

Tünde Fűrész – Balázs Péter Molnár

Addressing Europe's Demographic Challenges by Supporting Families Instead of Encouraging Migration

Two decades after Hungary's accession to the European Union, it will hold the presidency of the Council of the European Union for the second time. The demographic challenges facing Europe have intensified significantly since the first Hungarian presidency in 2011. Our country is taking over the baton at a time when no EU country is giving birth to enough children for population replacement. The trend until now has been that the desire to have children is declining in the formerly leading Western and Northern European countries, while in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe this desire keeps growing, at the highest rate in Hungary. In global comparison, population loss will mean a continuous decrease in the relevance of the European Union and its ability to enforce its interests. Yet the issue of population does not receive the necessary attention in European public thinking. Just as it did in 2011, during its first presidency, Hungary will again focus on encouraging the birth of European children in 2024. This objective is in line with the opinion of the European population, for whom the family is of paramount importance, and which thus requires support, and who believe that population loss should be tackled by strengthening families and not by encouraging inward migration.¹

The family policy aspects of the first Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union (2011)

Hungary's first EU presidency focused on the impact of the reconciliation of work and family life on demographic dynamics.² In view of the high importance of the issue, during its presidency, Hungary devoted an entire week of events to the topic, organising the *Europe for Families, Families for Europe – Population Issues and Policies Awareness Week* between 28 March and 2 April 2011 in Budapest.

In addition to public events, EU representatives from academia, politics and civil society discussed current issues of family policy and the best practices of individual Member States and family organisations at international conferences and at an informal meeting of European family ministers. At the end of the series of events, a festival entitled *Family Fiesta with Europe* was held, treating families to varied children's activities and cultural events.

The informal meeting of the EU ministers responsible for demography and family affairs was opened in Gödöllő by the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, who emphasised in his speech that: "Children multiply the power of parents, the power of

¹ The original article was translated into English by Kriszta Kállay-Kisbán (Mária Kopp Institute for Demography and Families).

² Kormány.hu 2010.

the family, and the generation of children multiplies the power of a nation, a country and an entire civilization.”³ On 1 April 2011, the Declaration of the family ministers of the Presidency Trio Member States and Poland on the impacts of the reconciliation of work and family life on demographic dynamics was signed.⁴ At a meeting in June 2011, the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council (EPSCO) adopted the Council’s conclusion entitled *Reconciliation of Work and Family Life in the Context of Demographic Change*, in which it welcomed the Gödöllő meeting and confirmed the need to address demographic challenges by improving the coordination of work and family life, since the lack of this prevents the children wished for from being born into European families.⁵

While it is an important principle of the EU that family policy-making falls within the competence of the Member States, it is a major achievement of the thematic week that the participants reached a consensus that, at an EU level, increased attention should be paid to the issues of population and families, as changing the prevailing attitudes to demographic and family issues is essential in order to maintain the competitiveness of the European Union and to preserve its economic and social system. In an exploratory opinion issued at the request of the Hungarian Presidency, the European Economic and Social Committee also reached this conclusion, and drew attention in its proposals to the importance of the exchange of practices supporting family formation between European Member States.⁶ In order to strengthen this positive process, the Hungarian Presidency proposed that the European Union designate 2014 as the European Year of Families.

Despite the fact that the demographic situation of the European Union has further deteriorated in the decade since the first Hungarian presidency and that since 2015, its Member States are facing their biggest migration crisis to date, the issue of population and the survival of Europe has still not received adequate emphasis on the agenda of the EU institutions. Although from 2006–2013, at the initiative of the European Union, the European Demographic Forum took place four times, since 2013 the European Commission has not organised the event once. Despite the recommendations of European family organisations and broad social and political support, the reconciliation of work and family life did not become the theme of the European Year 2014. At the same time, the appointment of Dubravka Šuica as Vice-President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography can be seen as a first step in the right direction.

While the issue of families and population was not considered a priority on the European stage, Hungary and Central Europe became the flag-bearers and primary advocates of family-friendly policies and addressing the issues faced by families. The declared goal of family-friendly government is to unite the actors who wish to act for families and to form an international pro-family alliance. Hungary has hosted the Budapest Demography Summit four times to date. During these events, at the highest

³ ORBÁN 2011.

⁴ Council of the European Union 2011a.

⁵ Council of the European Union 2011b.

