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| **SEDEC-VII/047** | |
| **162nd plenary session, 7-9 October 2024** | |

**OPINION**

**Demographic change in Europe: a toolbox for action**

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| THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS (CoR)   * considers it timely to mainstream demographic change as a transversal challenge into the work of all commissions, and consider the possibility of establishing an interregional group closely cooperating with the European Parliament’s relevant intergroup, encouraging the exchange of best practices, and the development of coordinated strategies that take into account a broad spectrum of EU policies, including gender equality; * emphasises that the Demography Toolbox introduces key elements explaining the gap between actual and desired family size; * stresses the importance of the existing EU cohesion funding tools which can help alleviate the negative effects of demographic change, either as a result of depopulation or overpopulation in regions with strong population pressure, and welcomes the focus of the presidency of the Council of the EU on demographic issues and its close link with cohesion policies; refers in this context to the CoR work on how to exploit the full potential of cohesion policy to tackle demographic change; underlines that these tools should promote a balanced and enabling approach to demographic issues at an appropriate territorial level; * calls on the Member States to consider the establishment of a Permanent Council configuration comprising a group of ministers in charge of demography from the Member States. Such a Council configuration should keep in mind gender equality and the intergenerational dimension, while developing mechanisms for sharing good practices at European level on their national policies to support parents, families, young and elderly women and men and respecting national competences. |





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| **Rapporteur:**  János Ádám Karácsony (HU/ECR)  Vice-President of the County Council of Pest Vármegye  **Reference document(s):**  Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the *Regions Demographic change in Europe: a toolbox for action*  (COM(2023) 577 final) |

**Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions –   
Demographic change in Europe: a toolbox for action**

1. **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS (CoR)

*General comments*

# considers that, at regional level, the established long-term demographic trends observed in recent years including an ageing population, young people moving away, fertility gap, low fertility and birth rates and the unequal urban/rural divide of the population caused by depopulation of rural areas, have not permanently changed for the better, although they have in many cases become more pronounced; regions must therefore adapt to these trends and make every effort to at least mitigate their negative effects. Migration is a significant factor in demographic change in Europe. In 2022, 5.1 million migrants arrived in the EU from non-EU countries and 1.5 million people previously residing in one EU Member State migrated to another Member State[[1]](#footnote-1);

# considers that the projected impact of demographic change on the social market economy of the EU continues to include shrinking working-age population, an ageing population, increased pressure on public budgets and increased territorial disparities due to depopulation, brain drain and the difficulties of these people returning;

# underlines that in 2023 82 regions were deemed to be in or at risk of falling into a talent development trap[[2]](#footnote-2) and in 2020 in the EU one sixth of all regions had a shrinking population[[3]](#footnote-3).These developments underscore the urgent need for sustainable development policies to support vibrant, well-integrated and resilient rural communities, which meet the needs of their current and potential new inhabitants hoping to start a family, while acknowledging that some islands, cities and metropolitan regions are experiencing strong demographic growth and face the challenge of overpopulation that generates high pressure on the territory, public resources and services;

# stresses that in 2020 the average number of childbirths per woman was 1.5, which is well below the value of 2.1 required to maintain a stable population[[4]](#footnote-4), the mean age of women at birth of first child increased to a value of 29.7 in 2021[[5]](#footnote-5) while the share of households with children has generally declined in the EU over the last years[[6]](#footnote-6). In 2022, the total fertility was 1.46 live births per woman, almost half of children born were born to first-time mothers and 22% of children were born to mothers who were not born in the reporting country, but in another EU country or outside the EU. There is a growing trend of young people to postpone the decision to start a family or limit its size. The complexity of the matter is illustrated by the fact that a notable proportion of especially highly educated women indicate they would want to have more children than they actually do – a gap influenced by factors such as the difficulty of reconciling work and care responsibilities, economic and social insecurity linked to employment prospects, the cost of living and housing or gender inequalities[[7]](#footnote-7);

