

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE IN THE OSCE REGION

ANALYSIS, IMPACT AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS
OF A MEGA TREND RESHAPING SOCIETY



Report of the OSCE PA Special Representative
on Demography and Security

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REPORT

Demographic Change and Security in the OSCE Region

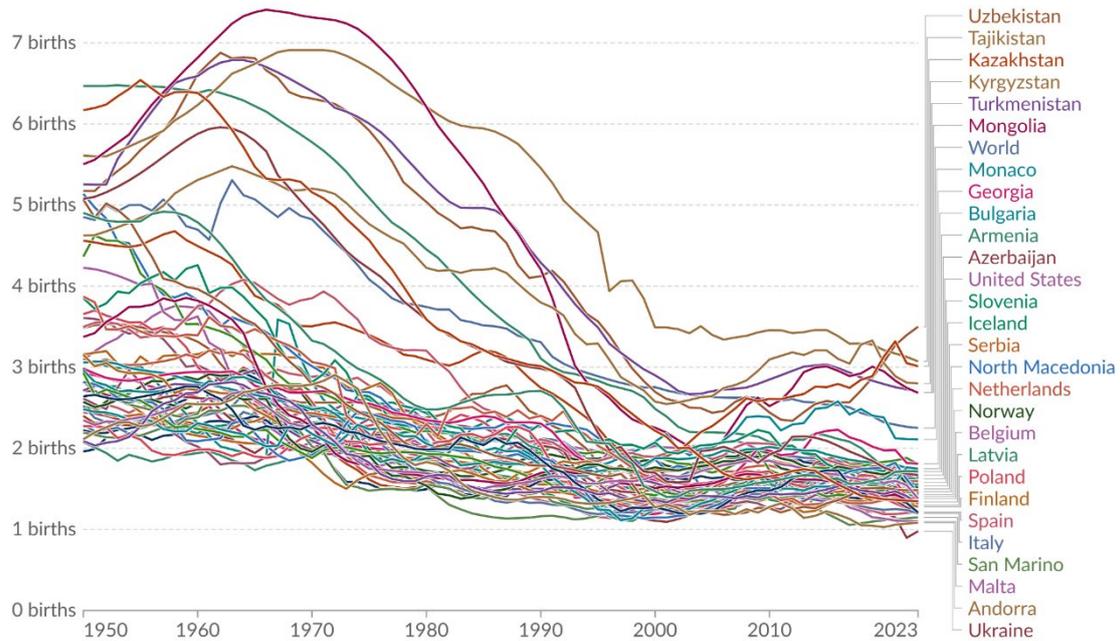
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OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Vice-President Dr. Gudrun Kugler

Fertility rate: children per woman



The fertility rate¹, expressed as the number of children per woman, is based on age-specific fertility rates in one particular year.



Data source: UN, World Population Prospects (2024)

OurWorldinData.org/fertility-rate | CC BY

1. Fertility rate: The total fertility rate is a period metric. It summarizes fertility rates across all age groups in one particular year. For a given year, the total fertility rate represents the average number of children that would be born to a hypothetical woman if she (1) lived to the end of her childbearing years, and (2) experienced the same age-specific fertility rates throughout her whole reproductive life as the age-specific fertility rates seen in that particular year. It is different from the actual average number of children that women have. The fertility rate should not be confused with biological fertility, which is about the ability of a person to conceive. [Read more: Fertility rate](#)

¹ Our World in Data (n.d.) *Fertility Rate*. Available at: <https://ourworldindata.org/fertility-rate> (Accessed 13 January 2025).

INTRODUCTION

Demographic change is a megatrend which will fundamentally alter our societies. It affects everything, and should be treated as a primary political issue: We will be witnessing the reshaping of our region's social, economic, and political landscape, impacting social structure, infrastructure, labour force, retirement, old age and health, state finances, and security - almost every aspect of life. It will break the system and "burst all seams", as German demographer Harald Michal said.²

I. THE NUMBERS

Contemporary demographic change is initially characterized by shrinking family sizes, declining child mortality, and increased life expectancy. In later stages, family sizes stabilize while childlessness rises. These trends have come with socio-economic developments, and now describe nearly all of the world's societies.

After many years of nearly continuous increases, life expectancy in the European Union saw a notable temporary decline of over half a year in 2020 and 2021, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, effectively reverting to the level observed before 2014.³ Despite this setback, the overall trend remains remarkable: between 2002 and 2019, life expectancy at birth increased by 3.7 years, from 77.6 to 81.3 years.⁴ In 2023, pre-pandemic life expectancy was surpassed in most European countries.

At the same time, in keeping with widespread trends, the OSCE region has birth rates below replacement level (2.1 children per woman), with the notable and positive exceptions of Central Asian countries, such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, with a large population of young individuals and significant human potential.⁵

Across Europe, all countries have had low fertility rates for decades, with countries such as Malta, Spain, and Italy consistently recording some of the lowest figures. Malta's rate is the lowest at 1.08. The most dramatic recent fertility rate declines in Europe have been observed

² Steinwandter, L. (2024) 'Wir haben Kipppunkte überschritten, das Land wird sich dramatisch verändern', *Corrigenda*, 26 September. Available at: <https://www.corrigenda.online/politik/harald-michel-wir-haben-kipppunkte-ueberschritten-das-land-wird-sich-dramatisch-veraendern> (Accessed 13 January 2025).

³ Eurostat (2025) *Life expectancy at birth and age-specific life expectancy by sex*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_mlexpec/default/table?lang=en&category=demo.de_mo_mor (Accessed 8 January 2025).

⁴ Eurostat (2025) *Mortality and life expectancy statistics*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Mortality_and_life_expectancy_statistics (Accessed 8 January 2025).