⁶ Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on ‘The Role of Family Policy in Relation to Demographic Change with a View to Sharing Best Practices among Member States’ (exploratory opinion).

level, heads of state and government, church and non-governmental leaders, ministers, researchers, Academia, economic actors and journalists committed themselves to the cause of families. This high-level series of events shows that those concerned with demographic decline are not alone, and allows us to exchange ideas, learn best practices, help solve challenges and share our experiences and achievements. The second Hungarian Presidency, which runs from July to the end of December 2024, can thus take as one of its key priorities the goal of improving the population situation in the European Union by strengthening European families and promoting the desire to have children.

Overview

Europe is currently experiencing a period of demographic winter, with none of the populations of EU Member States producing enough children for population replacement. The number of births is decreasing: in 2021, a total of 4 million 66 thousand live births were registered in the European Union,⁷ which is 392 thousand fewer than in 2011, a drop of almost 9%. As applied to Europe, the term ‘the old continent’ refers more and more to an ageing continent where fewer and fewer children are being born. The proportion of Europeans in the world’s population is steadily decreasing: in 1960, 20% of the world’s population was European, whereas today it is only 10%, and by 2070 it is expected to be only 6%.⁸ In parallel, the EU accounted for 31% of world GDP in 2004 and for only 17.7% in 2021.⁹

As population decline is accompanied by a significant decline in economic performance, the EU is steadily losing ground in the face of increasingly fierce global competition. It is estimated that by 2050, six of the world’s seven largest economies will be developing countries, led by China and India. Germany will be only in 9th place and the U.K. in 10th place. Two other G7 members, France and Italy, will drop out of the top 10 and 20 strongest economies, respectively.¹⁰

It is clear that, in addition to the desirability of population replacement, it is also an economic necessity to promote the birth of European children. In addition to the shortage of well-qualified workers in the short term, the sustainability of the social security and health insurance systems of each country is also a question in the medium term. According to Eurostat population data, in 1960, there were an average of three young persons (0–14 years old) for every person aged 65 years or more, while it is predicted that by 2060, there will only be two young people for every person aged 65 years or more.¹¹ For this reason, demographic trends, especially the evolution of birth rates, have a significance far beyond the demographic situation of individual countries. Therefore, an ageing Europe will need more European children to be born, as caring for inactive

⁷ Eurostat 2023a.

⁸ European Commission 2020.

⁹ World Bank 2021.

¹⁰ PwC 2021.

¹¹ Eurostat 2011.

elderly people is already a major challenge in the medium term. At the same time, the older generation, after decades of hard work, rightly expects to be recognised and valued by society, and not regarded as a sustainability problem.

Most developed economies suffer from significant labour shortages, especially in knowledge-intensive jobs. However, the decision-makers of the European mainstream do not typically include promoting the birth of European children among the solutions to this problem. Instead, they focus on migration, and as this solves their need for skilled labour in their high-tech economies in only a fraction of cases, the ‘brain drain’ from the Member States that have joined since 2004 is increasing, which could significantly weaken the economic opportunities of the sending country.¹²

The relationship between fertility and migration

The EU data from the decade between 2010 and 2020 show that the desire to have children has increased permanently in countries that wanted to reduce their population decline not by facilitating migration, but by supporting the birth of their own children and strengthening families. The average fertility rate in the EU Member States has fallen by 2.5%.¹³ In Hungary, however, the fertility rate increased the most, by a quarter. Perhaps the significance of this positive change is better expressed by the fact that 150,000 more Hungarian children were born in the country in the last decade than if the willingness to have children had remained at the 2010 level. In the previous 10 years, fertility decreased in 19 Member States and increased in 8. Among the Member States following a liberal migration policy, the increase was significant only in Germany, while among the Member States rejecting migration and helping their own families to prosper, in addition to Hungary, in its Visegrád partners the Czech Republic and Slovakia, as well as Latvia and Romania, a substantial increase can also be observed. On the other hand, the desire to have children also decreased significantly in the leading migration destination countries such as France, Sweden, Belgium and the Netherlands.¹⁴

It is also worth examining the impact of migration inflows on Europe’s social fabric. Pál Demény, a Hungarian demographer who has spent a significant part of his career in the United States, does not agree that mass immigration can solve Europe’s demographic problems: “Mass immigration as a solution is an illusion – a temporary remedy that leaves bigger problems behind. Moreover, and above all, for Europe, relying on such a solution – replacing domestic births with immigrants – is a continuing excuse not to face the problem of fertility deficits.”¹⁵

¹² FÜRÉSZ–MOLNÁR 2020: 3–11.

¹³ Eurostat 2023b.

¹⁴ Eurostat 2023b.

¹⁵ DEMÉNY 2016: 366.