# stresses that the employment rate for persons aged 15 to 29 in the EU remains worryingly low, at 49.7% in 2023 for men and women, and in 2022 12.5% of women and 10.1% of men aged 15-29 in the EU were neither in employment nor in education or training (NEET)[[8]](#footnote-8). In all EU Member States, women have a lower employment rate than men, and there are also considerable differences between European countries with regard to men’s and women’s employment rates. Moreover, the CoR underlines that if in employment the earnings and income of women and men in their 20s and early 30s stagnates or falls compared to previous generations, they will have less resources for establishing a family, thus, in line with the CoR opinion on Youth Guarantee[[9]](#footnote-9) special focus should be placed on supporting young people in the transition from school to work provide women and men with early economic and vocational stability, since success in this is an important precondition for professional and social integration, which is crucial to have the opportunity and be able to afford to have children;

# stresses that the United Nations Population Division forecasts that the population of Europe is expected to decline from 2030 onwards. In this context, underlines that with a declining and aging population it will become an increasing challenge to sustain economic growth in Europe; notes that considering an old-age dependency ratio that increases from 33% to 60% by 2100, increasing women’s labour participation could help achieve the EU’s employment rate target for 2030 and be one of the most effective remedies to the negative consequences of ageing[[10]](#footnote-10), alongside legal migration and the effective integration of third country nationals to alleviate labour market pressures. Notes that increasing women’s participation in the labour market requires a range of measures, such as addressing the gender pay gap, accessible and affordable childcare and care for the elderly and a balanced distribution of unpaid domestic and care work. Urges targeted use of EU resources to support regions with high youth unemployment;

# stresses that all the measures and policies recommended in this opinion must fully uphold women’s freedom to choose as regards their own bodies, irrespective of their social, economic or family situations. Demographic policies must never limit women’s rights or undermine their physical autonomy, and mental health, and they must safeguard women’s reproductive rights comprehensively, also ensuring universal access to safe healthcare services and respectful treatment;

*The need for coherent policy response at all levels of governance*

# notes that European regions respond to demographic challenges by numerous family-friendly measures to foster growth and job creation, policies to support families in all their diversity, including single-parents raising children, as well as measures to balance work and family life, through policies aimed at maintaining educational establishments in the regions, especially in rural areas, and aimed at launching initiatives for the return and retention of talent, and through policies that ensure equal opportunities for women and men. Encourages the use of EU funds to enhance local capacities to address demographic shifts effectively;

# encourages European regions to continue to address and to adapt to these challenges, and to seize the opportunities associated with demographic change, such as those related to the ‘silver economy’; and in line with its opinion on active and healthy ageing[[11]](#footnote-11) it is convinced that ageing is a hidden opportunity, as increased longevity creates a market for new affordable products and services supporting active and healthy ageing;

# recognises the importance of citizens’ participation and encourages leading local stakeholders to strengthen regional horizontal policies, thereby increasing awareness of demographic change within the local community to reinforce the acknowledgement of more citizen-centred measures; suggests to broadly discuss the demographic challenges with European citizens;

# considers it timely to mainstream demographic change as a transversal challenge into the work of all commissions, and consider the possibility of establishing an interregional group closely cooperating with the European Parliament’s relevant intergroup, encouraging the exchange of best practices, and the development of coordinated strategies that take into account a broad spectrum of EU policies, including gender equality;