⁵ Our World in Data (n.d.) *Fertility Rate*. Available at: <https://ourworldindata.org/fertility-rate> (Accessed 13 January 2025).

in Southern and Nordic countries. Greece has experienced one of the steepest long-term drops, falling from 2.45 births per woman in the 1970s to approximately 1.3 by 2022. Finland has seen the sharpest recent decrease among Nordic nations, with its fertility rate dropping by about 33% between 2010 and 2020.⁶ Lithuania is grappling with a severe demographic challenge, with deaths outnumbering births by nearly two to one in 2024⁷ and in France the number of people born in 2024 was surpassed by the number of individuals, who were born in 1946 and are still alive today, meaning that there are actually more individuals alive today from the 1946 cohort than there were babies born in 2024.⁸

On March 21, 2024, *Euronews* published an article titled “Fertility rates will see ‘dramatic decline’ with 97% of countries unable to sustain populations”, which discusses research from *The Lancet* projecting significant global fertility declines. The study forecasts that by 2050, three-quarters of countries will have fertility rates below the population replacement level, rising to 97% by 2100. Globally, the total fertility rate is expected to drop from 2.23 births per woman in 2021 to 1.68 by 2050 and further to 1.57 by 2100.⁹

While some demographers have long expressed concerns, the issue is now regularly making headlines. In Germany, newspapers speak of “collapse” and in the UK we read of the “lowest birth rate in 90 years”.¹⁰ Latvians are worried that their language will die out in the foreseeable future.¹¹

The *Financial Times* published an article in January 2025 titled “Falling birth rates raise prospect of sharp decline in living standards,” highlighting concerns about declining fertility rates and their potential economic impacts.¹² Similarly, the *McKinsey Global Institute* released a report titled “Dependency and depopulation? Confronting the consequences of a new

⁶ Tilastokeskus (Statistics Finland) (n.d.) *Population Statistics: Fertility rates in Finland*. Available at: https://pxdata.stat.fi/PxWeb/pxweb/en/StatFin/StatFin_synt/statfin_synt_pxt_12dt.px/ (Accessed 22 January 2025).

⁷ Delfi (2024) Record low births reported in 2024. Available at: <https://www.delfi.lt/en/business/record-low-births-reported-in-2024-120082714> (Accessed: 12 February 2025).

⁸ INSEE (2024) *Pyramide des âges - France*. Available at: <https://www.insee.fr/fr/outil-interactif/5014911/pyramide.htm#!b=1947&c=0> (Accessed: 12 February 2025).

⁹ Euronews (2024) Fertility rates will see 'dramatic decline' with 97% of countries unable to sustain populations. *Euronews*, 21 March. Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/health/2024/03/21/global-infertility-rate-will-cause-a-dramatic-decline-in-population-in-97-of-countries-by-> (Accessed 29 January 2025).

¹⁰ Financial Times (2023) *UK birth rate hits lowest level in 90 years*. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/03a14332-3048-4bf9-88a8-d965815c34cf> (Accessed 22 January 2025).

¹¹ The Baltic Times (n.d.) *Concerns grow over the future of the Latvian language*. Available at: <https://www.baltictimes.com/news/articles/29021/> (Accessed 22 January 2025).

¹² Financial Times (2025) Falling birth rates raise prospect of sharp decline in living standards. *Financial Times*, 15 January. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/19cea1e0-4b8f-4623-bf6b-fe8af2acd3e5> (Accessed 29 January 2025).

demographic reality,” stating that falling fertility rates are propelling major economies toward population collapse in this century.¹³

The simultaneous rise in life expectancy and decline in births has led to an especially heavy shift in the composition of age groups in society, posing significant challenges. Austria exemplifies this trend: by 2042, there will be only two working people for every pensioner, compared to today’s ratio of three to one. Without major adjustments, these trends will place increasing strain on social and economic systems.¹⁴

Further, in Germany since the 1970s, the number of deaths has exceeded the number of births.¹⁵ This trend has led to an aging population and a declining workforce, posing significant challenges to the country’s social and economic structures. The persistent low fertility rate effectively means that each generation is about one-third smaller than the previous one, exacerbating the population decline.¹⁶

1. Unplanned Childlessness as a Major Factor of Demographic Change

Over the last fifty years, childlessness has risen dramatically across developed nations, while the number of children among those who do become parents has remained remarkably stable. In Japan in 1974 only 1 in 20 people were childless, while it is now on course to reach 40%. In Italy, childless was 1 in 30 in 1975, by 1990 it was 1 in 3 and today childlessness is on course to reach 40%, the same as Japan. Meanwhile in South Korea, childlessness is currently trending towards 55%, in the US, current trends show childlessness reaching over 35%, despite an increase in family size. Even France, a country which has long boasted higher fertility rates than other European countries, appears to be on the same path with all OSCE nations trending towards one third or more remaining childless.¹⁷

¹³ McKinsey Global Institute (2025) Dependency and depopulation? Confronting the consequences of a new demographic reality. *McKinsey & Company*, 15 January. Available at: <https://www.mckinsey.com/mgi/our-research/dependency-and-depopulation-confronting-the-consequences-of-a-new-demographic-reality> (Accessed 29 January 2025).

¹⁴ Statistik Austria (2024) *Zahl der Erwerbspersonen stagniert trotz Bevölkerungswachstum*. Press release, 27 November 2024. Available at: <https://www.statistik.at/fileadmin/announcement/2024/11/20241127Bevoelkerungsprognose.pdf> (Accessed 9 January 2025).

¹⁵ Federal Institute for Population Research (BIB) (n.d.) *Fact Search: Population Development*. Available at: https://www.bib.bund.de/DE/Fakten/Bevoelkerungsentwicklung/Faktensuche_formular.html?nn=1334012 (Accessed 15 January 2025).

¹⁶ Kuhnt, A., Trappe, H., & Schmid, L. (2010) Germany joins EU's 'ultra-low' fertility club. Available at: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC2914425/> (Accessed 15 January 2025).

¹⁷ Shaw, S.J. (2023) *Birthgap – Childless World* [film]. Available at: <https://www.birthgap.org/spaces/10215679/page> (Accessed 13 January 2025).

The question therefore is not: “Why do people have so few children?” but “Why do so few people have children?”

Research shows, only 32% of childless adults aged 50 and older reported they never wanted children, 25% stated they were unsure while 38% had wanted children. Around 39% say a major reason for not having children is that it simply never happened. Meanwhile, about a third cite not finding the right partner (33%) as the key reason.¹⁸ Notably, the median age of first time mothers in Spain went up from 25 in 1981 to 32 in 2021.¹⁹

Recent research demonstrates a strong link between the median age of first-time mothers and childlessness. According to researcher Stephen J. Shaw, fewer than half of women who are childless at age 30 go on to have children.²⁰ The growing demand for IVF and egg freezing — both of which have significant failure rates — along with the rise of online support groups for unplanned childlessness, highlights the profound grief that can be experienced by those affected. This grief often intensifies with age as life priorities shift.

