenges, representing a genuine structural shift that requires both adaptation and mitigation. The Assembly concurs with the United Nations Population Fund in calling for responses to demographic change that focus on people's rights, choices and empowerment rather than on numerical population targets, in order to build more fair, sustainable and resilient societies.

3. The Assembly observes that Europe's demographic shrinkage is not the result of a single factor, but of a combination of economic insecurity, high costs of housing and childcare, rising age at first childbirth. difficulties in reconciling work and family life, fertility issues, unequal sharing of care responsibilities, gender inequality, environmental anxiety, weakness of public services and insufficient support for disadvantaged families and persons with disabilities (including both parents and children). The Assembly stresses the need for comprehensive, coherent and co-ordinated responses in providing stable support to families in all their diversity.

4. Recalling the relevant Council of Europe standards, such as the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5), the European Social Charter (ETS No. 35) and its revised version (No. 163), the Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (CETS No. 210, "Istanbul Convention"), the Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (CETS No. 201, "Lanzarote Convention"), as well as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Assembly underlines the importance of guaranteeing socio-economic rights, equality and non-discrimination in all family policies at national and European level.

5. The Assembly considers that the growing diversity of family forms and structures prevalent in European societies – including lone parents, blended families, cohabiting couples, rainbow families and families with members who have disabilities – calls for inclusive policies that acknowledge and provide non-discriminatory treatment to all families.

6. The Assembly is concerned with the negative economic and social impacts of demographic imbalance, such as shrinking labour force, increased old-age dependency ratios, pressure on pension, long-term care and healthcare systems, and territorial cohesion. All these affect intergenerational solidarity and increase the risk of social fragmentation. It emphasises the importance of long-term policy planning and social investment to preserve prosperity and enhance well-being.

7. The Assembly notes that young adults face increasingly long transitions into autonomous living and underlines the need to empower younger generations through improved access to quality jobs, public services, affordable housing and credit, inclusive educational and social policies, lifelong learning, and territorial cohesion measures to combat depopulation and talent drain so that young people can participate fully in building a sustainable future in their home regions.

8. Noting that ageing is a structural and irreversible feature of European societies, the Assembly stresses that older people are a major social and economic asset as long as policies are in place to promote active ageing, autonomy, participation and lifelong learning. It therefore calls for age-friendly societies that strengthen prevention approaches to health and well-being, accessibility, digital inclusion and quality long-term care, recognising older persons as contributors to prosperity and intergenerational solidarity.

2. Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 10 September 2026.

9. Recalling its Resolution 2586 (2025) “Immigration, one of the answers to Europe’s demographic ageing”, the Assembly considers that migration can help to alleviate labour shortages and demographic imbalances even if it cannot by itself compensate for ageing or lower birth rates. It stresses that migration policy should be rights-based, skills-aware and well integrated with labour-market and regional-development policies, while remaining a complement to, and not a substitute for, family-support measures.

10. The Assembly believes that demographic resilience must be embedded in sustainable development, including affordable housing, quality education, effective health care, clean and climate-resilient infrastructure, and decent employment. It considers that people are more likely to settle, raise families and invest in their communities when they can trust that public services are reliable and continuous, their environment is safe, and their future is secure.

11. The Assembly calls on the Council of Europe member States to:

11.1. adopt coherent, long-term and inclusive demographic strategies and action plans, involving national, regional and local authorities, social partners, civil society organisations and young people in the design, monitoring, evaluation and adaptation of demographic policies;

11.2. establish interministerial co-ordination mechanisms to ensure long-term demographic policy coherence and better-integrated delivery of family-centred services;

11.3. mainstream policies that support parenthood at the time when people wish to become parents, namely by ensuring gender equality in all aspects of life, addressing the issue of child marriages, guaranteeing access to reproductive health, protecting family life through work-life balance measures, improving access to care, childcare and affordable housing and providing other material conditions for family life that facilitate circular migration linked to labour mobility and family reunion;

11.4. bring family policies in line with Articles 16 and 17 of the European Social Charter, as interpreted by the European Committee of Social Rights, ensuring in particular that family benefits, childcare services and housing for families are adequate and accessible, and that single-parent families and families in vulnerable situations are properly protected;

11.5. strengthen family-friendly measures by:

11.5.1. improving affordability and accessibility of childcare, and ensuring a seamless transition between parental leave and publicly supported early childhood education and care;

11.5.2. expanding and better compensating parental leave for both mothers and fathers, including adoptive parents and foster parents, regardless of their employment status (including self-employed persons and those engaged in seasonal work), and promoting flexible, family-friendly working arrangements;

11.5.3. strengthening legal and practical measures against workplace discrimination linked to pregnancy, motherhood and caregiving which constitutes maternal mobbing;

11.5.4. investing in social housing, especially for young adults, first-time parents and large families, in particular in disadvantaged urban areas and regions affected by depopulation or those undergoing transition towards more sustainable energy sectors and green economy, in line with the Assembly Resolution 2626 (2025) “Analysis and guidelines to guarantee the right to housing”; and encouraging banks to review lending criteria or proposing State-supported loans for young workers to facilitate their access to home-ownership;

11.5.5. supporting youth employment, stable careers, fair wages and skills development to reduce precarity and enable earlier household formation;

11.5.6. ensuring equal treatment, antidiscrimination and targeted financial support where necessary for single-parent families, rainbow families, families including persons with disabilities, Roma and Traveller families and other disadvantaged population groups, in particular through national education systems;

11.5.7. improving access to State-funded maternal, child and reproductive health services, including fertility information, infertility prevention, counselling and treatment where needed;

11.5.8. establishing family centres for providing community support for families and promoting the European Network of Family-Friendly Municipalities;

11.5.9. developing community-based open care and support programmes for vulnerable people which would provide accessible psycho-social counselling to prevent and treat addictions, help secure young persons' transition to parenthood and ensure timely care for mental health issues among young parents;

11.5.10. encouraging family-friendly business practices such as flexible working arrangements (including telework) and employer-supported childcare, establishment of workplace childcare facilities or partnerships with local childcare providers;

11.5.11. ensuring that demographic and family policies fully respect bodily autonomy and the right of all persons to make free and informed decisions about whether, when and how many children to have;

11.6. promote age-friendly policies, active ageing, lifelong learning and accessible services for older persons and families with small children, in particular through municipalities and local authorities;

11.7. mainstream gender equality across all demographic and family policies, recognising unpaid care as a shared social responsibility rather than a private burden borne mainly by women and ensuring stronger prevention of violence against women;

11.8. ensure the sustainability of pension systems by introducing or enhancing, as appropriate, the capitalisation tier in pay-as-you-go systems;

11.9. support territorial cohesion through investment in infrastructure, public services and local development in rural and peripheral areas, as well as tax incentives for the relocation of essential services and economic activities from major urban centres to under-developed or remote regions;

11.10. further analyse and reduce environmental risks that can affect reproductive health, notably pollution and the population's exposure to endocrine-disrupting chemicals;

11.11. ratify the revised European Social Charter – if they have not yet done so, accept Article 16 thereof and the Additional Protocol Providing for a System of Collective Complaints (ETS No. 158), and give full effect to the conclusions and decisions of the European Committee of Social Rights.