# in line with its recent opinion on brain drain[[12]](#footnote-12) emphasises that the free movement of individuals and workers forms the basis of the internal market but draws attention to the recent report on the Internal Market[[13]](#footnote-13) which signals a paradigm shift by acknowledging that intra-EU mobility is not an opportunity for everyone, as those living in less developed regions face significant real-life barriers to mobility such as age, lack of skills, intergenerational solidarity obligations, house ownership or emotional attachment, and more should be done to support citizens in the scope of ‘freedom to stay’ . All these should be accompanied with measures looking at the root causes of emigration of young and qualified citizens in order to reduce territorial disparities and boost the attractiveness of regions facing depopulation. Furthermore, it is important to mention that, in addition to the barriers already listed, economic inequalities and lack of information on available opportunities are significant barriers for many citizens in less developed areas. A lack of financial resources may limit access to mobility, while insufficient dissemination of information, for example on training programmes, mobility support measures or job opportunities, deprives many citizens of the possibility to seize these opportunities. These factors exacerbate the gap between different areas and social groups within the EU;

# reaffirms its position stated in its 2016 and 2020 opinions on demographic change, emphasising that addressing the fertility levels within Member States must remain a primary objective; recognises that demographic trends are complex issues intertwined with various policy areas and that therefore fertility rates do not change rapidly. Meanwhile, and migration should be considered a secondary supportive tool used only thereafter[[14]](#footnote-14); underlines that the contribution made by migration is a short-term solution not free from risks, and important additional efforts across levels are needed to ensure that full integration into the labour markets and society is ensured; agrees that *‘legal migration and the effective integration of third country nationals legally residing in the EU can help alleviate labour market pressures*[[15]](#footnote-15)*’,* while insisting on the need to address the root causes of outward migration of young and educated people, in order to reduce territorial disparities and enhance the attractiveness of regions faced with depopulation;

# agrees with the Council that all generations should be empowered to harness their talents and fulfil their aspirations by reconciling family and personal aspirations with paid work[[16]](#footnote-16), and notes that complementing these efforts, legal migration and the effective integration of third country nationals can help alleviate labour market pressures;

# notes that the European Commission undertook various initiatives in the past, including, among others, the report on demographic change, the Demography Toolbox, the talent booster mechanism, the Harnessing Talent Platform, the reinforced Youth Guarantee, the European Child Guarantee, the 2024 reinforced long-term vision on the EU’s rural areas, the European Care Strategy, the European Skills Agenda, the Digital Education Action Plan, the Green Paper on Ageing, the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025 and the updated Guidance on the right of free movement of EU citizens and their families;

# welcomes the fact that the European Economic and Social Committee began evaluating ‘The impact of demography on Social Europe’[[17]](#footnote-17), contributing to existing institutional efforts;

# points out that the Demography Toolbox which is crucial for planning and implementing strategies to enhance human capital, is necessarily focused on competitiveness due to the European Council’s call[[18]](#footnote-18) and explored the possible pillars within this focus; however, notes that this does not prevent the Commission from continuing its efforts on the less pronounced territorial aspects, in accordance with Article 174 TFEU which envisages reducing regional disparities and offers the necessary legal foundation for a wider application of European-level instruments and the required financial resources, and it would be appropriate to provide guidance on regional needs concerning specific tasks aligned with these territorial considerations. Financial resources must promote a balanced and enabling approach to demographic issues. The EU should, in the context of cohesion policy in particular, also work to rebalance economic and social conditions in Europe;

*Promoting intergenerational fairness and fostering parenthood*

# notes that the COVID pandemic has held a magnifying glass to the need to improve the resilience of European care systems, and that care services can be insufficient, which has a bigger impact on women as supplementary or informal care responsibilities still fall predominantly to them and this affects their work-life balance and options to take on paid work; further stresses the importance of policies that promote shared caregiving responsibilities. The COVID-19 pandemic has also seriously called into question support services for young people, who are, generally, struggling the most post-pandemic and often withdrawing from society, preventing positive social and employment integration. Child and adolescent services – in line with the European plans to prevent youth disaffection – need to step up their efforts to manage and prevent the worsening of the phenomenon of the post-pandemic social withdrawal of young people;

# also supports the vision presented by the European Commission in the Demography Toolbox, in particular the demand for Member States' demography policies to be grounded in local realities and prioritise gender equality, non-discrimination and intergenerational fairness;