The goal of a responsible demographic policy is not to impose childbirth on anyone, as the decision to have children is deeply personal. Instead, the focus should be on providing support for women, men, children, and families, to better enable young people to have the number of children they desire. In the OSCE region, most individuals have fewer children than they would ideally want. Therefore, it is crucial to create conditions that not only help them achieve their intended family size but also foster a greater inclination towards having children.

2. World Prospects: Overpopulation Cannot be Considered a Global Threat

One of the most popular and persistent ideas about the future of humanity is that population growth inevitably makes resources scarcer, eventually leading to a crisis of overpopulation. However, a shrinking population could be just as detrimental, leading to economic decline. The demographic shift is causing economic challenges, including labour shortages, higher dependency ratios, and potential stagnation.²¹

Global birth rates are declining even in less developed parts of the world and the fertility rate has dropped below replacement level in many regions, including East Asia, most of Latin

¹⁸ Minkin, R., Horowitz, J. M. and Aragão, C. (2024) 'Reasons adults give for not having children', Pew Research Center, 25 July. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2024/07/25/reasons-adults-give-for-not-having-children/> (Accessed 14 February 2025).

¹⁹ Macarrón, A. (2024) *¿NOS QUEDAMOS SIN NIÑOS? El suicidio demográfico actual*. [online] Logroño, 12 November. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Otnq9139OzE> (Accessed 14 January 2025).

²⁰ Shaw, S.J. (2024) *The real reason for falling birth rates*. *The Spectator*. Available at: <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-real-reason-for-falling-birth-rates/> (Accessed: 13 February 2025).

²¹ *The Economist* (2023) Global fertility has collapsed, with profound economic consequences. *The Economist*, 1 June. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2023/06/01/global-fertility-has-collapsed-with-profound-economic-consequences> (Accessed 29 January 2025).

America, South Asia, and South-East Asia.²² Even in India birth rates have fallen below replacement levels: Only five out of thirty-six states are now above replacement level,²³ with Tamil Nadu in the south, which contributes 8% of India's GDP, having a birth rate of 1.4²⁴, as low as parts of Europe. Predictions suggest that the global population could start to shrink in the coming decades. Indeed, much of the population growth over the past century has been due to declines in mortality rates (due to medical advances, improved sanitation, etc.), rather than an actual "explosion" in births.

The UNDP's "World Population Prospects" report is one of the most comprehensive and reliable sources on global population trends, including fertility rates. According to the 2022 revision of the World Population Prospects, the global fertility rate has indeed declined significantly, from about 5 children per woman in 1950 to around 2.25 children per woman in 2023. As global infant mortality is still not as low as in highly developed countries and female baby infanticide is still relatively common in countries as important as India, the world may already have reached replacement level (somewhat higher than 2.1 children per woman globally), or even have fallen slightly below it.

Additionally, the World Bank tracks global fertility rates and also consistently reports similar reductions in fertility rates worldwide.²⁵ A stark warning comes from the fact that so far no nation in history, during times of prosperity, has been known to recover from long-term low birth rates.²⁶

II. CONSEQUENCES OF DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

Demographic changes in the OSCE region, based on an aging population, declining birth rates, and migration trends, have profound and multifaceted consequences across a range of policy areas. These shifts are reshaping the region's social, economic, and political landscape, impacting social structure, infrastructure, labour force, retirement, old age and health, state finances, and security.

²² United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (n.d.) *World Population Prospects*. Available at: <https://population.un.org/wpp/> (Accessed 22 January 2025).

²³ Times of India (2022) *In 7 charts: India's fertility rate drops below replacement level*. Available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/in-7-charts-indias-fertility-rate-drops-to-2-0-according-to-latest-national-family-health-survey/articleshow/91373789.cms> (Accessed 11 Feb. 2025).

²⁴ Times of India (2023) *Tamil Nadu leads in achieving population stabilisation by 2035*. Available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/tamil-nadu-leads-in-achieving-population-stabilisation-by-2035/articleshow/111721834.cms> (Accessed 11 Feb. 2025).

²⁵ World Bank (n.d.). *Fertility rate, total (births per woman)*. Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN> (Accessed 14 January 2025).

²⁶ Tsuya, N. (2024) quoted in *Tackling Japan's Dual Crisis: How Policies, Culture and Values Can Help Stabilise the Fertility Rate and Enable Economic Development*. *Economist Impact*, p. 21. Available at: https://impact.economist.com/perspectives/sites/default/files/economist_impact_-_japan_fertility_report_2022.pdf (Accessed 14 February 2025).

Demographer Paul Morland and Economist Philip Pilkington describe a “trilemma” – a situation in which of three desirable outcomes only two can be achieved. In the context of demographic change, these are low birth rates, economic stability, and low immigration. Societies can only choose two, accepting the trade-off of the third. It is interesting to examine how societies navigate this trilemma, as each one makes complex decisions based on its own priorities and circumstances.²⁷

This is how the challenges look in each area:

1. Challenges to the Social Structure

A society without children becomes decadent and toxic, says French demographer Arsene Dumont, who spoke of a “*principe toxique*”, a self-harming individualistic civilization, already visible in the 19th century, during which France underwent a first demographic shift.²⁸ The generational chain is characterized by giving back to one’s parents for their sacrifices by paying it forward to the next generation: breaking this link, brings generations into imbalance.

Britain’s former chief rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks, famously said: “Parenthood involves massive sacrifice: of money, attention, time and emotional energy. Where today, in European culture with its consumerism and its instant gratification, where will you find space for the concept of sacrifice for the sake of generations not yet born? ... ‘Why should I have a child?’ And our culture is not giving a very easy answer to that question.”²⁹ The underlying question is therefore one of culture and of identity: Who are we as a society, where do we go, what are our goals, what do we agree on, into what do we expect immigrants to integrate themselves? And yes, currently, many of our societies are short of answers, let alone a consensual one.

- **Increasingly Aging Societies:** With a declining number of children born each year, the proportion of elderly individuals within the total population increases, along with a rise in the median age.
- **Changes in Family Dynamics:** More frequent childlessness and smaller families with no or fewer siblings change and challenge social structure. Greater emphasis will be placed on non-family support networks.
- **Social Cohesion and Intergenerational Tensions:** There may also be increased social stratification as the younger population struggles with economic insecurity, while older generations may enjoy greater economic stability. Rising tensions between

²⁷ Morland, P., & Pilkington, P. (2023) *The Demographic Trilemma*. ARC Research Paper. Retrieved from <https://www.arc-research.org/research-papers/the-demographic-trilemma> (Accessed 30 January 2025).

