

Demographic future of Europe

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution based on the own-initiative report drafted by Françoise CASTEX (PES, FR), on the demographic future of Europe, and noted with concern the demographic projections until 2050. These projections show an ageing of the European population, whose average age could rise from 39 in 2004 to 49 in 2050. Parliament stresses, however, that 50-year projections are not irreversible predictions but serious warnings to which we must respond today if we are to maintain Europe's competitiveness, the viability of the economy, social cohesion, solidarity between the generations and its social model. It considers that the perspective of shrinking populations by 2050 may implicate a lowering of the pressure on the environment and provide an opportunity for sustainable development. It also recalls that the two chief causes of demographic change – the falling birth rate and the ageing of the population – are the result of progress.

Parliament discusses several points which may be summarised as follows:

Maternity: Parliament stresses that the average birth rate in the EU, which at 1.5 is abnormally low, is not a reflection of women's choice or of European citizens' actual aspirations for creating a family. It may be linked to the difficulty of reconciling work with family life (lack of child-care infrastructures, social and economic support for families, and jobs for women), the anxiety-inducing social environment (unstable work situation, expensive housing) and a fear of the future (late access to employment for young people and job insecurity). Since, however, Member States' birth rates range from 1.25 to 2, it is possible to influence birth rate curves favourably through coordinated public policies, by creating a family- and child-friendly material and emotional environment.

Family support: Parliament acknowledges that a society that places children at the centre of its policies is the precondition for a healthier birth rate. It proposes a series of measures to improve family support. These measures range from the provision of childcare for at least 90% of children from age 3, to greater parental support and tax breaks for company crèches, as well as a better application of relevant directives, including Directive 2006/54/EC on the equal treatment of men and women in matters of work and employment and Directives 96/34/EC and 97/81/EC. Parliament also calls on Member States to recognise the social, economic and educational value of informal family work in the form of caring for children and other dependants, while examining the possibility of recognising length of service, social security and pension rights for those who carry out such informal work.

Adoption and infertility: Members suggest measures to 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 increasing problem of infertility in Europe, which affects around 15% of couples. Unlike Parliament's committee, which had called for infertility to be made the subject of a specific recommendation, Parliament called on the Member States to ensure the right of couples to universal access to infertility treatment.

The human resources challenge: Parliament notes that, faced with an imbalance between the active and non-active population resulting from demographic change, the EU has substantial scope to increase the employment of women, young people, senior citizens and people with disabilities. It calls for a reform of current European human resource management which, by under-employing people aged less than 25/30 and people over 55, limits to approximately 30 years the working life of a large part of the population.

Members consider that the measures envisaged having regard to demographic change must take account of the increase in productivity of all the working population, thus “not only is the ratio of economically active to economically non-active people significant but also the increase in productivity”.

Working beyond 65: Members call for practical initiatives to enable older people to work longer if they so wish, so that they can pass on their particular work experience to young people, other workers and employers. Parliament believes that people over the legal age of retirement today have a better life expectancy and higher quality of life than ever before and that Member States should promote and not prevent the establishment of rules enabling the prolongation, voluntarily on the worker's part, of working life after the legal age of retirement. It also considers that the time has come to address the issue of "pensioners' stress", namely the feelings of dejection, uselessness and nihilism experienced by workers a few days after retirement, when they perceive themselves to be useless, abandoned, and without a future. Incentives should be proposed which will make it easier for young people to enter the employment market, for example by encouraging workers who have reached retirement age to act as mentors for young workers and by introducing job-sharing and part-time working, with a view to facilitating the hand-over from one generation to the next. Generally, Parliament encourages Member States to maintain a budgetary balance between revenue and expenditure in the various pension schemes and commends the Member States which set aside budgetary appropriations each year for the payment of future pensions.

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.

Immigration: Parliament notes that the use of immigration will continue to be one of the elements in the EU's demography and could be a positive contribution from an economic, social and cultural point of view. It stresses the need for immigration policies to be coordinated among Member States by ensuring that immigrants enjoy the same living and working conditions, and calls upon the Commission to consider specific measures relating to economic immigration. It emphasises that legal migration inside the EU should be advantageous for migrants and should not constitute a disadvantage for the countries of origin, and encourages Member States to improve their integration measures for immigrants.

Regional differences: Parliament notes that the impact of demographic change on individual regions is serious and requires different adjustment strategies depending on whether the region concerned is a region of migration or of shrinking population. The Commission should promote, as part of territorial cooperation, EU-wide networks in which regional and local authorities and civil society actors can learn from one another about tackling the problems resulting from demographic change.

Solidarity between generations: 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.