# strongly endorses the importance of intergenerational solidarity and cooperation within families, in the workplace and in local communities. This includes fostering active ageing and enabling skills transfers between generations, which are empowering factors for a better work-life balance and for women and men of all ages to live independent, healthy, and fulfilling lives. Special attention should be given to rural areas where the median age is high, ensuring that these efforts are inclusive and equitable, and not seen as a sole solution to low fertility rates. This also means developing programmes to encourage young people to stay in these areas, as well creating job and training opportunities that attract new generations;

# stresses that Member States must implement a wide range of measures to implement the Council recommendations on access to affordable high-quality long-term care[[19]](#footnote-19). It is essential to ensure that people living in less developed areas also have health services available and accessible to them, and to strengthen integrated home care services in rural regions to meet the needs of a population with a very high average age;

# stresses the importance of extending learning opportunities under ERASMUS+ to cover youth from rural and remote areas;

# expresses the importance of introducing more progressive and adapted frameworks to address work-life balance for workers of all generations, especially taking into consideration the digital transition. Recognises the opportunities presented by remote work, not just as a tool to facilitate more equal sharing of unpaid domestic and care work but also as a key strategy to retain young, skilled people and attract other people, fostering repopulation of rural areas, as it can facilitate a more equal sharing of unpaid domestic and care work, while also acknowledging that not everyone has the option to work remotely, and the fact that prolonged remote work can also have disadvantages. Additionally, underlines the key role of connectivity and boosting of digital in enhancing the attractiveness of regions and cities for a growing number of ‘working nomads’ on full telework;

# underlines that young people entering the labour market need key competences for lifelong learning as well as specific digital, vocational and personal skills that will support them in managing their diverse future career pathways alongside their personal life, and prepares them for their life in a ‘longevity society’. It is important to stress that the type of education that young people receive and the educational/teaching approach that they experience have a direct link to whether young people succeed in the labour market. School should therefore be increasingly linked to the world of work and supported by European, national and regional investment policies that not only make it easier for young people to enter the labour market but also build up their social skills to help them both in their professional lives and in their personal lives, with a view to positively integrating into today’s society;

# points to the importance of enhancing joint responsibility of women and men in order to improve the equal distribution between men and women of responsibilities, opportunities and rights associated with caring and addressing the needs linked to life within the family unit;

# emphasises that the Demography Toolbox introduces key elements explaining the gap between actual and desired family size[[20]](#footnote-20);

# notes that demographic change and the choice of having children is primarily determined by personal life choices that individual women, men and families make; however, public policy also has a crucial role to play in eliminating obstacles and fostering an environment which allows women and men in society to fulfil their personal aspirations, including job security, equal working conditions, quality of life, and access to a wide range of services such as childcare and care for the elderly and affordable housing. These factors are key in ensuring that everyone can reap the opportunities offered by market integration;

# underlines the high priority for improving access to quality and inclusive care, at all levels of the education system, with particular focus on early childhood in collaboration with private initiatives, including during unsocial working hours, which are evenly spread across the region, as well as to make better use of European funds to provide quality services in the field of education and health and formal care (childcare, out-of-school care and long-term care) in accordance with the Council’s recommendation[[21]](#footnote-21);

# stresses that regional development should ensure that families and prospective parents feel that they are raising children in a healthy and safe environment, where they have good access to affordable, quality housing, good transport and telecommunications networks, an attractive business environment conducive to the establishment of new businesses and the growth of existing businesses, and childcare, and encourages the promotion of support for childcare and family services aimed at improving the work-life balance and potentially boosting birth rates;

*Enhancing demographic support through cohesion as part of the future competitiveness agenda of the EU*

# notes that the Council recognised that some regions face particular difficulties in developing and retaining talen, i.e. a combined challenge of shrinking workforce and lower levels of university education or vocational training, and declared that cohesion policy must remain a key pillar of the EU and, to this end, must maintain as its sole objective the promoting of the EU’s overall harmonious development and the strengthening of its economic, social and territorial cohesion, while reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions;