²⁸ Dumont, A. (1890) *Dépopulation et Civilisation*. [online] Paris: Lecrosnier et Babé. Available at: <https://books.google.at/books?hl=de&id=PwYAAAAAMAAJ> (Accessed 14 January 2025).

²⁹ Sacks, J. (2009) 'Birth rate in developed world at "historic low", says chief rabbi', *The Guardian*, 5 November. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/nov/05/birth-rate-chief-rabbi-sacks> (Accessed 14 February 2025).

younger and older citizens, and between native and immigrant populations, could become more pronounced.

- **Populism and Political Polarization:** As demographic pressures mount, especially when manifested around immigration and the distribution of resources (such as pensions and healthcare), there could be a rise in populist, nationalist, and anti-immigrant political movements. These movements often gain traction in countries where younger, economically insecure populations feel threatened by demographic shifts. Increased polarization could destabilize political systems and make it harder to implement long-term policies.
- **Electoral Gerontocracies:** As the voting influence of retired individuals expands, democracies may increasingly shift toward governance increasingly dominated by the elderly, with an ever smaller age cohort of younger voters that have their policy concerns and preferences heard.
- **End-of-Life Challenges:** As populations age, the ethical issues surrounding end-of-life care, euthanasia, and assisted suicide become more prominent. These issues could generate contentious debates.

2. Challenges as a Result of Increasing Loneliness

One side effect of an aging population is the increase of loneliness. The German federal government instituted a strategy against loneliness in 2021 which focuses amongst other things on raising public awareness, increasing knowledge about preventing and alleviating loneliness through low-threshold support services to those affected.³⁰

Britain is combatting what it calls an epidemic of loneliness, with 49.63% of adults (25.99 million people) in the UK reported feeling lonely occasionally, sometimes, often or always and approximately 7.1% of people in Great Britain (3.83 million) experiencing chronic loneliness, meaning they feel lonely “often or always” in 2022.³¹ The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in a 2023 report highlighted the pressing public health issue of social disconnection. It outlined the far-reaching negative impacts of loneliness on both physical and mental health, such as increased risks for anxiety, depression, suicide, sleep disturbances, dementia, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and stroke. It suggested that loneliness is also associated with elevated blood pressure and acute stress responses.³² Loneliness and

³⁰ Bundesregierung (2024) 'Strategie gegen Einsamkeit'. Available at: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/strategie-gegen-einsamkeit-2248862> (Accessed: 8 January 2025).

³¹ Campaign to End Loneliness (2023) 'Facts and statistics about loneliness'. Available at: <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/facts-and-statistics/> (Accessed: 16 January 2025).

³² Brown, E.G., Gallagher, S. and Creaven, A.M. (2018) 'Loneliness and acute stress reactivity: A systematic review of psychophysiological studies', *Psychophysiology*, 55(5), e13031. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/psyp.13031> (Accessed: 16 January 2025).

isolation also contribute to premature death³³ and increase the risk of early mortality by 26%³⁴. It can put people at greater risk of poorer mental health, including depression.³⁵ These issues extend beyond individual health, influencing areas like academic performance, workplace productivity, and community well-being. Additionally, 62% of lonely young people say that “feeling lonely makes them lose confidence in themselves”.³⁶

3. Challenges to Infrastructure

- **Rural Decline and Loss of Infrastructure:** As the working-age population shrinks and migrates to cities, many rural areas face population decline. This reduces tax revenues and local economic activity, while also raising the cost of providing public services like healthcare and education, electricity maintenance, supermarkets, bank offices, mail delivery, government institutions and democratic processes, in these areas. Rural decline destroys real estate values and can lead to ghost towns and villages consisting of abandoned, dilapidating houses causing their own hazards. Much of Europe’s infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, is aging and underused as younger populations move away. There is an increasing reluctance to invest in or to modernize transportation networks.
- **Urbanization:** The OSCE region’s urban population continues to grow, with younger people flocking to cities for employment opportunities. This results in pressure on urban infrastructure such as housing, transport, and social services.

4. Challenges to the Labour Force

- **Labour Shortages:** Low birth rates have led to significant labour shortages across Europe. This shortage threatens productivity, innovation, and economic growth, while exacerbating the reliance for immigration to fill gaps. Most societies attempt to compensate for labour shortages through automation or by attracting immigrants. While these strategies help to address immediate needs, they also present challenges, such as the technological displacement of jobs and the complexities of integrating

³³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2023) Social connection as a public health issue: A report of the Surgeon General. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Available at: <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf> (Accessed 14 February 2025).

³⁴ Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T.B., Baker, M., Harris, T., & Stephenson, D. (2015) Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: a meta-analytic review. *Perspectives on Psychological Science: A Journal of the Association for Psychological Science*, 10(2), pp.227–237. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691614568352> (Accessed 16 January 2025).

³⁵ NHS Digital (2021) *Health Survey for England 2021, Part 2*. Available at: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/health-survey-for-england/2021-part-2> (Accessed 16 January 2025).

³⁶ Co-op Foundation (2022) *A friend in need: The importance of friends for reducing loneliness*. Available at: <https://www.coopfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/A-Friend-in-Need-FINAL.pdf> (Accessed 16 January 2025).

immigrant populations, with challenges related to integration.

- **Rising Dependency Ratios:** While the retirement of the baby boomer generation is causing the loss of experienced workers, it also leads to a shrinking working-age population and a growing elderly demographic, causing an increase of the dependency ratio, putting pressure on the active workforce to support the growing number of retirees.
- **Declining Labour Force Participation and Innovation:** Fewer young people entering the workforce might cause a decline in innovation rates, as young people are key drivers of innovation in technology, startups, and creative industries. The pace of progress might slow down, reducing Europe's global competitiveness, especially in high-tech industries.

5. Challenges in the Area of Migration

Some argue that immigration is the way to protect economies from labour shortages. Immigration can provide workers and offer some relief, but the relief is only temporary and comes with complex, unintended consequences. The challenges to integration of people from foreign cultures are manifold and widely known - including difficulty maintaining social cohesion and trust within the community, with further possible dangers in the form of extremism and anti-Semitism, and rising crime such as gender-based violence. Besides, migration does not solve the demographic problem in the long run: It is an often-overlooked reality that immigrants also age and will eventually require support. This means that the number of older people in society does not decrease in the long run (as it may in lower-immigration nations like Japan and Hungary). This creates a perpetual need for exponential, unsustainable growth in the number of new immigrants simply to maintain a short-term effect on the age structure of a population.