In the European Union as a whole, only 5% of births could be linked to people from other Member States. However, the birth rate of non-EU arrivals is much higher, at 16%, with approximately one in six newborns coming from a foreign, non-European migrant background. In the 14 'old' member states, this ratio is as high as 20%, while in the 13 new members, it is only 3%.¹⁶

According to Eurostat data, in 2019 the countries with the highest proportions of non-EU nationals – excluding the outlier Luxembourg with 66% – were Cyprus (38%), Austria (34%), Belgium (33%), Sweden (31%), Malta (30%) and Germany (30%),¹⁷ which reveals that Member States with larger populations are also affected. The proportion is somewhat lower, however, at about a quarter of foreign mothers in Spain (28%), Ireland (26%), France (25%) and Italy (23%). In addition, one in five newborns are being born to a mother born abroad in the Netherlands (21%), Greece (21%), Denmark (21%) and Portugal (20%).¹⁸

In the newly acceded Member States, only the Slovenian and Croatian figures of around 10% (traceable to the Yugoslav past) are worth mentioning, while in all the other recently acceded countries values below 5% can be measured. In Central and Eastern European countries, the overwhelming majority of births, about 95–96%, are from the native population, so these Member States are not characterised by the kind of ethnically, culturally and religiously heterogeneous population towards which the West is increasingly moving.¹⁹

For every hundred women aged 20–39 from outside the EU, there are one and a half times more live births in the 'old' member states of Western Europe than for women from the native population. The corresponding data for Member States which acceded after 2004 are only minimally different. If the 2019 live birth rates, taking into account the mother's origin, are applied to the total fertility rates, it becomes clear that the majority of the total fertility rates of countries in Western Europe can no longer be attributed to their native populations.²⁰ Even with the 'help' of migration, which causes significant social transformation and tensions, these countries are unable to maintain their population balance and slow down population decline, since their fertility rates are decreasing despite large-scale migration. In Sweden, which had a fertility rate of 2 in 2010, the value had decreased to 1.67 by 2020, to 1.63 in Ireland and to 1.83 in France.²¹ On the other hand, in the more traditional Visegrád countries, whose demographic policies are not based on migration, a continuous increase in the fertility rate can be observed.²²

¹⁶ Eurostat 2022.

¹⁷ Eurostat 2019.

¹⁸ Eurostat 2019.

¹⁹ Eurostat 2019.

²⁰ Eurostat 2021.

²¹ Eurostat 2023b.

²² NOVÁK–FÜRÉSZ 2021.

European families or migration

The Századvég Foundation and the Mária Kopp Institute for Demography and Families have been examining the attitudes of European citizens towards families within the framework of the Project Europe for the past three years. In addition to the 27 EU Member States, the representative study they produced covers the U.K., Norway and Switzerland, where it examines opinions on the most important public issues affecting our continent, such as families, demography and migration.²³

As part of the research, Europeans were also asked about their views on the relationship between migration, family support and demography. When asked, “Should your country rely on internal resources and support local families instead of migration?” more than two-thirds of European respondents agreed in all three years they were questioned, while nearly a fifth of respondents agreed with supporting migration in 2020 and a quarter in 2021 and 2022. The values of the former socialist countries and the V4 countries were 10 and 8 percentage points higher, respectively, than the two-thirds recorded in the EU as a whole. Romanians and Hungarians were the most pro-family with 88% and 87% expressing support, respectively. Respondents from Luxembourg (42%) and Sweden (31%) see migration as the best solution. In twenty-two of the thirty countries studied, a two-thirds majority expressed views in support of local families and not migration.

The research also addressed the question of how to tackle the demographic situation in Europe. Respondents were asked about their view of the statement “the problem of population decline should not be solved by migration but by increasing the number of children to be born”. The proportion of those who agree with the increase in the number of children born increased by one percentage point each year and stood at 59% in 2022, as did the proportion of those who prefer migration (27%). This question also had the highest proportion of non-answers. A significant result is that twice as many Europeans would remedy the problem of population decline by encouraging the birth of children than by migration. The corresponding figures of the former socialist countries and the V4 countries on this question are also 12 and 9 percentage points higher than the EU average, respectively. While Ireland was the only country with a higher preference for migration, Hungarians (87%) and Lithuanians (84%) were the most in favour of promoting internal population growth. Migration was most strongly supported by respondents in Ireland (39%) and the United Kingdom (38%). It should be noted that in fifteen European countries supporting increasing the birth rate enjoys the backing of a two-thirds of the respondents. It is also a good indication of the political sensitivity of the topic that in seven Western and Northern European countries, nearly a quarter of the respondents did not respond to the question.

This representative study involving 30,000 citizens clearly demonstrates that, if they are questioned about their views, a large majority of Europeans expect the decision-makers to support families and help the birth of their children instead of constantly promoting migration as the only solution to population decline.