12. The Assembly welcomes the innovative national demographic frameworks (such as dedicated parliamentary committees, cross-sector policy co-ordination mechanisms and fiscal initiatives) in several member States, and encourages the adoption of similar frameworks elsewhere, tailored to national and regional contexts.

B. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Georgios Stamatis, rapporteur[3]

1. Introduction

1. "People are the most important and valuable resource of any nation".[4] Yet, there are growing worries across Europe about the continent's demographic future. As the motion for a resolution (Doc. 16121) tabled by Ms Anna Záborská and other members of the Assembly points out, Europe faces severe demographic challenges of declining birth rates, ageing and rural depopulation, with effects on "society, the economy, regional development, pensions, health care and the labour market" that taken as a whole threaten the continent's social cohesion and economic stability. This demographic decline moreover affects life expectancy across Europe and leads to brain drain, as many European governments are too slowin adopting family-friendly policies which would help foster both human and socio-economic development. Demographic renewal has become a critical policy issue in Europe for the coming decades.

2. The motion in question therefore proposes to examine the situation and social policy commitments in member States in light of relevant Council of Europe standards with a view to improving the existing social welfare systems and providing more adequate support to families. It envisages specific policy recommendations that could foster resilience of member States by investing in health and long-term care services, providing for more family-friendly policies in all spheres of society (including housing, child-care programmes, working conditions and fiscal policies) and fostering a better work-private life balance, protecting parents and ensuring equality in employment policies, as well as "closing (or at least narrowing) the persisting wage differences between the core States and the periphery" and "rethinking the organisation of the entire life-course perspective of work, parenthood and retirement".

3. The European Social Charter (ETS No. 35) is, in this respect, one of the main normative foundations for family policies. As interpreted by the European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR), Articles 7, 8, 16, 17, 19§6, 30 and 31, read in particular in the light of the non-discrimination clause set out in Article E, cover a large part of the measures examined in my report. Any demographic renewal strategy should therefore be grounded in a human rights-based approach and designed and assessed in the light of the obligations arising from the Charter and the interpretation given to it by the ECSR. Such an approach ensures that family policies primarily seek to create the conditions that enable everyone to freely pursue their family plans, while respecting dignity, autonomy, family diversity, equal treatment and individual choice.

4. It is therefore important that member States that have not yet done so ratify the Revised European Social Charter and accept the provisions that directly protect families, in particular Article 16 on their social, legal and economic protection. Acceptance of the Additional Protocol providing for a system of collective complaints is particularly relevant in this regard: by enabling social partners and authorised organisations to bring before the ECSR situations affecting families collectively, this procedure helps to identify structural shortcomings in public policies. It also provides States with a tool to assess and improve the effectiveness of their family policies, prevent persistent inequalities and steer their reforms in line with a human rights-based approach.

5. As rapporteur for this matter, I intend to take a closer look at the demographic situation in Europe based on the analysis of available data and trends. Considering research insights, I will seek to assess the root-causes and impacts of demographic changes on the various aspects of our society, in particular the sustainability of socio-economic rights of the population. I will then highlight possible policy responses to address the causes and mitigate the key problems through public authorities' intervention in the short, medium and long term with regard to different categories of the population.

6. With expert insights and guidance by the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), this report pleads for responses to demographic change that focus on people's rights, choices and empowerment rather than on numerical population targets, with the aim of building more fair, sustainable and resilient societies. In the context of my work on this report, the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development held several hearings (notably on 23 April 2026[5] in Strasbourg, on 4 June 2026[6] in Athens and on 24 June 2026 in Strasbourg),[7] and I held a number of online meetings with experts[8] to explore the multiple facets of demographic challenges. I have also carried out a fact-finding visit to Bocconi University in Milan[9] to discuss demographic strategy options and policy recommendations, and reviewed several written contributions by civil

3. This explanatory memorandum is drawn up under the responsibility of the rapporteur.
4. Extract from the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action (Principle 2), downloadable at www.unfpa.org/icpd.

society organisations.[10] My report draws on the valuable comments and proposals made on these occasions regarding the demographic policy measures and strategies that our member States should consider for the enhanced prosperity of present and future generations.

2. A brief overview of demographic trends and challenges

7. After decades of vivid growth, Europe's total population of about 751 million is flattening and is set to slowly fall during the 21st century unless dramatic policy changes occur. In 2024, the population of 29 European countries was beyond the peak level and shrinking.[11] Due to low birth rates, a rapidly ageing population and rural depopulation, Europe is experiencing profound demographic changes with far-reaching consequences for its society, economy and social systems. However, to put Europe into the global context, the United Nations (UN) observe similar developments also in other regions (North America, Australia, Latin America, Oceania, much of Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa), which reflects a global trend.[12]

8. Across the European Union (EU) countries, the median age of the population increased from 38.7 years in 2002 to 44.7 years in 2024. While the total EU population will rise in the short term – from 449 million persons in 2022 to 453 million in 2026, in the longer-term perspective it is projected to fall to 432 million in 2070.[13]

9. From 2016 to 2025, deaths outnumbered births in the EU (natural population change), with population remaining stable or growing slightly only thanks to net immigration. Eurostat figures show a particularly sharp drop over the three years of the Covid-19 pandemic (2020 to 2022) and the strongest negative rates for 2024 in Latvia (-7.4), Bulgaria (-7.3), Lithuania (-6.4), Greece (-5.5) and Romania (-5.3) compared with the EU average of -2.8 per 1000 persons. The same year, negative natural population change outside the EU was recorded in Serbia (-5.7), Moldova (-4.1), Bosnia and Herzegovina (-3.2), North Macedonia (-2.3), Georgia (-1.2) and Monaco (-1.4) among the countries for which Eurostat data is available.[14]

10. One of the most critical elements of this demographic shift is the decline in fertility. According to Eurostat data, the average fertility rate in the EU was only 1.38 live births per woman in 2023 (1.4 for the all-European average), well below the replacement rate of 2.1 required to sustain population in the long run.