With birth rates already below replacement level in countries such as India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and much of Southeast Asia, and with Africa trending in the same direction, the pool of potential migrants will also shrink. Moreover, as these regions continue to grow wealthier, the appeal of moving to more developed countries will diminish. Eventually, nations will run out of potential immigrants to sustain their aging economies and will be forced to confront their low birth rates directly.

Additionally, there are ethical concerns about encouraging migration from aging societies—already evident in parts of India and Latin America—which will likely become a global issue in the near future. Brain drain undermines the development of countries of origin, depriving them of home-grown talent and amounting to lost investments in human capital (education, training, etc.). Such harm often overshadows the potential benefits of remittances. We need to keep in mind that continuous brain drain of the best educated people in a developing nation will impede their further development and exert social pressure, often resulting in family separation with no care and intergenerational solidarity for the elderly that are staying behind in the country of origin.

Over the past decades, we have strived to build a more egalitarian society. However, the emergence of a permanent underclass of blue-collar immigrant workers with limited social mobility risks creating a new form of inequality. When demographic change fosters mass migration, it could heighten social divisions of the past, where multiple generations were denied fair opportunities and the chance for upward mobility.

A secure, self-sustaining, and resilient society must cultivate the skills and abilities of its own population to meet needs, particularly for essential sectors.

6. Challenges to Retirement and Old Age

- **Pension System Strain:** As the elderly population increases, Europe's pension systems, particularly those based on pay-as-you-go models, are coming under pressure. With fewer working persons contributing to the system, governments face the challenge of ensuring that pension benefits remain sustainable while maintaining economic stability.
- **Raising Retirement Age:** Many European countries are raising the retirement age to compensate for longer life expectancy and the shrinking workforce. However, this can be politically contentious, especially among older workers or those in physically demanding jobs.
- **Different Nature of Retirement:** As life expectancy increases, people may spend more years in retirement. This creates the need for new retirement models, based on the need to save more for retirement or work longer. Some countries have already introduced policies to encourage "active aging," where older citizens continue to work or volunteer. From a medical perspective, longevity becomes a new goal.

7. Challenges to the Health Sector

The retirement of baby boomers over the next decade will intensify three healthcare challenges: rising demand for services, workforce shortages, and a shrinking financial base. Older adults, who make up 25% of the population but account for 50% of healthcare costs, require frequent and costly treatments, often for chronic conditions. In Spain, in 2011, 80% of all pharmaceutical expenses were made by people aged 65 or more, who were 17% of the population then.³⁷ In Austria, the age group 0-60 years averages 12 contacts with the health system per year. In the age group above 60 years, this increases to 27 contacts.³⁸ Nordic countries, with, on average, five more "healthy life years," highlight the potential of

³⁷ Macarron Larumbe, A. (2017) *Demographic Suicide in the West and Half the World: Either More Births or Catastrophe?* 1st edn. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, p. 100.

³⁸ Österreichisches Parlament (2025) *Expertenforum „Österreich wird älter – Auswirkungen der Demographie auf das Gesundheits- und Pflegesystem“* Transkript, p.30. Available at: https://www.parlament.gv.at/dokument/XXVIII/VER/1/fname_1659007.pdf (Accessed 9 January 2025).

prevention and education to reduce healthcare burdens.³⁹ Workforce shortages are pressing, with a shortage of caregivers, and medical staff retiring: 33% of Austrian doctors are expected to retire within the next decade, which will cause particular difficulties in rural areas.

Austria exemplifies the growing pressures on long-term care, with demand for these services projected to increase by 57% by 2050. At the same time, many already now advocate for higher quality care. Meeting these demands will require not only a significant expansion of the health system, specifically nursing personnel, but also a concentrated effort to improve health in old age to alleviate the strains on our care systems.

Several key factors influence the future of long-term care. Health in old age plays a critical role, emphasizing the need for preventative measures to reduce care burdens. Family dynamics also present challenges, as declining birth rates, delayed parenthood, and greater distances between family members complicate caregiving. Two-thirds of long-term care staff express doubts about their ability to remain in their jobs until retirement.⁴⁰ In addition, non-competitive wages, heavy workloads, and excessive administrative tasks, as well as language barriers and differing professional standards make it difficult to hire personnel from abroad.

- **Healthcare Demand:** An aging population translates into increased demand for healthcare services, particularly in geriatric care, chronic illness management, and end-of-life care. European healthcare systems, often already under strain, are finding it difficult to keep up with this rising demand and its costs.
- **Workforce Shortages in Healthcare:** The healthcare sector is also facing labour shortages, as there are fewer young people entering medical professions and an aging healthcare workforce. Many doctors and nurses are approaching retirement age, creating a gap in skilled labour. In addition, the recruitment of healthcare workers from developing countries often results in a depletion of the workforce in those nations, leaving them with fewer medical professionals and a diminished capacity to care for their populations. This is particularly concerning for elderly patients, who are already facing long waiting lists for treatment.
- **Health Inequality:** As public healthcare systems are stretched, there may be rising health inequalities, especially in poorer regions, where the elderly may have limited access to high-quality care.

³⁹ OECD/European Commission (2024) *Health at a Glance: Europe 2024: State of Health in the EU Cycle*. Paris: OECD Publishing, p. 97. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1787/b3704e14-en> (Accessed 14 February 2025).

⁴⁰ Österreichisches Parlament (2025) *Expertenforum „Österreich wird älter – Auswirkungen der Demographie auf das Gesundheits- und Pflegesystem“* Transkript, p.22. Available at: https://www.parlament.gv.at/dokument/XXVIII/VER/1/fname_1659007.pdf (Accessed 9 January 2025).

8. Challenges to State Finances

- **Fiscal Stress:** The combination of rising pension costs, increased healthcare spending, and declining tax revenues due to a shrinking workforce is placing a significant strain on European state finances. Governments may face growing deficits, leading to fiscal austerity measures or the need for tax increases.
- **Policy Responses:** In response to these challenges, European governments may need to adjust policies related to taxation, welfare, and labour markets. This could include increasing taxes on consumption, raising retirement ages, reducing public spending in other areas, or reforming pension systems.
- **Debt Levels:** To finance the increasing demand for social services, some countries may need to take on more debt. High debt levels, however, could lead to credit rating downgrades, higher borrowing costs, and long-term economic instability.