# stresses that demographic transition must remain high on the EU agenda, as this framework ensures that EU financial instruments and resources are properly allocated to appropriate actions and measures. With this in mind, underlines the importance of considering demographic indicators in the next multiannual financial framework;

# stresses the importance of the existing EU cohesion funding tools which can help alleviate the negative effects of demographic change, either as a result of depopulation or overpopulation in regions with strong population pressure, and welcomes the focus of the Presidency of the Council of the EU on demographic issues and its close link with cohesion policies; refers in this context to the CoR work on how to exploit the full potential of cohesion policy to tackle demographic change; underlines that these tools should promote a balanced and enabling approach to demographic issues at an appropriate territorial level;

# highlights the key role of addressing demographic change with regard to the future of cohesion policy and the future competitiveness agenda of the EU and refers to the ongoing opinion on *A renewed Cohesion policy post 2027 that leaves no one behind - CoR responses to the 9th Cohesion Report, the Report of the High-Level group on the future of cohesion policy and the Council conclusions on the future of Cohesion Policy* and the CoR opinion on *The future of the single market and the EU’s competitiveness*;

*Strengthening strategic measures to address demographic challenges*

calls on the European institutions:

# to consider the establishment of an appropriate structure within the Commission on directorate-general and commissioner level adopting strategies that ensure gender equality and overall inclusivity to achieve its objectives, and to ensure permanent professional-administrative resources dedicated to the demographic challenge and transition, including the strengthening of the internal and inter-institutional coordination structures;

# to explore and make proposals on how cohesion policy in general could play a more prominent role in addressing demographic challenges; notes that cohesion policy already has a wide range of instruments in this area, however, its role in addressing demographic challenges should be further strengthened in the future; proposes to reinforce cohesion implementation at local and regional level in order to better reflect national and regional specificities and increase effectiveness; underlines that cohesion policy should promote a balanced and enabling approach to demographic issues;

# to integrate the demographic dimension horizontally into the planning of both current and future multiannual financial frameworks (MFF) and cohesion policy funding tools, which includes proposing dedicated demographic objectives and earmarked resources within existing cohesion policy funding tools, particularly targeting the European Social Fund (ESF+) and the Cohesion Fund, and developing specific tools to address demographic challenges while allocating resources for these initiatives in the design of the next MFF. Underlines that these tools should promote gender equality and a balanced and enabling approach to demographic issues;

# to treat demographic continuity as a European priority, critical to sustaining the EU’s competitiveness, fostering well-being, social cohesion and resilience, and calls for relevant funds to be strategically employed to address demographic challenges accordingly and to proportionally reflect the seriousness of the situation in each affected territory;

# to examine the impact of demographic change on SMEs, such as small family businesses, to evaluate in particular how EU funding could support a smooth generational transition in the management of vulnerable SMEs;

# to make further specific proposals to address the key challenges in the light of the results of the Internal Market Report 2024, especially to offset the effects of brain drain, to identify effective tools and methods needed to support the implementation of the ‘freedom to stay’, to attract talent to regions and ensure regions can reap the benefits of workers’ mobility;

# to further develop the concept and area of application of services of general interest in order to better target the demographic challenges;

# to craft proposals on how cohesion policy funding tools and resources can be mobilised and made available more effectively to support the demographic dimension;

# to eventually review the work-life balance directive following the process of consultation, in particular during the preparation of the report under Article 18, and to propose a redefinition of the Directive’s rules in the context of the digital transition, which would provide efficient ways to ensure more flexible working arrangements (e.g.: teleworking) in the digital environment, also seeking to ensure fair and predictable working conditions and a healthy work-life balance. The Directive certainly marks a significant step forward in adding carers into the equation when it comes to facilitating a work-life balance, thus expanding the focus beyond the role of parents alone. However, the carer-related measures could be further strengthened to respond more effectively to the challenges posed by socio-demographic change. Specifically, it would be a positive move for the Directive to provide for more ambitious support for those caring for older persons or family members with disabilities, with the aim of ensuring equal access to care services and promoting a better balance between care responsibilities and opportunities for participation in the labour market. This could include, for example, remunerating carers’ leave and extending these rights to those who provide care to people outside their household, thus making the legislation more inclusive and more in tune with the diverse range of family and social circumstances;