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5. The hearing with Ms Livia Sz. Oláh, Associate Professor of Demography at the Department of Sociology, Stockholm University, Sweden (online), and Mr Ioannis Vardakastanis, President of the European Disability Forum (online). See document AS/Soc (2026) PV03add2 for declassified minutes of this hearing.
6. The hearing involved Ms Domna Michailidou, Greek Minister of Social Cohesion and Family Affairs, Ms Niki Kerameus, Greek Minister of Labour and Social Insurance, Mr Stelios Maridakis, Vice-President of the National Youth Council of Greece, Prof. Basil C. Tarlatzis, Professor Emeritus of Obstetrics-Gynaecology and Human Reproduction at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, and Ms Alexandra Tragakis, Professor of economic demography at Harokopio University, Greece. See document AS/Soc (2026) PV04add for [declassified] minutes of this hearing.
7. The hearing with Cianan B. Russell, Senior Policy Officer, ILGA-Europe.
8. Including Ms Elisabeth Gosme, Director of COFACE Families Europe; Dr Michaela Kreyenfeld, Professor of Sociology at Hertie School and Co-Director of Einstein Center Population Diversity (ECPD), Hertie School – The University of Governance in Berlin; Prof. Anne H. Gauthier, Director of the Generations and Gender Programme at the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute and the University of Groningen; Dr Tomas Sobotka, Deputy Director of Vienna Institute of Demography of the Austrian Academy of Sciences and Editor-in-Chief of Vienna Yearbook of Population Research (www.viennayearbook.org); Mr Leonidas Galeridis, Senior Policy and Research Officer at the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual & Reproductive Rights (EPF).
9. The visit notably included meetings with Arnstein Aassve, Professor of Demography at the Department of Social and Political Science at Bocconi University, Principal Investigator of Futures' and coordinator of the research teams facilitating dialogue between researchers, policymakers and the public, as well as his colleagues Elisa Latora, Letizia Mencarini, Matthew Parbst, Luca Di Casola and Samuel Plach.
10. Notably the European Large Families Confederation (ELFAC) and the Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe (FAFCE).
11. In the case of Albania, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Kosovo*, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia and Ukraine, population has been declining since 1980s and 1990s, according to the UNDESA (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs). *All reference to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.
12. "World Population Prospects 2024: Summary of Results", United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Population Division.
13. "2024 Ageing Report. Economic and Budgetary Projections for the EU Member States (2022-2070)", published on 18 April 2024 by the Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs of the European Commission.
14. See Eurostat database.

Across the Council of Europe member States, the fertility rates in 2024 ranged from 1.8 in Montenegro and 2.1 in Monaco to 1.1 in Malta, 1.09 in Andorra and 0.99 in Ukraine.[15] The number of children born in the EU has decreased from 4.68 million in 2008 to just 3.67 million in 2023.

11. Furthermore, only around 12% of families in the EU have three or more children, a figure that continues to decline annually. At the same time, the average age of first birth moves between 26-30 years in most European countries (up from 28.9 years on average in 2014 to 29.5 years in 2020 in the EU) given relatively high youth unemployment, income uncertainty and the tendency to postpone marriages and/or first births.[16]

12. Across Europe, childlessness has been increasing steadily. Although it varies a lot by country, around one in seven women is childless by the end of her reproductive age; for men, the proportion is often somewhat higher. German-speaking countries have the highest levels of childlessness (with one in five women concerned) closely followed by Finland, the Netherlands and Italy, while other Southern Europe countries are rapidly moving in the same direction.[17] Surveys also reveal a gap between people's aspirations to found a family with children and the child-free reality. Experts describe this as a 'fertility gap' whereby delaying parenthood eventually becomes voluntary or involuntary childlessness.

13. As the number of people of childbearing age decreases, births decline even further, intensifying population shrinkage. This demographic transformation is profound because smaller households lead to lower population growth, an increased dependency ratio (the number of people over 65 relative to those 15-64) and a reduced number of people at work to support ageing populations. Prospects for generational renewal dim with every passing decade, creating compounding effects that threaten future sustainability of the workforce, healthcare, social security systems and pension schemes. Indeed, even if European countries were to increase fertility rates to 2.1 children per woman, it would take about 25 years for these children to become active contributors to the social security systems and labour markets.

14. Europe's population is ageing faster than in any other continent, with the share of those aged 65 and older set to rise from 20% in 2019 to 31% by 2100. In some countries, the old-age dependency ratio is expected to double from today's 24% to nearly 50% by mid-century. At the same time, by 2050, 22 out of 27 EU countries will face declines in their working-age populations (20 to 64), deeply affecting social systems and intergenerational solidarity.

3. Understanding the root causes of the demographic decline

15. Europe's demographic decline is driven by a complex web of root causes, which span social, economic, psychological, cultural and environmental factors. In addition to well-known drivers such as persistent low birth rates and ageing, concerns about the daily life and future are increasingly influential and shape contemporary attitudes toward family formation. In particular, young people's attitudes towards family formation and parenthood need to be analysed carefully to be addressed.

16. The observed trends in demography reflect economic and social pressures, including the high cost of raising children, limited access to affordable housing and childcare, and work-life balance challenges. The mental load and unequal share of domestic work can also be considered as a root cause of the demographic decline. Young women especially often anticipate that parenthood will still be unequally shared, despite social progress, and a risk of sacrificing their career or personal balance. Moreover, certain population groups such as persons with disabilities (about 100 million in Europe) face particular barriers to enjoying family life and parenthood because of insufficient or inaccessible public services and unaffordable private care services, which lays excessive burden on family carers, with mostly women bearing the brunt.

17. All over Europe, we see the growing diversity of household and relationship forms beyond the traditional married-couple family. The main examples are cohabiting couples, lone-parent families, reconstituted or blended families, same-sex couples raising children and families where care is shared across several households or across generations, often with full-time working parents. Greater family diversity thus reflects the long-term transformation in society and generates new needs for the organisation of care, social support services and public policy adaptation.

