

TOWARDS DEMOGRAPHIC RESILIENCE

STRATEGIC ADAPTATION FOR AN AGEING AND SHRINKING EUROPE

ABOUT THE PROJECT

This policy brief builds on insights from the EUROMOBI Conference, part of the EU-funded EuroMobi project (Horizon Europe, Grant No. 101232335), which explores mobility, demographic change, and socio-economic resilience in Europe.

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Europe is undergoing a profound demographic transformation. Fertility rates have remained well below replacement level for decades, while life expectancy continues to rise. This combination is driving population ageing and increasingly population decline. Longer and healthier lives represent a civilizational achievement, but the resulting demographic changes are reshaping Europe's economies, welfare systems, and territorial balance. By 2050, there will be 57 persons aged 65+ per 100 working-age adults living in the EU, which is up from 34 today. This trend places pressure on pensions, healthcare, and public finances, while shrinking labour force threatens productivity and competitiveness. The change takes place unevenly across regions intensifying territorial inequalities. Political fragmentation and short-term planning hinder effective responses.

Key challenges include the difficulty of reversing fertility decline, limited political and social acceptance of large-scale migration and raising retirement ages, and persistent barriers to labour force participation among older workers, women, and low-skilled groups. Automation can help alleviate labour shortages and productivity, but adopted across sectors and may deepen income inequalities. To adapt, Europe needs long-term, cross-sectoral strategies. Policies need to support families, invest in migrants, boost labour participation and prolong working lives, address regional decline, ensure governance continuity and improve data and public awareness of demographic change.

"Europe's demographic shift is inevitable — how we respond will define the future of our economies, societies, and territorial cohesion."

KEY MESSAGES

Europe's population is ageing and declining, driven by persistently low fertility and rising life expectancy.

Demographic change is reshaping economies, welfare systems, and regional dynamics, placing growing pressure on public finances and social cohesion.

Labour shortages threaten productivity and competitiveness, as the working age population shrinks.

Policy responses are hindered by political fragmentation and short-termism, despite the long-term nature of demographic trends.

No single solution exists—reversing fertility is difficult, migration is politically sensitive, and automation cannot and should not fully replace human labour.

Europe needs coordinated, long-term strategies to support families, boost labour participation, address regional decline, and strengthen public awareness and governance.

CONTEXT AND CHALLENGE

Europe is undergoing a profound demographic transformation, driven by persistently low fertility and steadily increasing life expectancy. These shifts lead to population ageing and, in many countries, to population decline. While demographic change is not a new phenomenon, it has reached a stage where its socio-economic, political, and territorial consequences are unavoidable. Fertility rates across most EU countries have declined below the replacement level of 2.1 for decades. This decline has been particularly acute in countries such as Poland and Southern European nations, where the average number of children per woman is currently below 1.2. Governments have introduced various family-oriented policies to counteract this trend—with varying intensity and success—but overall effects remain limited. A return to replacement-level fertility appears unlikely, especially in persistently low-fertility contexts.

KEY MESSAGES

Europe's demographic shift is structural and lasting, driven by low fertility and increasing longevity — not easily reversible and requiring long-term adaptation.

Fertility rates remain well below Replacement level, especially in countries like Poland and Southern Europe, despite policy efforts to support families.

Rising life expectancy is a major success, but also accelerates population ageing and shifts the balance between working-age and retired populations.

Ageing societies strain public finances, with growing demand for pensions, healthcare, and long-term care, while the shrinking workforce threatens economic growth.

Territorial inequalities are deepening, as population decline hits rural and less-developed regions hardest, risking depopulation and economic stagnation.

Europe needs forward-looking, cross-sectoral policies to adapt — supporting families, boosting labour force participation, and addressing spatial imbalances.