# to promote further research of demographic issues with a scientific approach and data, targeting the remobilisation of its internal human resources according to the pillars of parents, young and older generations and to further explore the reasons behind the gap between actual and desired family size in the EU;

# to develop gender-disaggregated performance and result-oriented indicators in the field of demographic transition at the appropriate territorial level;

calls on the Member States:

# to consider the establishment of a Permanent Council configuration comprising a group of ministers in charge of demography from the Member States. Such a Council configuration should keep in mind gender equality and the intergenerational dimension , while developing mechanisms for sharing good practices at European level on their national policies to support parents, families, young and elderly women and men and respecting national competences;

# to prioritise initiatives that contribute to gender equality, retain and attract young people in areas of demographic decline, and are aimed at raising birth rates within Member States by fostering supportive conditions for women and men who want to have children;

# recalls that the International Day of Families has been held in the United Nations each year on 15 May; accordingly proposes to establish a European Day of Families, celebrating families in all their diversity;

# calls on the LRAs, especially those LRAs throughout Europe that already lead by example integrating migrants and refugees, to exchange best practices particularly with smaller municipalities that often lack the same capacity to welcome and integrate migrants; points to the Mechelen model as a living and recognised example to follow. Introducing good practices for welcoming and integrating the migrant community must be promoted with funding for local authorities in rural areas so that they can strengthen their services.

Brussels, 9 October 2024.

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| *The President of the European Committee of the Regions*  Vasco Alves Cordeiro |  |
|  | *The Secretary-General of the European Committee of the Regions*  Petr Blížkovský |

1. **PROCEDURE**

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| **Title** | Demographic change in Europe: a toolbox for action |
| **Reference(s)** | COM(2023)577 final |
| **Legal basis** | Own-initiative, Article 307(4) |
| **Procedural basis** | Article 41, b)(i) |
| **Date of Council/EP referral/Date of Commission letter** | COM(2023) 577: EC (12/10/23) |
| **Date of Bureau/President’s decision** | 24/10/2023 |
| **Commission responsible** | SEDEC-VII – 7th Mandate – Commission for Social Policy, Education, Employment, Research and Culture (SEDEC) |
| **Rapporteur** | János Ádám KARÁCSONY (HU/ECR), Vice-President of the County Council of Pest Megye |
| **Discussed in commission** | 26/4/2024 |
| **Date adopted by commission** | 27 June 2024 |
| **Result of the vote in commission**  **(majority, unanimity)** | majority |
| **Date adopted in plenary** | 9 October 2024 |
| **Previous Committee opinions** | * [A Long-term vision for the EU’s rural areas](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52021IR3533) * [Demographic change: proposals on measuring and tackling its negative effects in the EU regions](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52019IR4647) * [Brain Drain in the EU: addressing the challenge at all levels](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52019IR4645&rid=2) * [Active and Healthy Ageing](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2012:225:0046:0051:EN:PDF) * [Work-life balance for parents and carers](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52017AR3138) * [Territorial classification and typologies](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52017AR1528&from=LV) * [The EU response to the demographic challenge](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52016IR0040) * [Active ageing: innovation – smart health – better lives](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52012IR0056) * [Impact of an ageing population](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2010:232:0007:0013:EN:PDF) |
| **Subsidiarity reference** | N/A |

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7. [Demography Toolbox for action](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52023DC0577), point 3.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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11. [Active and healthy ageing (COR opinion 2020)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52019IR0015). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
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