9. Challenges to Security

- **Youth Emigration:** In some regions, particularly in Southern and Eastern Europe, young people are increasingly emigrating in search of better economic opportunities. This brain drain is depleting these regions of their most educated and skilled workers, which can further stagnate local economies and reduce opportunities for those left behind. The social fabric of these regions could be altered significantly, with fewer young people to sustain local cultures and communities, thereby destabilizing the countries of origin.
- **Immigration Challenges:** Immigration is often marked by challenges related to integrating large numbers of migrants, particularly when the countries of origin and destination are culturally distant from each other. Potential risks can include cultural clashes and strongly differing values, large educational disparities, as well as high unemployment, and strain on social services. Partially, there has been a noticeable rise in extremism, including anti-Semitism, certain forms of crime, such as gender-based violence, and terrorist threats. Additionally, political polarization and broadly differing visions create tensions, making it difficult to find a unified approach to managing immigration and asylum seekers.
- **Challenges to Democracy:** Dramatic demographic changes could harm democracy: thinly populated areas might not be able to keep up the rule of law, or provide for the last remaining citizens the possibility to vote within proximity. It is therefore necessary to foresee, evaluate and find new ways in order to uphold democratic standards.
- **Shifts in Global Power:** Europe's declining and aging population could weaken its relative global competitiveness, especially in comparison to younger, faster-growing populations in regions like Africa and Asia. This could lead to a shift in geopolitical

dynamics, as Europe's demographic decline may reduce its strategic importance in global affairs.

Without people, things don't make sense.

The demographic crisis was predictable already in the 1970s, but largely ignored. Now, it has become apparent to all and a key topic of our time. Some unfolding changes in the social fabric are irreversible, and we must find ways of adaptation. Some things can be improved, for which we must therefore look into good practices and creative new ways. This might require quite some political courage.

We can build highways, buildings and factories, but they mean nothing without people. Demographic recession is worse than economic recession. Therefore, taking demographic change seriously must be an absolute priority. The situation is too worrisome as to think only about the short span of a legislative period. Necessary long-term measures must be prioritized before short-term wins and re-election concerns.

III. SOLUTIONS

Of all things in the world, people are the most precious, and we need more of them—more children. This seemingly simple objective, however, requires a concerted effort across society, from all stakeholders, including policymakers, to create the most favourable conditions for having children.

Demographic change in the OSCE region presents a complex set of challenges across multiple policy areas, requiring integrated, long-term strategies to ensure economic and social stability and security. Any policy response to demographic trends must be crafted with respect for the distinct culture, identity, sensibilities and development context of a country in order to be effective.

Active population aging, recovering birth rates and family stability, must be integrated into all policymaking processes, ensuring a holistic approach to societal development.

Addressing the challenges of an aging population requires a multifaceted approach that draws on a range of strategies. One key priority is to reduce childlessness and encourage higher fertility rates while adaptation to the changes is essential to safeguard pension, welfare and infrastructure as well as to sustain productivity and economic stability with a smaller future workforce.

As members of parliament, we are in the driver's seat of accompanying change as positively as possible. We must seek to analyse problems without ideological blinds. In particular, this existential challenge must be kept out of political bickering: our well-being in the medium term, and our prosperity in the long term, are at stake. We must seek to find solutions outside worn out paths and communicate openly about all of this with the people we represent.

In the following, there are multiple pathways for consideration:

1. Researching the Demographic Crisis

Academia has hardly taken up the demographic crisis. Therefore, neither awareness of the problem nor answers have been sufficiently developed. The study of demographic developments, academic and governmental, counter- and adaptation measures is key.

While data on birth rates is readily available, data on the ratio of young to older people and on childlessness, such as barriers to parenthood and the gap between couples' desired and actual fertility rates are less available and publicly known. Which personal choices might be more likely to lead to childlessness should be researched and be part of educational curricula.

Growing unplanned childlessness is a major issue. Besides medical remedies, research into the causes of infertility is indispensable and must be fostered.

2. Increasing the Birth Rate and Reducing Unplanned Childlessness through Cultural and Societal Shifts Towards Family Support

Participating states will have to acknowledge the situation and commit to increasing the birth rate. Decision-makers, influencers, politicians, key figures in academia, media and finance need to fully understand the dangers of ultra-low fertility rates and join efforts to increase the birth rate across the population.

- **Cultivating a Family-Friendly Society:** A broad cultural transformation is needed to create an environment that supports family formation and its stability over time, child-rearing, and work-life balance. This includes fostering positive attitudes towards parenthood, marriage, and family life, emphasizing the value of stability in family structures. Efforts should also aim to restore societal prestige and recognition for the roles of both mothers and fathers. Fostering such an environment requires a collaborative effort across all sectors of society. The issue of demographic change cannot be solved through government policy alone. Civil society, including communities, businesses, and local organizations, must be actively involved in supporting families and encouraging family-friendly practices across society. This collective approach can create a more supportive environment for child-rearing and family life.
- **Raising Awareness About the Dangers of Delayed Parenthood:** Increasingly, individuals are delaying childbearing until much later in life, which has significant implications for fertility. Parenthood and the timing of parenthood is a personal choice that needs to be respected. However, awareness of the fact that advanced parental age is associated with higher risks of infertility, complicated pregnancies, and increased rates of miscarriage, all of which can discourage additional births, is important. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that considers the medical, social, and economic factors influencing the timing of parenthood.
- **Strengthening Marriage Stability:** Research indicates that stable marriages are more likely to result in larger families, less poverty, children with higher educational

achievements and substantially fewer mental health problems.⁴¹ Policies and programmes that promote and support marriage stability and family cohesion contribute to higher birth rates and provide a more secure environment for raising children. Conversely, policies should focus on tackling societal and economic factors contributing to high divorce rates and unstable family structures, as these can undermine childbearing incentives.