²³ Századvég 2021.

Intra-EU mobility

In addition to external migration processes to EU countries, it is also important to highlight the issue of internal mobility between Member States. Free movement of persons and free labour mobility is a fundamental right which is one of the four freedoms of the European Union. One of the most important achievements of the European Union is to ensure equal treatment for mobile EU citizens, workers and students. This non-discrimination also extends to family benefits for mobile EU citizens, which are guaranteed by the Treaty and a number of pieces of secondary EU legislation.²⁴ At the same time, it is important to keep the idea of equal treatment and the right to it on the agenda during our EU Presidency, stressing that we have recently been confronted with initiatives aimed at undermining this right. An example is the initiative aimed at the indexation of family benefits, which started with the Brexit process and was later explicitly embodied in some national legislation.²⁵ Indexation consists of reducing the family benefits that a Member State has to pay to an employee if their children live in another Member State where the standard of living is lower.

Indexation itself has faced strong opposition, with the Court of Justice of the European Union having stated in principle that indexation is based on the criterion of the children's place of residence in another member state when determining the amount of family allowances. This affects migrant workers to a greater extent, and therefore constitutes indirect discrimination based on nationality.²⁶

Although indexation has been settled at the level of law, we should not forget about those tens of thousands of families whose benefits have been reduced overnight by indexation. They have thus experienced that their children are not treated equally to children living in another Member State. We have to do everything to safeguard the equal treatment that for decades we thought was unshakable, and which we suddenly notice has had a hole punched in it, meaning that in practice it negatively affected thousands of children, the vast majority of them in Central and Eastern Europe.

The comprehensive measures taken by each sending Member State to help families, their improved economic situation, wage levels and the processes that negatively affect the public security and social conditions of the host Western and Northern European countries have all contributed to the fact that in recent years more and more mobile workers have returned to Hungary and other Central and Eastern European Member States, thus improving the economic opportunities of the region. Recent statistics show that in 2020, 4,000 more people returned to Hungary than went to work abroad, while among the returnees there is a significant proportion of young people who are just about to

²⁴ Articles 18 and 45 of the Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union; Articles 4 and 67 of the Regulation (EC) No 883/2004 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2004 on the Coordination of Social Security Systems; Article 7 of the Regulation (EU) No 492/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 April 2011 on Freedom of Movement for Workers within the Union.

²⁵ GELLÉRNÉ LUKÁCS 2019: 179–193.

²⁶ Judgement of the Court of Justice in the case C-328/20 of the European Commission vs. Republic of Austria. 103.

start their own family, who want to raise their children in a safe, family-friendly country. Similar trends can be observed in most Central and Eastern European countries.²⁷

More children – a greener future

In order to preserve our continent as a European one, it is essential that Europeans' desire to have children is met in full. Research shows that European citizens still wish to have more than two children on average, so if the fertility gap in Europe could be reduced, the continent could improve its demographic situation considerably by using its own resources.²⁸

However, many young people may be confused by today's fashionable opinions that blame childbearing or having a large family for climate change. As a result, they may abandon their childbearing plans or opt to have fewer children. It is important to note that protecting our environment and the ecosystem is our common responsibility. Families are at the forefront of this, as they want to pass on a liveable planet to their children and grandchildren. The ecological footprint of families is, in fact, significantly smaller than that of those without children. From the relevant research of KINCS, it is clear that the overwhelming majority of parents raise their children in an environmentally conscious way, and reject the statement that it is not worth giving birth to a child due to the ecological crisis.²⁹

Conclusion

In line with Professor Pál Demény's belief that "migration policy can temporarily alleviate age distortion in the short term, but probably only at the cost of radically transforming the cultural and ethnic composition of the host society",³⁰ we propose a completely new approach in Europe as the theme of the second Hungarian EU presidency, an approach which is already proven in Hungary. Tackling demographic problems by helping families rather than encouraging migration would resonate well with the real needs of the European population, as we have seen that two-thirds of Europeans would support families and encourage childbearing, not migration, as the mainstream policy did in the previous decade. For the citizens of Central, Eastern and Southern Europe, the most important value is the family, as more than nine out of ten people affirmed.³¹ This should not be forgotten on the European stage either.

²⁷ GYENEY 2020: 1074–1184.

²⁸ Századvég – Project Europe Research 2020, 2021, 2022; KINCS 2019: 10.

²⁹ KINCS 2020; KINCS 2021.

³⁰ DEMÉNY 2016: 219.

³¹ KISS-KOZMA 2022.

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