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15. See Statista data for fertility rates in European countries in 2024, released in July 2025.
16. "Declining birth rate in Europe. Addressing the demographic emergency", policy brief of July 2022 by the Jacques Delors Institute.
17. Policy insights on childlessness by Michaela Kreyenfeld, Professor of Sociology at the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin (Germany), see https://population-europe.eu/research/policy-insights/childlessness, Population Europe – the Network of Europe's leading demographic research centres.

18. There is no doubt that concerns about the future (climate change, wars, crises, instability) also impact the desire to have children. A rising share of Europeans, especially youth, experience "eco-anxiety" – a deep-seated fear about the environmental and climate future, which affects mental health, daily functioning and major life decisions. Climate change and the prospect of climate disasters are seen as a threat not only to personal well-being, but also to the stability of future generations. This anxiety is amplified by real and perceived risks, including extreme weather events, environmental degradation, resource scarcity and the possibility of forced migration due to adverse living conditions.

19. A new UNFPA study[18] reveals a major disconnect between young people's aspirations and demographic realities. While young people of Eastern European countries[19] are more optimistic about their future than their peers in Western Europe (despite greater anxiety about conflict, economic crises and unemployment), strongly value family, marriage and parenthood, and desire to have more than two children, the number of children they actually have in their late 30s is just about one. This is because the conditions needed to achieve their aspirations are missing: this reflects especially the lack of financial security and adequate housing, as well as health issues, difficulties finding the right partner and concerns about an uneven sharing of childcare and housework. Life decisions are seen as a chain – employment, housing, partnership, then parenthood – so when one step fails, the rest is delayed. The study clearly shows that governments should focus less on incentives or pressure to have children and more on removing earlier the barriers that prevent young adults from building stable lives. Moreover, other studies and surveys show that younger generations do not necessarily consider partnership and parenthood as a norm. Life paths are less predetermined than they used to be, reflecting profound changes in values and in what is perceived as a life milestone.

20. Crises have become a near-constant feature of the European outlook: from pandemics to war, and from economic shocks to natural disasters. Each new episode of uncertainty increases hesitation of young couples around long-term commitments such as childbearing, home-buying, or setting down roots, feeding a cycle where doubts about the future become a self-fulfilling demographic trend. Moreover, more and more young people deliberately choose not to have children by putting individual interests and personal projects (such as career, volunteering and leisure) at the centre of their lives.

21. Last but not least, there are growing fertility problems – across Europe and globally. The World Health Organisation estimates that up to 17.5% of the world's adult population or roughly one person in six experience infertility.[20] Lifestyle factors, age and the population's chronic exposure to toxins and chemicals, in particular endocrinal disruptors, largely contribute to the worsening of female and male reproductive health. Harmful substances are massively and increasingly present in our food, drinking water, cosmetics, at workplaces and air pollution, which calls for more determined action to both protect public health and the environment, and to facilitate the population's access to fertility treatments.[21]

4. Multifaceted impacts and policy implications

22. Demographic changes impact all European countries, but present challenges in different ways. Some southern and eastern European countries such as Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Spain, and Ukraine, face sharper demographic shocks given declining populations, high emigration of youth and accelerated ageing; their rural regions are emptying as population flocks to urban areas for opportunities, compounding public services provision challenges (notably to sustain schools and healthcare) and economic stagnation in the countryside ("demographic deserts").

23. Western and northern countries, while also ageing, benefit from comparatively higher immigration inflows, somewhat cushioning the effects and allowing their populations to remain stable or even grow modestly.[22] The recent arrival of large numbers of Ukrainians seeking protection – estimated at 5.1 million in Europe – has temporarily boosted demographic numbers in some countries such as Germany, Poland, Czechia, the United Kingdom, Spain, Romania, Italy, Slovak Republic and Moldova.[23]

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18. "Demographic Futures Survey: Findings from Eastern Europe and Central Asia" by the UNFPA released on 9 July 2026.
19. Including Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, North Macedonia, Serbia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and Kosovo.
20. Infertility prevalence estimates, 1990-2021, World Health Organization, 2023.
21. "Environmental exposure, fertility and reproductive health", a factsheet by the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology, 2024.
22. Pinkus, D. and N. Ruer, "The demographic divide: inequalities in ageing across the European Union", Policy Brief 13/2025, Bruegel.

24. Labour force participation is declining as the working-age population shrinks. The decreasing supply of labour may in turn slow down economic development, erode competitiveness and lead to labour shortages in critical sectors such as healthcare, construction and technology. With fewer workers supporting a growing elderly population, pension, long-term care and healthcare systems are under mounting financial pressure. The sustainability of the European welfare model is increasingly stretched by demographic imbalances. The projected doubling of the old-age dependency ratio will require either substantial increases in pension contributions, reductions in benefits, later retirement ages, or new sources of funding to remain solvent. Moreover, countries relying on pay-as-you-go retirement systems should consider introducing a tier of capitalisation so as to preserve their sustainability given the shrinking workforce and number of contributors in a context where the retired population keeps growing as longevity increases.

25. An older population entails increased demand for healthcare, particularly for chronic and age-related conditions. The European Commission's 2024 Ageing Report forecasts a sharp increase in age-related expenditures, rising by 6.1% of GDP annually by 2070, driven primarily by pension costs and escalating needs for health and long-term care.[24] Health systems across Europe should prepare for higher expenditures and a need for more geriatric specialists and long-term care infrastructure. Large generational imbalances increase the risk of social fragmentation as young people stay longer in education and older people stay longer in employment, pitting younger and older groups against each other in the competition for scarce public resources and undermining the stability of existing social contracts.

26. Young people should not be excluded from homeownership simply because labour markets increasingly rely on temporary, part-time, or otherwise precarious contracts. Mortgage rules that assume a single, stable, long-term employment trajectory no longer reflect the reality of many workers, especially those entering the labour market after years of uncertainty or moving between short contracts and periods of training. Reviewing conservative lending conditions is therefore necessary to ensure that access to housing is based on realistic assessments of repayment capacity rather than outdated employment models, while still maintaining responsible lending standards. A more flexible approach could help young adults secure stable housing earlier, support family formation and reduce the widening gap between employment insecurity and the ability to build an independent life.