- **Promoting Recognition of Parenting:** It is important to recognize and support both fathers and mothers in their caregiving roles, without undermining the significance of either. Public perceptions and social policies should avoid stigmatizing stay-at-home parents and should work towards increasing the social prestige of having children, family life and parental involvement.
- **Implementing Financial Measures to Support Families:** Financial long-term measures are a necessary component to support families in their financial pressures. To that end, family-friendly measures should be a consensus beyond political ideologies and enjoy cross-party support, such as creating family and child-friendly taxation, family-friendly incentives, family-friendly affordable housing, family and child-friendly TV content, family-friendly curricula in schools, affordable high quality child care, etc. Financial incentives for families could include direct tax benefits, pension bonuses for parents, and reductions in the costs of child-rearing (e.g., lower VAT on baby products). A comprehensive, equitable approach is essential to ensure that both parents are able to participate fully in child-rearing and family life. Governments should identify and address the legal, economic, and social barriers to parenthood that exist within current systems. These may include tax laws, employment regulations, and social policies that create disincentives for individuals or couples to have children. The third child embodies population growth: some countries offer special subsidies for the third child. It has also been shown that ownership of personal housing leads to decisions in favour of having more children. Therefore it is meaningful to support young families towards private ownership.
- **Promoting Child-Accustomed Popular Culture:** Making people accustomed to having children by showing life with children in popular culture: Where children are perceived, it is easier to have children, which is accurately described as contagious fertility. German sociologist Harald Michel said: “We are not child-hostile, but we are child-deprived”.⁴²
- **Designing Supportive Policies to Encourage Childbearing:** Policies should be designed to promote childbearing as a key factor in addressing demographic challenges. This

⁴¹ Institute for Family Studies (2021) *Families matter to kids' mental health*. Available at: <https://ifstudies.org/blog/families-matter-to-kids-mental-health> (Accessed 22 January 2025).

⁴² Steinwandter, L. (2024) ‘Wir haben Kipppunkte überschritten, das Land wird sich dramatisch verändern’, *Corrigenda*, 26 September. Available at: <https://www.corrigenda.online/politik/harald-michel-wir-haben-kipppunkte-ueberschritten-das-land-wird-sich-dramatisch-veraendern> (Accessed 13 January 2025).

includes providing young people with information on the decline of fertility with age, supporting young adults in their transition to parenthood through education, providing financial assistance, enabling raising children while being at university, as well as addressing the challenges of balancing family life with education and career aspirations. Overlong education paths should be revisited.

- **Facilitating and Streamlining Adoption:** Efforts should focus on facilitating the adoption of unwanted children and providing better support for mothers who choose to carry their pregnancies to term. Adoption processes should be streamlined to reduce barriers and ensure that children are placed in stable, supportive homes.
- **Leveraging Religious Values:** Religion plays a significant role in family values, and research shows that people with faith adherences tend to have higher birth rates. A balanced approach that respects religious beliefs and supports family life can help create a more inclusive society. Governments must recognize the positive impact that religious institutions can have on family stability and uphold freedom of religion.

3. Active Aging

Aging is a dynamic and malleable process, meaning that physical and mental activity can significantly enhance well-being in later life. Concepts such as “successful aging” emphasize the importance of maintaining health, cognitive function, and social connections as key factors for a fulfilling old age. Education also plays a vital role, positively influencing the aging process and delaying the onset of age-related conditions such as dementia.

To support this, “age-friendly” environments that encourage the participation of older adults and provide them with opportunities to take on active roles should be created.

Indeed, the UN has launched the global initiative “UN Decade of Healthy Ageing” which is aimed at improving the lives of older individuals by promoting healthy aging and addressing the challenges that come with it. The initiative focuses on four key areas: changing attitudes towards aging, creating age-friendly environments, ensuring access to health and social care, and improving the quality of life for older people. Healthy aging is crucial as it enables individuals to live longer and more productive lives, maintaining independence and well-being as they age.⁴³ Aging should not be viewed as a passive stage of life but as a period that can be actively shaped and filled with meaning.

4. Sustaining Old-Age and Health Infrastructure

As populations age, strengthening the infrastructure for old-age care and health services is crucial. Proactive measures, such as forecasting demand, securing funding, and investing in

⁴³ United Nations (2023) *UN Decade of Healthy Ageing*. Available at: <https://www.decadeofhealthyageing.org/> (Accessed 29 January 2025).

preventive healthcare and digital tools, are essential to creating a sustainable system that promotes independence and enhances quality of life for older generations.

- **Ensure Accurate Demand Forecasting:** National demand forecasts for care should be created and regularly updated. Sufficient places of cared-for-living must be established on the basis of projections.
- **Proactively Adjust Budgets:** Budget adjustments should be made proactively to account for rising care costs, rather than delaying action until the situation becomes critical.
- **Promote Choice and Diversity in Long-Term Care:** In the area of inpatient long-term care, a mix of public, private and of public, private and non-profit operators works well for example in Austria. As much as possible, the freedom of choice for citizens (in this case those in need of care) to choose their preferred form and organisation of care should be guaranteed.
- **Invest in Digital Solutions:** Investment in telemedicine, and digital health could help to manage the demand for healthcare services also in rural areas.
- **Enhance Nursing Professions:** Nursing professions must be made more attractive by improving working conditions, reducing paperwork, and implementing family-friendly work models. Shortened training programmes and dual education for caring occupations should be considered.
- **Foster Innovation in Nursing and Caregiving:** Innovative work concepts in the nursing and caregiving sectors are necessary to enhance job sustainability and improve the quality of care services. Better coordination, structural reforms, and leveraging of digital tools, including administrative simplification of medication management in long-term care is certainly useful.
- **Promote Digitalisation and AI in the Care Sector:** A funding system should be developed which promotes and ensures innovation in the digitalisation of long-term care. The focus should be on reducing administrative efforts.
- **Promote Preventive Health Policies for Sustainable Aging:** Looking into good practices with regard to promoting longevity to help people live healthier in old age will certainly be meaningful. In consideration of the growing health and economic unsustainability of current healthcare systems, promoting health policies based on prevention and longevity is essential. The adoption of such prevention systems will allow a healthy aging society, greater social cohesion and new business opportunities. Increasing health investments to prevent age-related health deterioration is equally important, as it can help maintain independence for longer.

5. Securing Pension and Welfare Systems

The natural consequence of a shrinking labour force is the shrinking of the ratio of workers to retirees. This might lead to higher taxes for workers and a poorer elderly population. But how much burden is tolerable to the taxpayers? For governments, the Laffer curve illustrates that increasing tax rates, beyond a certain threshold, will result in decreased total tax revenue.