At the same time, Europeans are living longer and healthier lives. Life expectancy at age 65 in the EU increased from 13–16 years in 1970 to 17–22 years in 2024, and is projected to reach 19–24 years by 2050. This outstanding increase in longevity is a major civilizational achievement—reflecting decades of advancements in healthcare, education, working conditions, and overall quality of life. Both the lack of replacement from younger generations due to low fertility and the rise in life expectancy contribute to population ageing. In 2024, there are approximately 34 persons aged 65+ for every 100 persons aged 15–64 in the EU; by 2050, this number is expected to rise to around 57. In Poland, the old-age dependency ratio is projected to increase from 34 in 2024 to over 63 by 2050.

Population ageing is placing growing pressure on public finances, particularly pensions, healthcare and long-term care systems, due to the increasing number of beneficiaries relative to contributors and taxpayers. At the same time, the shrinking working-age population reduces the capacity to produce goods and services, threatening economic growth and competitiveness. Ageing also raises the risk of intergenerational tensions related to the redistribution of economic and social benefits and political representation. Meanwhile, population decline—especially in rural and economically weaker regions—intensifies territorial disparities. Many of such areas face a cycle of depopulation, economic stagnation, and decline of essential services if no actions are undertaken. Importantly, these demographic changes cannot be easily stopped or reversed. They are largely driven by population momentum—the preexisting age structure—and their effects will continue for decades. Societies must therefore adapt. This calls for long-term, inclusive, and forward-looking strategies.

KEY CHALLENGES

Reversing Fertility Decline Is Difficult and Will Not Bring Immediate Effects

There is a widespread but flawed belief that low fertility can be reversed by reverting to traditional family models—for example, encouraging women to exit the labor market. However, a growing body of evidence indicates that women's employment no longer negatively affects fertility. In fact, in many European contexts, employed women are as likely—or even more likely—to have children than those outside the labor force.

Policies that facilitate work-family reconciliation—such as childcare services, parental leave schemes, and flexible working arrangements—can support fertility by reducing the opportunity costs of childbearing. Yet, their aggregate impact remains modest. Broader structural factors continue to exert downward pressure on fertility: cultural and social norms that affect family formation, economic uncertainty, unaffordable housing or political instability. These are difficult to address through demographic policies alone, especially in the short term. Furthermore, more research on barriers to realizing fertility intentions is needed, in particular among men, as these are still not well understood. Importantly, even if fertility rates rise, the current size of the female population of reproductive age is relatively small, meaning that a rise in the number of births would be modest. Last but not least, any effects of higher fertility on the labor force would only be felt in 20 years or more.

Large Migration Would Be Needed to Slow Down The Ageing But May Not Be Socially Accepted

Migration has become essential to alleviating labor shortages in many EU countries. It already plays a key role in specific sectors such as healthcare, agriculture, and construction.

However, to have significant demographic impact, migration must occur at a large scale and be sustained over the long term, which is politically and socially challenging. Public anxiety over migration—driven by fears of sociocultural change or economic competition—makes it difficult to build political consensus. A polarised debate has emerged, often putting migration against fertility as mutually exclusive solutions. This framing is false: the two are not substitutes, but complementary tools in addressing demographic decline. Migration policy must therefore be accompanied by a long time perspective and robust integration measures. It is also important to change public discourse, highlighting contributions of migrants to the socioeconomic development of the country.

Labor Force Participation of Underrepresented Groups Is Crucial.

To counterbalance a shrinking workforce, it is vital to raise labor force participation of the groups currently underrepresented in the labor market. These include older and younger adults, women—especially mothers—and low- and medium-skilled workers. Older adults today are healthier and better educated than in previous generations. Yet some retirement systems continue to impose the retirement age of 65, and in Poland female retirement age remains even at 60. Pension reforms in some countries have encouraged longer working lives, but barriers to economic activity of older people persist. These are age discrimination, low digital literacy, and limited opportunities to retire gradually depending on individual's health needs. In addition, public acceptance of higher retirement age is low in most countries. Women, particularly those with young children or older parents requiring care, continue to face barriers to labor market participation. Despite improvements in parental leave and childcare provision, unequal division of care responsibilities and rigid gender norms impede employment continuity and career progression. Longterm care systems are not developed, which further leaves the care responsibility most frequently to women. In some countries, such as Poland, statutory retirement ages remain lower for women, further diminishing their lifetime earnings and long-term labor force participation. Low- and medium-skilled workers, but also an increasing share of high-skilled workers are particularly vulnerable to job displacement from automation and technological change. They are also less likely to participate in training, in particular employer-funded reskilling programmes. This limits their ability to adjust to changing labor market needs. Policy responses should include addressing gaps in labour force participation, pension reforms including the adjustment of retirement ages to longer life expectancy, age- and family-friendly work arrangements, and greater investment in lifelong learning and gender equality. Without such measures, labour shortages and skill mismatches will intensify, constraining Europe's economic resilience.

