CHAPTER 2

POPULATION OF EUROPE – FROM A HUNGARIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Population-related questions, such as the population composition of a country, have been a concern for community leaders, professionals, and experts since the beginning of the formation of early societies. Over the last centuries, sociologists and demographers have conducted countless studies to identify the driving forces behind population trends, employing, for example, theories of demographic transitions and economics. At the regional level, the demographic situation is both specific and general, although there are marked differences not only between continents but also between countries within a continent. This is also the case in Europe. In general, we can see a strong and specific migration trend, with declining birth rates and total fertility rates. However, in some European countries, such as Hungary, the demographic picture over the last decade has differed from the overall population trends on the continent: fertility has risen, marriage rates are experiencing a renaissance, and migration has not been the solution to population issues.

According to various United Nations estimates, Europe's population is expected to decline in the coming decades. The consequences of this are somewhat noticeable today, and in those countries where they are felt, various policies are already being put in place to tackle – or try to 'cure' – this specific demographic 'disease'. Since 2010, Hungary has been pursuing a pro-natalist and pro-family 'national medicine' policy, which uses measures to promote the well-being of families. This policy focuses on the family as the most important community, marriage as the most stable form of relationship, and respect for tradition and life. By building on internal resources, sustainability can be ensured in the national population of a country while preserving its economic, cultural, environmental, and value traditions.

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1. Introduction

Europe's demographic situation in recent years has been described as a 'demographic winter'.[1] In 2022, the population of the European continent was 745 million, representing 10% of the total world population.[2] In 1950, the population was 550 million; thus, there was an increase of only 35%. This was the smallest increase among all the continents. By 2100, Europe's population is projected to fall to 586 million people, reducing the continent's share of the world population from 10% to less than 6%.[3] Consequently, we face an ageing and declining population in the 'old continent'.[4] In addition, the birth rate and fertility rate, which determine population growth, in the European Union (EU) are well below the population replacement level. Europe's fertility rate fell from 2.77 in 1950 to 1.53 in 2021, and none of the EU Member States currently reaches the 2.1 level that is needed for population reproduction. As a result, projections indicate that population trends will show a continued downward trajectory in the long term. However, the EU's population is still rising and is predicted to continue to do so for decades to come, despite the continuing decline in fertility. This increase in population is not, therefore, a result of organic domestic growth but of additional population inflow from international migration.

Decades earlier, Hungarian-born demographer Pál Demény drew the attention of population policy-makers to the fact that Europe's demographic problem cannot be solved by immigration.[5] While immigration can increase fertility in the short to medium term, it can and does transform the cultural and ethnic composition of the host society if a significant number of immigrants arrive relative to the size of the host society.[6] We agree with Professor Demény that migration is not a good solution to maintain a sustainable population; on the contrary, building on the resources of Europe's own (national) populations is the only viable long-term method of maintaining European society and its economy, culture, values, and environment.

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1 Dumont et al., 1986, p. 21

2 United Nations, 2022.

3 HCSO, n.d.

4 '… according to Eurostat population data, in 1960 there were on average three young people (0–14 years old) for every old person (65 years old or over), while in 2060 it is projected that there will be two old people for every young person.' See: Molnár and Fűrész, 2023, p. 37; Population projections, n.d.

5 Demény, 1986, pp. 335–358; Demény, 1988, pp. 451–479.

6 Demény, 2011, pp. 249–274.

2. World demographics

The world population reached 1 billion in 1800, rising to 8 billion over the last two centuries. Based on different scenarios, United Nations (UN) projections estimate a 95% probability that the world's population will rise to between 8.9 and 12.4 billion by 2100.

Around two centuries ago, economic and medical progress led to a sharp decline in mortality, particularly infant mortality, in developed countries. At the same time, the number of children born remained at the same level as before because these societies were unable to adapt sufficiently quickly to the new demographic situation. During the Age of Enlightenment, a relatively significant reduction in the ideal family size and number of children was observed owing to factors such as a shift away from religion and the significant increase in the cost of children's education. Nevertheless, economic and medical progress continued, which further reduced mortality rates. Consequently, population numbers have continued to rise.[7]

Among the theories of population, the first demographic transition[8] stands out. This transition has already taken place in developed countries but has not yet been completed in much of the world, which explains the ongoing rise in the world population. Meanwhile, the second demographic transition[9] defines population trends in the developed world from the 1950s to the 1960s in light of the weakening of normative constraints: access to contraceptives fundamentally changed sexual relationships and broke the link between marriage and childbearing, placing relationship instability at the centre of population issues. This change has delayed marriage – or even caused individuals to sidestep it altogether – and childbearing, and increased childlessness, cohabitation outside marriage, and, ultimately, instability among couples.