27. While migration has been proposed as one of the tools to balance demographic trends, it presents complex challenges, including integration needs, cultural tensions and public resistance.[25] Immigration alone cannot fully neutralise the effect of ageing since migrants also age and birth rates among migrants tends to converge to host-country levels over time. At the same time, pro-family policies and incentive-based social policies (such as enhanced allowances, parental leave, support for childbearing and social safety nets for young parents), have demonstrated their effectiveness in encouraging parenthood. For example, countries like Denmark, France and Sweden, which have implemented generous parental leave, subsidised childcare and family tax benefits, maintain some of the highest birth rates in the EU. These policies not only encourage larger families but also help mitigate economic barriers that deter young couples from having children.

28. More effective gender mainstreaming is a structural prerequisite for successful demographic and family policies. A growing body of evidence demonstrates that gender inequality directly affects economic performance, demographic trends and models of care services. Policies that are not designed through a gender lens risk falling short, as women continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of care responsibilities and encounter systemic barriers to participation in the labour market. In this respect, the link between gender equality and sustainable, inclusive, economic development should be built in more robustly through relevant policies. Targeted policies should furthermore be developed to support single parent families, rainbow families and other new family configurations.

29. The prevention of violence against women also constitutes a critical parameter in protecting the formation of families, relationship stability, and shaping long-term demographic prospects. The Council of Europe, in the work around its Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (CETS No. 210, “Istanbul Convention”), has repeatedly stressed that combating gender-based violence is not merely a human rights imperative, but also a structural condition for social cohesion. Insufficient support to women having suffered violence and lack of programmes aimed at preventing future violence on the part of offenders threaten the stability of families and perpetuate cycles of violence, affecting

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23. See Statista data.
24. “2024 Ageing Report. Economic and Budgetary Projections for the EU Member States (2022-2070)”, published on 18 April 2024 by the Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs of the European Commission.
25. See “Immigration, one of the answers to Europe's demographic ageing” (Doc. 16072 and Resolution 2586 (2025)), report by Kate Osamor (United Kingdom, SOC) on behalf of the PACE Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons.

subsequent relationships and undermining the creation or expansion of families, a reality further aggravated by evidence of perinatal violence across Europe. A comprehensive approach, including psychosocial support for young couples, is increasingly recognised as essential for enabling safe family environments in which children can be raised.

30. The demographic trends and structural imbalance they entail exacerbate financial pressures on both national budgets and the population across Europe, while military spending is increasing (from 1.6% in 2023 to 1.9% of GDP in 2024 in EU countries, rising to an estimated 2.1% in 2025)[26] and the cost-of-living is growing in most countries (with Switzerland scoring highest consumer price levels of 184% and Turkey scoring lowest with 47% compared to the EU average)[27] faster than incomes.[28] Moreover, as the OECD studies show, age-related spending on pensions, healthcare and long-term care is mostly publicly funded, representing respectively about 8%, 7% and 1% of GDP in OECD countries.[29] As a result, "debt sustainability challenges might arise from mounting ageing-related public spending" according to the European Central Bank.[30]

31. Addressing Europe's demographic challenges requires comprehensive co-ordinated responses at national and European levels, involving a mix of interventions across socio-economic dimensions and integrated cross-sectoral strategies that cover education and life-long learning, health, workplace flexibility, urban planning, migration management, investment in public services and regulatory measures, as well as drawing on good practice and expert advice. The experts I have consulted for this report unanimously plead for policy coherence and adaptation to people's needs across their lifetime so that family-friendly perspectives are mainstreamed and work in synergy.

32. The establishment of national-level demographic committees, as demonstrated by successful models in Finland, Iceland, Lithuania and the Netherlands, national demographic action plans (such as in Greece, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Slovakia and North Macedonia), national (Germany) or regional (Spain) demographic strategies, strong family policies and measures (France, Italy and Poland) offers a promising path for the future. Demographic committees, actions plans and strategies enable governments to map demographic outlook and shape policies that transcend electoral cycles, ensuring a comprehensive, long-term approach to managing demographic change. Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway) address demographic change through mainstream social and labour policies rather than dedicated demographic plans.

33. According to the UN, depending on "the specific circumstances and priorities of each country, population stabilization or limited decline may bring additional opportunities to eradicate poverty, expand access to health care and education, promote gender equality, improve social protection systems, move towards more sustainable patterns of production and consumption, and enact measures to protect the environment and mitigate the negative effects of climate change".[31]

34. As the conclusions of the Regional Ministerial Conference held in Skopje on 7-8 May 2026 under the UNFPA auspices show, "demographic change is […] a megatrend fundamentally altering socio-economic landscapes that requires a paradigm shift toward demographic resilience – the capacity of countries to thrive by centering policy on people's aspirations and evidence-based planning". Policy makers' task is therefore to "bridge the gap between demographic trends and policy frameworks" in a way that contributes to democratic security and stability.

5. Towards greater demographic resilience: empowering people, upholding their rights and supporting their well-being

35. Demographic change is reshaping societies across the world, and Europe is no exception. Population ageing, low fertility, changing family patterns, increased work-related mobility and shifting dependency ratios are altering public budgets, labour markets, care systems, social protection, housing and community life. A

26. "EU defence in numbers", by the Council of the European Union.
27. See Euronews article "Cost of living: Which are the cheapest and most expensive countries in Europe?" published on 6 July 2025.
28. Ad hoc review on "Social rights and the cost-of-living crisis", published in March 2025 by the European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR).
29. "Ageing populations, their fiscal implications and policy responses" by Vassiliki Koutsogeorgopoulou and Hermes Morgavi, OECD Economics Department Working Papers, No. 1844, 2025.
30. "The macroeconomic and fiscal impact of population ageing" by Katalin Bodnár and Carolin Nerlich, Occasional Paper Series, No 296 of June 2022, European Central Bank.
31. "World Population Prospects 2024: Summary of Results", p. 17, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division.

policy response towards greater "demographic resilience" does not attempt to reverse these trends through numerical targets alone; instead, it focuses on strengthening people's capacities, protecting their rights and improving the conditions in which they can live, work, care for their families and age with dignity. A meaningful demographic strategy should aim to promote family setting as a safe-haven and a shield against external uncertainties.

36. While policy making for decades relied on socio-economic and demographic expansion which was taken for granted, the ongoing demographic shift calls for a more sober approach building on a better understanding of human needs, planetary limits and socio-economic dynamics. The United Nations agencies (such as the UNFPA, the UN DESA, the UNECE, the ILO, etc.) and various European think-tanks recommend an approach that can be adapted to regional, national and local realities. This reflects a broader shift away from one-size-fits-all policy toward differentiated responses for areas facing depopulation, ageing, changing family structures, strain of social protection system or labour shortages. Good governance here means anticipating patterns early, co-ordinating across sectors, and avoiding simplistic narratives that treat demography as either crisis or destiny.

