Demographic future of Europe

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The Committee on Employment and Social Affairs adopted the own-initiative report by Ms Françoise **CASTEX** (PES, FR) on the demographic future of Europe, noting with concern the demographic projections from now until 2050 and the consequences of these changes for Europe.

Recalling the deep-rooted causes of these changes – a drop in the birth rate and the ageing of the population – MEPs, firstly, highlighted a table and a statistical overview of the situation in Europe. These show, in particular, that in 2050, according to latest statistics, demographic changes will be reflected in a net ageing of the population of Europe, with the average age increasing from 39 in 2004 to 49 in 2050. The number of young people aged between 0 and 14 years will have fallen from 100 million in 1975 to 66 million in 2050, and the population of working age will peak at 331 million around 2010 and gradually diminish thereafter (to around 268 million in 2050). At the same time, life expectancy will increase by six years for men and five years for women between 2004 and 2050, and the percentage of people aged over 80 will climb from 4.1% in 2005 to 11.4% in 2050, resulting in an average old-age dependency ratio of 53% between now and 2050.

Faced with this statistical reality, MEPs are reviewing the measures which could be taken to overcome the demographic challenges posed by the changing face of Europe:

Maternity: while MEPs emphasise how maternity has become a fundamental choice for men and women of today (a choice which must be respected) they also underline that the average birth rate in the EU, at 1.5 children, is “abnormally low”. In their view, the reason for such a low rate is a combination of a personal choice to have a child and the “difficulty of balancing working and family life”. However, they remain confident and consider that, since Member States’ birth rates range from 1.25 to 2.0, it is possible to positively influence birth rate curves through family-orientated public policies.

Family support: to support a policy which promotes a rising birth rate in Europe, Members agree that society as a whole must “place children at the centre of its policies”. They suggest that Member States take a series of measures that can be summarised as follows:

- to provide childcare, for at least 90% of children from age 3 to the start of compulsory schooling and at least 33% of children under 3 by 2010, as agreed by the Member States and in accordance with the objectives of the 2002 Barcelona European Council;

- to effectively combat discrimination of women who work and who wish to have children (e.g. through a better application of the Directive 2006/54/EC on the equal treatment of men and women in matters of work and employment);

- to ensure that working women who decide to have children do not become victims of unemployment, poverty or marginalisation (Members believe that working women should be offered incentives to become mothers, and that action should be taken against employers who do not employ women wishing to become mothers);

- to improve European legislation on paternity and promote fathers' rights as regards the upbringing and the care of children (particularly in the event of separation or divorce);

- implement proactive measures in support of parents, such as additional retirement pension entitlements and tax breaks for company crèches;

- to take action in order to ensure that work breaks for maternity and parental leave cease to constitute a penalty when women's pension entitlements are calculated;

- to adopt best practice as regards the length of maternity leave (which varies from 14 to 28 weeks in Europe), parental leave, ante-natal care and counselling, a guaranteed wage during pregnancy and return to the same job;

- to more effectively apply European agreements on parental leave and part-time work, which were the subject of Directives 96/34/EC and 97/81/EC.

Adoption and infertility: for those who cannot have children, Members also suggest measures to promote and improve adoption. In particular, they propose placing abused children, orphans and those raised in specialist institutions, in foster care and to initiate discussion at a European level on adoption procedures for children from Member States or third countries. In more general terms, they are concerned by the recurring problem of infertility in Europe, which affects both married and unmarried women and couples (around 15% of couples). They call for infertility to be made the subject of a specific recommendation in order to ensure that the cost of treating infertility medically and psychologically is covered and that the topic of adoption be dealt with in conjunction with that of infertility (and for the possibility of adoption to be offered to couples as an alternative to infertility treatment at all stages of that treatment). They also suggest that Member States raise the age limit for legal adoption and guarantee couples "universal access to infertility treatment and medically assisted procreation" by taking steps with a view to overcoming the financial obstacles, amongst others.

Working beyond 65: Members call for "practical initiatives designed to enable older people to work longer", so that they can pass on their particular work experience to young people. They believe that, given the life expectancy and the quality of life of over 65s, Member States should promote the establishment of rules and conventions enabling workers to voluntarily prolong their working life beyond the age of 65. They also propose discouraging companies from imposing early retirement whilst respecting the choice of those who no longer wish to hold a full-time position. The Commission and Member States should propose incentives to encourage workers who have reached retirement age to act as mentors to younger workers by introducing job-sharing and part-time working, with a view to facilitating the hand-over from one generation to the next. In the wider context, MEPs call for a thorough reform of career management for senior employees, who are currently penalised from the age of 50 through discrimination in the recruitment process, inadequate access to training (particularly in new technology), and the absence of recognition of acquired experience. They also call for the effective implementation of Directive 2000/78/EC which outlaws discrimination on the basis of age in training and employment, and call on the Commission to ensure effective monitoring of Member States whose legislation continues to discriminate on the basis of age or disability.

Grey Gold: recalling the huge contribution made by older people to social cohesion and to the European economy, Members also emphasise that these people constitute a market referred to as 'grey gold', due to their consumption of goods and services (including leisure, care and welfare services). They, therefore, call on Member States to promote measures to encourage the physical well-being of older people and to support the exchange of experience between regions in which the 'silver economy' plays a major role in regional development, in general (notably through the use of Structural Funds).

Abuse of older people: Members also focus attention on the maltreatment and lack of care, to which the elderly are exposed, within their families or within the institutions in which they are placed. They urge

Member States to take instant action in this domain as, according to estimates, some 10% of older people experience some form of physical, financial or mental abuse before they die. A warning system could be developed as well as penalties for maltreatment of this kind. They eagerly await the presentation by the Commission of a communication on this issue planned for 2008, in order to launch a vast awareness campaign and implement measures in this area at European level.

Immigration: noting that immigration is also one of the main causes of demographic change (and is beneficial from an economic, social and cultural perspective), Members call on the Commission, Member States and social partners to develop a clear and reasoned approach to immigration, in order to counter xenophobic and racist opinions and to promote the full and effective integration of migrants into society. This approach requires immigration policies to be laid down and coordinated, with the two-fold aim of meeting the needs of the employment market and financing the Member States' pension schemes, by ensuring that immigrants enjoy the same living and working conditions. MEPs also emphasise the importance of combating human trafficking and of penalising employers who employ and/or exploit illegal workers. They also recall the benefits of legal migration for the EU and call on Member States to bolster the measures aimed at bringing about the social and civic integration of immigrants (notably, by allowing migrant workers to change to permanent status after a certain period of stay). Furthermore, MEPs consider that family members accompanying immigrant labour should be given residence permits and, where appropriate, work permits, as “financial remittances from immigrants in Europe are a very significant method of financing the lives of older people in developing countries”.

Solidarity between generations in decision-making: lastly, MEPs note that the demographic future of Europe creates new problems, as regards democratic mechanisms, and that “in an ageing society the political representation of minors, who represent the common future and the political future of the Community”, must be better taken into account. They, therefore, ask that the voice of young people be better taken into account and that they be included in everyday decision-making.