KEY CHALLENGES

Territorial Divergence and Regional Decline

Demographic decline is geographically uneven. While large cities continue to attract younger, skilled populations, rural and economically lagging regions face pronounced population loss, ageing, and shrinking service provision. Demographic decline of a region is often followed by deterioration of the local economy and infrastructure: schools and health centers close, private investment declines, and young people continue to leave. This process intensifies demographic inertia and regional inequalities which may persist for decades or even intensify due to path dependencies. Closing regional gaps requires targeted and continuous investment: in digital and physical infrastructure, transport, housing, education, health care, and labor market access.

Governance Fragmentation and Short Political Cycles

Despite the complexity and crosssectoral nature of demographic change, demographic competencies in governments are spread across several ministries and responses remain fragmented. Governmental bodies responsible for health, education, labor, family, pensions, housing, and regional development often operate independently, which results in inconsistent strategies and competing policy goals. Moreover, demographic trends unfold over decades, while political incentives are shaped by short electoral cycles. Policymakers may be unwilling to undertake reforms which will bring returns only in the long term. Consequently, many promising initiatives may be abandoned.

KEY MESSAGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Raising fertility is not a quick fix. While family policies help, deeper structural factors limit their effectiveness, and demographic recovery from higher birth rates would take decades.

Migration is essential but politically sensitive. Long-term strategies must pair migration with robust integration and reframe public narratives to build social acceptance.

Boosting labour force participation is vital — especially among older adults, women, and lower-skilled groups, through pension reform, care infrastructure, flexible work, and lifelong learning.

Territorial disparities are deepening — shrinking regions need sustained investment in infrastructure, services, and economic opportunities to avoid long-term decline.

Governance fragmentation weakens response — demographic adaptation demands coordinated, cross-sectoral policies beyond electoral cycles.

Automation can ease labour shortages but widens inequality. It must be paired with inclusive upskilling, especially in sectors where human labour cannot be replaced.

Automation is Not a Silver Bullet—but It Is Part of the Solution

Despite the complexity and cross sectoral nature of demographic change, demographic competencies in governments are spread across several ministries and responses remain fragmented. Governmental bodies responsible for health, education, labor, family, pensions, housing, and regional development often operate independently, which results in inconsistent strategies and competing policy goals. Moreover, demographic trends unfold over decades, while political incentives are shaped by short electoral cycles. Policymakers may be unwilling to undertake reforms which will bring returns only in the long term. Consequently, many promising initiatives may be abandoned.



1 **Promote long-term, multi-sectoral demographic strategies**

Governments should adopt strategies that go beyond isolated interventions. Demographic change intersects with education, labor, health, pensions, long-term care, housing, migration, and infrastructure. Strategies must be cross-sectoral and coordinated at national and regional levels, with clear goals and monitoring systems.

2 **Support families through comprehensive and equitable family policies**

Access to high-quality, affordable childcare and early education needs to be further improved. Governments should further promote flexible parental leave schemes with incentives for equal uptake by fathers; and improve access to affordable housing for young families. However, radical fertility increase is not realistic.

3 **Invest in integration of migrants**

Migration is needed to fill the labour supply shortages. Governments should develop longterm migration strategies, which take into account labor market needs. This includes language development, recognition of skills or anti-discrimination policies. Society should be made aware of migrants' positive contributions to the socio-economic development of the country.