37. Changing demographic outlook is one of Europe's major long-term challenges, alongside the green and digital transitions, – a genuine structural shift that requires both adaptation and mitigation, not a narrow attempt to "fix" fertility rates or offset ageing through one policy lever alone. The social conditions that sustained the fertility levels of the 1960s have been fundamentally transformed in the last decades. If higher fertility emerges in the future, it will have to be generated by a fundamentally different social configuration. A holistic public strategy could therefore build around five broad priorities: supporting parents, empowering younger generations, improving the well-being of older people, managing migration effectively and laying greater emphasis on sustainable development (based on a balanced consideration of social, economic and environmental needs). This means treating demographic resilience as a question of life-long social capability (whether people can form families if they wish, invest in children, work securely, care for relatives, and age well) and an overarching public interest (that is mainstreamed across a full range of policies).

5.1. Supporting families and parenthood

38. A first element of this strategy is support for families and parenthood. As research shows, low birth rates and delayed childbearing are closely linked to housing costs, job insecurity, weak childcare provision and the difficulty of combining work and care, as well as securing access to fertility treatment as necessary and tackling environmental factors that can lead to infertility across a population. The policy implication is not to pressure people into having children, but to remove barriers that prevent them from realising their preferences, especially through affordable childcare, parental leave, early childhood services and better work-life balance through flexible work, reflecting also the UN recommendations which insist that governments should support choice and rights rather than treat people as instruments of population policy. It is essential to ensure that parental leave provisions cover in a fair manner both mothers and fathers, including adoptive parents and foster parents, regardless of their employment status (including self-employed persons and those engaged in seasonal work).

39. In this context, policy makers must consider the full range of new family configurations and ensure a reality-check of existing policy measures. During committee hearings, our attention was drawn to issues arising for families which include persons with physical and mental disabilities – either as parents or children. Their full social integration is impossible without strong rights-based public policies that support the family, provide the right services and facilitate life in the community. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities guarantees the right to live independently, participate in the community, and enjoy family life on an equal basis for persons with disabilities who must be treated as equal citizens and holders of rights, not passive recipients of care.

40. In practice, families in such situations are often forced to fill gaps left by weak public services, with parents reducing their employment, siblings becoming carers, and women bearing a disproportionate unpaid burden of care. Family-friendly disability policy should be piloted by the state and provide accessible services, inclusive education, affordable personalised support, income protection, community-based services, personal assistance, accessible housing, and inclusive local infrastructure. Children with disabilities should be able to grow up in their families and communities rather than in segregated settings, and should benefit from early adequate intervention policies, while persons with disabilities should be directly involved in policy design, monitoring and implementation under the principle of "nothing about us without us".[32]

32. See document AS/Soc (2026) PV03add2 for declassified minutes of the committee hearing held on 23 April 2026.

41. The principles of inclusion and non-discrimination should also guide policies towards rainbow families. As we have learned during the committee hearing with ILGA-Europe, the legal landscape varies across Europe: 15 member states still offer no form of legal recognition for same-sex couples although the caselaw at supra-national level establishes clear obligations on all Council of Europe member states.[33] The cross-border recognition of family ties established in one member State is important for framing parenthood and upholding the best interest of the child, as well as eliminating discriminatory barriers in terms of adoption, recognition of co-parenthood and medically assisted reproduction.

42. Family-friendly demographic strategies are most effective when they recognise the diverse circumstances of different population groups and ensure that no families are left behind. Across Europe, Roma and Travellers communities (about 12 million persons) continue to experience disproportionately high levels of poverty, inadequate housing, barriers to healthcare, lower educational attainment and discrimination, all of which can limit families' ability to realise their aspirations. Targeted measures that address these structural inequalities are therefore an important complement to universal family policies, helping to ensure that demographic strategies promote inclusion and population resilience. Supporting Roma families and other vulnerable communities such as migrants and ethnic minorities should not be understood as an objective separate from broader demographic policy, but as an integral component of it.

43. Investments in early childhood education and care, maternal and child health services, quality housing, employment opportunities and equal access to social protection can strengthen family well-being while contributing to long-term social cohesion, reduced inequalities and human capital development. By combining universal family support with targeted interventions for disadvantaged communities, European countries can develop demographic strategies that are more equitable, effective and responsive to the needs of all families.

44. In this respect, we should note a persistent weakness in European family policy: the period between the end of adequately compensated parental leave and the point at which children become entitled to a publicly supported full-time early childhood education and care place. During this interval, the so-called “childcare gap”, many families are left without affordable formal childcare while also lacking sufficient income replacement through parental leave. This childcare gap is a major structural barrier affecting parents' employment, family well-being and decisions about having children, making it a critical issue for both social and demographic policy.

45. As the COFACE Families Europe study shows,[34] only five EU countries (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Slovenia and Sweden) provide a seamless transition from well-paid parental leave to guaranteed access to state-supported childcare, thereby avoiding a childcare gap. Some countries provide financial support to families with children aged from two months to two-and-a-half years to access certified home-based childcare either in the family’s home or in the care-giver’s home. By offering flexible, community-based care, such services help parents, particularly mothers, to reconcile family responsibilities with employment and contributes to reducing the childcare gap. In most other states, parents experience a period ranging from several months to well over a year during which they must rely on informal care arrangements, purchase private childcare, reduce working hours or temporarily withdraw from the labour market. Comprehensive family support systems should thus comprise co-ordinated parental leave and childcare policies to avoid disproportional negative effects on mothers, whose labour market participation, earnings and long-term career prospects are more likely to be interrupted by caregiving responsibilities.