How can pension systems be reformed to accommodate the new ratio? Answers cut deeply and painfully into the heart of societies and politics and should be discussed openly:

- Can we increase retirement age? Given the significant increase in healthy life expectancy over the past 50 to 70 years, driven by slower physical aging processes that continue to decelerate, it is a logical step to consider delaying the retirement age.
- What is the future of pay-as-you-go social insurance systems? Do we need to incentivize private pension systems?
- Can AI help us to increase productivity? Aware of the challenges this will bring, changes are needed to adapt to demographic changes, and AI will cause upon us a complete reorganisation of professional processes. Could a strategic combination of these two even prove beneficial?
- In what form will we have to overhaul our tax systems to ensure we can cope with the changing demographic structure financially? Tax rates, such as personal income tax and social security contributions, could be adjusted in proportion to the number of children a taxpayer has, as the costs associated with raising children represent a contribution to all of society.

6. Upholding the Dignity of Each Person Within an Aging Population

Resist the temptation and attempts to promote suicide and other forms of hastened death in order for society to stay humane and appreciative of human life, and to prevent any form of pressure exerted on the older generation.

Sometimes, when people die without leaving behind any relatives, they are disposed of in anonymous mass graves, which prompted a staffer in Germany to say: “We are throwing the bodies away.”⁴⁴ A religious group founded a funeral fraternity to pay respects to the deceased. It is important that we keep up high ethical standards, and uphold the dignity of each person, also while we go through a demographic transition.

⁴⁴ Shaw, S.J. (2023) *Birthgap – Childless World* [film]. Available at: <https://www.birthgap.org/spaces/10215679/page> (Accessed 13 January 2025).

7. Tackling Loneliness

As legislators, we are committed to taking comprehensive action to address the issue of loneliness.

The UK first instituted a loneliness ministry in 2021, hosting Loneliness Awareness Week, with funds for charities and organisations tackling loneliness in their communities, launching a Tackling Loneliness Network, offering a loneliness advice chatbot service, and launching a social media campaign. The government urged everyone to check in with a neighbour and keep in touch with friends, family and neighbours, re-join groups that might not have met for some time, and think about how you can welcome others back, especially people not feeling very confident, and increase volunteering with local groups or by offering a regular conversation to someone feeling isolated.⁴⁵

The LONELY-EU project is an international initiative led by Ruhr University Bochum to research and combat loneliness in Europe. Funded by the European Commission with EUR 3 million over three years, it aims to analyse existing data, identify factors contributing to social isolation, and develop recommendations against loneliness. The project involves multiple European institutions and focuses on creating a network for collaboration and a system to monitor loneliness across the EU. Ultimately, LONELY-EU seeks to provide politicians with effective strategies to prevent and reduce loneliness.

Another project focuses on engaging in activities in nature, in order to reduce the feeling of loneliness. The RECETAS project is funded by the EU Horizon 2020 program with EUR 5 million. Its aim is to explore whether the medical prescription by a doctor to do social activities in nature can reduce loneliness and improve the life quality of people living in urban areas. This is called “nature-based social prescribing”. By now, this practice has been tested in Canada by over 2.500 doctors who are prescribing activities in more than 80 national parks, to fight the feeling of loneliness. The RECETAS Project currently takes place in Melbourne, Helsinki, Prague, Marseille, Barcelona and Cuenca.

8. Accompanying the Depopulation Process in Affected Areas

Most countries in the OSCE region have areas which are endangered by or already undergoing depopulation. Accompanying depopulation in rural areas requires a balanced approach of adaptation and strategic abandonment to maintain quality of life while reducing inefficiencies. Key steps should include:

- **Long-term Planning:** Prioritize investment in regions with potential for growth. Gradually phase out services in less viable areas, ensuring minimal disruption while

⁴⁵ Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) (2023) *Loneliness Minister: It's more important than ever to take action*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/loneliness-minister-its-more-important-than-ever-to-take-action> (Accessed 16 January 2025).

preparing for future shifts in population dynamics, in a planned closing down. Prepare for growing inequalities between rural life and city life.

- **Organized Relocation and Consolidation:** In areas with severe population decline, encourage the consolidation of communities by helping people move to more viable areas.
- **Consolidating Infrastructure:** Focus on maintaining essential services in strategic locations rather than trying to keep all facilities open. This includes healthcare, schools, and transport links, which could be shared among nearby villages to ensure access while reducing costs.
- **Smart Village Initiatives:** Invest in digital infrastructure to foster remote work, telemedicine, and e-learning. This can help retain young people and attract newcomers while maintaining rural livelihoods.
- **Rural Revitalization Projects:** Encourage sustainable farming, eco-tourism, and local businesses to diversify the economy.
- **Community Building:** In each rural community, community building, local cooperation, community cohesion and relations should be actively encouraged and fostered.

This strategy ensures sustainable living conditions while optimizing resources across rural Europe and the OSCE region.

9. Safeguarding Security in the OSCE Region

Governments should avoid relying on mass migration as the primary solution to labour shortages, as this can contribute to brain drain, destabilization in countries of origin, integration challenges, and the emergence of new inequalities and social tensions in recipient societies. Instead, a balanced approach that prioritizes sustainable workforce development and targeted immigration policies is essential.

- **Preventing Uncontrolled Mass Immigration:** A controlled immigration system that targets professions facing labour shortages is essential for economic stability and social integration. Instead of uncontrolled mass migration, the focus should be on selectively attracting skilled workers who can fill critical positions and contribute positively to society.
- **Fostering Integration:** Immigrants should be guided toward integration into the host society by learning the language and adapting to shared social and cultural norms.
- **Upholding Zero Tolerance for Extremism:** Zero tolerance for religious extremism, antisemitism, gender-based crimes, and for the glorification of or affiliation with terrorist organizations must be a fundamental principle.

- **Strengthening the OSCE Region's Role:** Ensure the continued relevance of the OSCE region through active participation in international dialogue, maintaining economic competitiveness, and effectively responding to shifts in geopolitical power dynamics.
- **Adapting the Voting System to Depopulated Rural Areas:** Implement reforms in voting processes to safeguard democratic participation, particularly in depopulated rural areas.

CONCLUSION

The human spirit is innovative and has proven in history that challenges can be overcome. Countless times, people have transformed doom and difficulties into opportunities and we have made the world a better place. We stumbled - but we stumbled uphill!

My report aims at inspiring us parliamentarians to take demographic change seriously and together find the best answers to this crisis. With this, I hope to encourage awareness, discussion and action and I commit to support all of my colleagues as we seek to take the necessary steps in our countries and the OSCE region.