4 **Boost labor force participation across underrepresented groups**

Migration is needed to fill the labour supply shortages. Governments should develop longterm migration strategies, which take into account labor market needs. This includes language development, recognition of skills or anti-discrimination policies. Society should be made aware of migrants' positive contributions to the socio-economic development of the country.

5 **Address territorial imbalances with place-based policies**

Governments should invest in less developed areas in the EU, paying special attention to transport, broadband, public services and housing. Improving quality of life, attracting investment and facilitating remote work could encourage young people to stay in the region.

6 **Develop Long-Term Care systems to meet the increasing demand**

Governments should adopt strategies that go beyond isolated interventions. Demographic change intersects with education, labor, health, pensions, long-term care, housing, migration, and infrastructure. Strategies must be cross-sectoral and coordinated at national and regional levels, with clear goals and monitoring systems.

7 **Ensure institutional continuity and long-term political commitment**

Access to high-quality, affordable childcare and early education needs to be further improved. Governments should further promote flexible parental leave schemes with incentives for equal uptake by fathers; and improve access to affordable housing for young families. However, radical fertility increase is not realistic.

8 **Improve data, and public awareness**

Migration is needed to fill the labour supply shortages. Governments should develop longterm migration strategies, which take into account labor market needs. This includes language development, recognition of skills or anti-discrimination policies. Society should be made aware of migrants' positive contributions to the socio-economic development of the country.

9 **Make use of automation while ensuring inclusive adaptation**

Migration is needed to fill the labour supply shortages. Governments should develop longterm migration strategies, which take into account labor market needs. This includes language development, recognition of skills or anti-discrimination policies. Society should be made aware of migrants' positive contributions to the socio-economic development of the country.

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FOR GENERAL PUBLIC

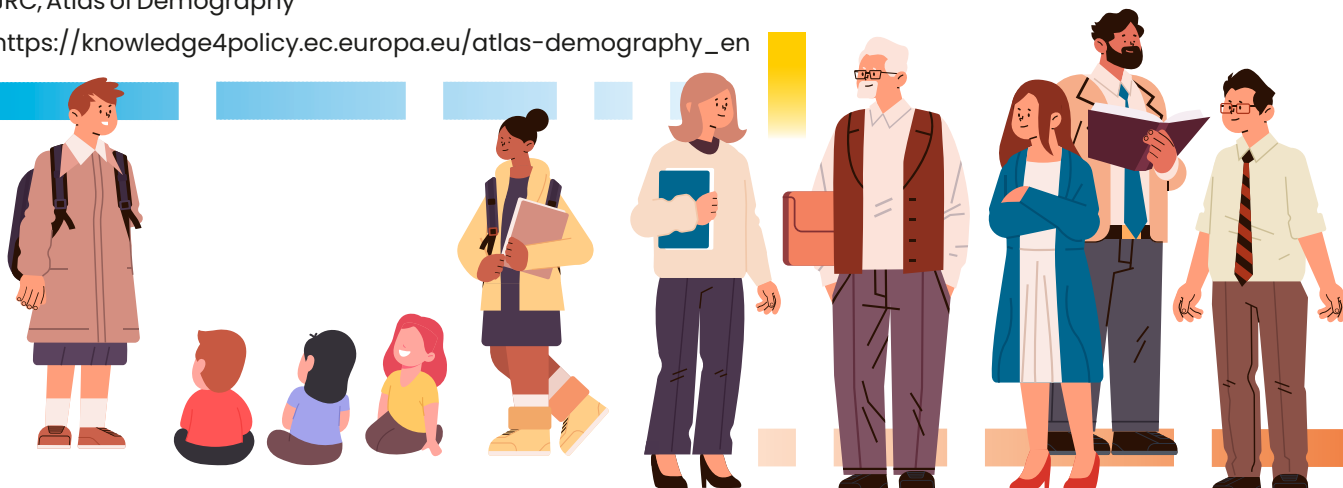
Population Europe portal — Hub of policy insight briefs, expert interviews, datasets and demographic dashboards (e.g. who is responsible for population policy in EU) <https://population-europe.eu>

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Human Fertility Database

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Human Mortality Database

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DISCLAIMERS

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