46. We cannot speak about demographics and equal opportunities without looking at the condition of working parents and in particular the maternal mobbing phenomenon, i.e. discriminatory, hostile or abusive treatment women may face at work because they are pregnant, mothers, or are perceived as likely to have children. It is commonly described as a mix of career penalties, exclusion, pressure and psychological harassment linked to motherhood and pregnancy. The issue matters because it can push women out of the labour market, slow promotions, reduce income thus exacerbating the gender pay gap, create stress at a moment when work-life balance is already under strain and perpetuate the expectation that women will carry

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33. Notably, Cupriak-Trojan v. Wojewoda Mazowiecki (C-713/23, 25 November 2025) case: The CJEU (Court of Justice of the European Union) held that EU member states are obliged to recognise a same-sex marriage lawfully concluded in another member state. Refusal to do so violates EU free movement rights (Art. 20–21 of the TFEU) and the prohibition of discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation (Art. 21(1) of the EU Charter). The CJEU found that non-recognition causes “serious inconvenience at administrative, professional and private levels”, affecting access to pensions, taxation, property, healthcare and parental rights. Moreover, in the case of Fedotova and others v. Russia (17 January 2023), the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights confirmed a general positive obligation under Article 8 of the ECHR for all Council of Europe member states to provide a specific legal framework for the recognition and protection of same-sex couples. This obligation applies regardless of whether the state allows marriage equality.

34. “Childcare gap in the European Union”, A 2025 Overview by the European Observatory on Family Policy.

the higher burden of unpaid care responsibilities at home. Demographic resilience strategies should therefore start by recognising the great value of unpaid care work which families render to society at large and putting in place, or reinforcing, safeguards to protect gender equality for working parents.

47. To ensure that families receive targeted support as close to home as possible, local authorities must be involved to complement the role of the state by delivering family-friendly services and environment in both urban and rural areas. To this end, the European Network of Family-Friendly Municipalities which aims to foster local family-friendly cultures across Europe can provide relevant support through shared resources, exchanges of good practice and guidance for planning and self-evaluation.

5.2. Empowering younger generations

48. A second important element is to empower younger generations. As young adults face prolonged transitions into stable work, family formation and independent living because of labour-market segmentation, the rise of temporary and gig work and rising housing costs, demographic strategies and measures should aim to help young people remain and build their future in their home regions. In this perspective, demographic resilience depends on whether younger people can see a viable future and opportunities for a meaningful life locally, not only in metropolitan centres, while retaining freedom of movement. Indeed, it makes no sense to increase birth rates if young people ultimately leave their country because they see no perspectives for a decent standard of living.

49. Territorial cohesion is therefore central at national and European levels to offset depopulation and talent drain from rural and peripheral areas (including island regions) given the particular challenges and structural disadvantages they face. The policy response should favour cohesion funding for infrastructure and quality public services (universal access and affordability) enabling youth to put down roots knowing that they have real options and opportunities to build good life for themselves and the next generations. This territorial dimension matters because demographic decline is often strongest where jobs, housing and public services are weakest, making family formation and long-term settlement less attractive. This is why local development and innovation are among the five priorities under the National Demographic Action Plan 2025-2035 in Greece.

50. A comprehensive approach begins with strengthening young people's economic independence. Policies that facilitate access to quality jobs, reduce labour market precarity, support fair wages and promote skills development enable young adults to achieve financial stability at an earlier stage of life. At the same time, addressing the affordability of housing is increasingly recognised as a demographic priority across Europe, as high housing costs and limited availability often delay leaving the parental home, partnership formation and the decision to have children. Investments in affordable housing, together with measures to improve access to credit and support for first-time homebuyers or tenants, can therefore contribute both to social inclusion and demographic resilience.

51. Empowerment also requires enabling young people to reconcile education, personal development, employment and family aspirations. Accessible and affordable early childhood education and care, adequate parental leave for both mothers and fathers, flexible working arrangements and family-friendly workplaces reduce the costs associated with parenthood and promote greater gender equality in both caregiving and employment. Such measures help ensure that having children does not require young adults, particularly women, to sacrifice educational or professional opportunities, nor contribute further to the existing gender pay gap. Equally important are investments in mental health services, preventive healthcare and social protection, which strengthen individual well-being and resilience during key life transitions.

52. Young people should also be recognised as active partners in shaping demographic policy. Their participation in public decision-making, youth organisations, local communities and social dialogue helps ensure that demographic strategies respond to the realities and aspirations of younger generations. Policies should pay particular attention to young people facing structural disadvantages, including those from rural areas, disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, migrant communities, Roma and Traveller communities, and persons with disabilities, ensuring that opportunities are accessible to all. Inclusive demographic strategies that reduce inequalities and expand opportunities are more likely to foster social cohesion and strengthen confidence in the future.

5.3. Building age-friendly societies

53. A third pillar is supporting older generations and building age-friendly societies. With Europe’s population ageing, experts warn not only of growing pressure on pensions, health systems and long-term care, but also stress that older people are a valuable resource which can be enhanced by policies promoting

healthy ageing, participation and autonomy. A resilient demographic strategy thus avoids framing ageing as a burden and instead focuses on prevention measures in healthcare, accessible services, lifelong learning, support for family carers and environments that allow older people to remain active, healthy, connected and respected.[35] This is consistent with the UN calls which plead for inclusive health systems and age-friendly policy responses that protect dignity over the entire life course.

54. Building age-friendly societies goes hand-in-hand with unlocking the potential of the silver economy. As longevity reshapes European societies, demographic change expands opportunities for innovation, employment and sustainable economic growth. Age-friendly policies that promote accessible infrastructure, digital inclusion, flexible work arrangements and lifelong participation enable older people to remain active as workers, consumers, volunteers and caregivers. At the same time, the silver economy – encompassing goods, services and technologies tailored to the needs and preferences of older populations – can drive innovation across sectors such as healthcare, housing, mobility, tourism and digital solutions, as well as family policies. A forward-looking demographic strategy therefore integrates ageing into economic and social policy, recognising older people not only as beneficiaries of support but also as contributors to prosperity, resilience and intergenerational solidarity.

5.4. Managing migration: between brain-drain and brain-gain

55. Migration is the fourth major policy lever, but experts are clear that it should be treated as a managed complement, not a substitute, for broader demographic adaptation. The European Parliament's work on labour migration and demographic change notes that legal migration can help address labour shortages, yet it will not reverse population ageing on its own. Figures, for instance, show that healthcare systems in certain European countries depend increasingly on immigrants' work: in Norway, Ireland, Switzerland, United Kingdom and Sweden, respectively 43.6%, 40.6%, 39.5%, 32% and 30% of doctors were foreign-trained in 2022.[36]

56. Some European countries put emphasis on re-migration of their nationals such as Greece whose National Demographic Action Plan encourages return migration through "Rebrain Greece" and related programmes. The latter had helped to facilitate the return of 473 000 citizens out of 747 000 who had left the country during the years of economic crisis.

57. Several UN agencies advocate for expanding and diversifying labour force participation (including more young and older workers, persons with disabilities and migrants) to ease social and economic pressures. I believe that Europe needs coherent migration governance which is rights-based, skills-aware and linked with labour market, integration and regional development policies. This also requires respect for the rights of both migrants and the communities that receive them, so that inward mobility would strengthen resilience rather than deepen social strain.

5.5. Sustaining well-being and prosperity through sustainable development

58. Europe's demographic resilience strategy should place sustainable development at its core by balancing social, economic and environmental needs in a way that makes everyday life more secure and livable. This means ensuring affordable housing, childcare, healthcare, education, mobility, long-term care and support for older persons so that people can form families, work and age with dignity, while also supporting decent jobs, lifelong learning, gender equality and adaptable labour markets so that ageing and changing family patterns do not lead to exclusion or poverty.

59. There is also a need to invest in climate-resilient infrastructure, clean transport, greener housing and protection against pollution and environmental stress so that people feel confident about the future and can settle fully in their communities. Demographic resilience is ultimately about creating conditions in which people can choose their lives freely and Europe can renew itself without compromising the well-being of current or future generations.

35. Lessons drawn from the Joint Council of Europe and the CEB (Council of Europe Development Bank) Conference on Inclusive and Sustainable Care for Older Persons held in Strasbourg on 9 December 2025.
36. OECD healthcare data as presented in The Guardian's article "Visualised: Europe's population crisis" by Alex Clark.

5.6. Overcoming the fertility gap and involuntary childlessness

60. As we have learned during the hearings with experts, Europe's birth rate is not only a demographic issue but also a broader health, environmental and social policy challenge. The ESHRE (European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology) factsheets link reduced human fertility to environmental pollutants (present in the air, water and food), in particular endocrine disrupting chemicals, and effects of climate change, while the Coalition for Fertility stresses that involuntary childlessness can significantly affect individual's and couples' mental health and quality of life. Birth rates are also falling due to a rising age at first childbirth and socio-financial uncertainties that delay decisions (by persons or couples) to have children: whereas childbirth used to be mostly completed in women's twenties, it is now often delayed beyond 30 and even closer to the age of 40.

61. One way to narrow the fertility gap is to reduce preventable environmental harms. Experts warn that global heat and air pollution are associated with lowered fertility and adverse pregnancy outcomes while exposure to multiple environmental pollutants correlates with infertility, miscarriage, ovulatory disorders and earlier menopause. This means that policy solutions should extend beyond clinic-based care and include stronger action on air quality, climate mitigation and exposure reduction to pollutants in workplaces, homes and consumer products.

62. Another major area of policy action is tighter control of endocrine disrupting chemicals which experts call a hidden threat because they interfere with humans' hormonal system, harm reproductive cells (sperm and egg quality) and ovarian function, as well as increasing the risk of miscarriage. In fact, nearly 100% of the population has these endocrine disrupting chemicals in their bodies. In practical terms, that requires stricter chemical regulation, clearer product labelling and public health campaigns that help people understand environmental risks and reduce exposure before conception of children and throughout their whole lifetime.

63. Involuntary childlessness has a mental health dimension that often goes under-addressed, with complex long-term consequences – for individuals, families and society at large. Experts therefore call for improved access to accurate information and mental health support. Policies that normalise fertility counselling, psychosocial care, and relationship support can help reduce distress while people navigate treatment decisions, delays or childlessness.

64. The European Atlas of Fertility Treatment Policies 2024 shows how uneven access to treatment remains across Europe and highlights the need for more equitable fertility care. When treatment access depends too much on where someone lives, their income or local eligibility rules, the fertility gap keeps widening even if medical solutions exist. As it were, in countries where fertility treatment is fully covered by the health system, births through IVF (in vitro fertilisation) are more common. For example, in Denmark about 8% to 9% of births each year were achieved through IVF. Other countries such as Belgium, Estonia, Finland, France, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain also have a strong public coverage of fertility treatment procedures. A stronger European response should combine prevention, access to care and comprehensive support to those facing involuntary childlessness rather than dismissing fertility issues only as an individual problem. In some countries, such as Azerbaijan, Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Cyprus, Switzerland, Slovakia, Georgia and Armenia, there is as yet little or no public funding for medically assisted reproduction support, and this gap should be filled.

6. Way forward: the need for coherent, comprehensive and inclusive demographic strategies

65. Europe's demographic changes are not a curse but a megatrend that calls for a coherent structural policy response rather than a fragmented set of measures. Demographic resilience requires a dual strategy: removing the obstacles that discourage family formation and constrain the life choices across generations, while adapting institutions, labour markets and social protection systems to sustain economic prosperity and social cohesion in societies where population growth can no longer be taken for granted. That means prioritising affordable housing, accessible childcare, adequate parental leave, stable employment and stronger work-life balance measures, while also reducing the economic and social penalties associated with parenthood. Public policy should be designed to make family life compatible with professional development and personal autonomy, not to impose demographic targets from above, nor to roll back human rights in the areas of reproduction, sexuality and gender equality.

66. A credible response also requires more inclusive and better targeted family policies. Governments should adapt their frameworks to the diversity of family forms and ensure that single-parent families, rainbow families, families including persons with disabilities, Roma and Traveller families, ethnic minorities and other disadvantaged groups have equal access to support, services and rights. This implies stronger anti-

discrimination safeguards, more accessible public services, and a broader understanding of care as a shared social responsibility. In parallel, policies must correct the persistent gender imbalance in unpaid care and promote equal participation in the labour market.

67. Demographic resilience also depends on improving the conditions under which young people can build their future. Policy makers should focus on youth employment, income security, access to adequate housing and territorial cohesion, especially in regions affected by depopulation and brain drain. If young adults can see realistic prospects in their home regions, they are more likely to settle, form households and invest in long-term life projects. This requires not only social policy, but also investment in infrastructure, public services and regional development.

68. Finally, ageing societies should be treated as an opportunity for adaptation, not as a crisis to be managed only through cost containment. Age-friendly policies, preventive health care, lifelong learning and the recognition of older people as active contributors should be central to public strategy. At the same time, migration policy should be managed as a complementary instrument within a broader demographic framework, not as a substitute for family support and social reform. A coherent response must therefore combine social investment, gender equality, territorial cohesion and sustainable development in order to strengthen social cohesion and long-term stability.