In 2021, the world population was 7.91 billion, compared to 7.07 billion in 2011.[10] The EU population in 2021 was 447 million, just 5.7% of the world population, compared to 6.2% in 2011. In 2021, two countries in the world had more people than the total population of the 27 EU Member States: China (1.426 billion; 18.0% of the world's total population) and India (1.403 billion; 17.8%). The UN estimated that India would be the most populous country in the world by 2023.[11] The EU is followed by the United States (337 million; 4.3% of the world's population) and Indonesia (274 million; 3.5%) as the next most populous countries. As of 2021, 10 more countries had a population above 100 million, including Pakistan, Brazil, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Russia, Mexico, Japan, Ethiopia, the Philippines, and Egypt.

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7 Pison, 2022, pp. 1–4.
8 Thompson, 1929, pp. 959–975.
9 van de Kaa, 1987, pp. 1–59.
10 United Nations, 2022.
11 United Nations, 2023

Together, the EU and the 14 most populous countries accounted for 69% of the world's population in 2021, down from 70.6% in 2011. The fastest population growth in this decade occurred in two African countries: Ethiopia (31%) and Nigeria (29%). Japan was the only one of the world's largest countries where the population decreased between 2011 and 2021 (-2.7%).[12]

In terms of regional disparities in the less developed world, over the past decades, large parts of Asia and Latin America have experienced an unexpected and rapid decline in fertility, with India (2.03), Iran (1.69), Brazil (1.64), Thailand (1.33) and China (1.16), among others, now having fertility rates below replacement levels.

The core area of population growth in the 21st century is Africa, specifically the sub-Saharan region of the African continent, which begins from the border strip formed by Senegal, Nigeria, and Ethiopia. This is because African countries are still at an earlier stage of demographic transition but have made significant improvements in mortality, that is, an increase in life expectancy, over the past decades, whereas fertility, although declining, is still high at above 2.1 children per woman. As a result, 'Black Africa's' share of the world population is expected to reach one-fifth by 2050'.[13] However, fertility rates are expected to fall below 2.1 thereafter, despite the fact that for a long time, the fertility trend in the developing world has not followed the global pattern.[14]

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3. The demographic situation in Europe

In the first decade of the 21st century, Europe was polarised in terms of fertility rates. Northern and Western countries moved upwards towards a fertility rate of 1.9, while Central, Southern, and Eastern European countries moved downwards towards a rate of around 1.3. Research[15] in 2004 examined the variance of the values for the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) 3 regions from the national average by total fertility rate (TFR). The research findings confirmed that there was a relatively strong spatial effect in fertility, so that in many cases country borders were less important than macro-regional cohesion: the character of a country was more pronounced in the spatial structure of fertility rates than differences between neighbouring regions. For example, the NUTS 3 regions in the eastern German province of Brandenburg had above-average fertility, whereas the NUTS 3 regions in the neighbouring western Polish province of Lubuskie had below-average fertility compared to the rate in the rest of the country,

12 United Nations, 2022.
13 Héran, 2018, pp. 1–4.
14 Reher, 2004, pp. 19–41.
15 Campisi et al., 2020, pp. 1–31.

regardless of having similar levels of TFR relative to each other. Thus, in addition to economic and socio-cultural factors, spatiality also plays a significant role in fertility studies.

3.1. Trends in fertility and live births

In recent years, population growth in the EU has relatively slowed compared to previous decades.[16] The underlying cause of population decline is a TFR below 2.1: when the fertility rate of a population falls below the reproductive threshold, natural decline starts within an average of 40 years, using current mortality rates and excluding migration.[17]

In the future, the European Union's relative demographic weight at the international level will decrease significantly. Its population will decline, albeit in different ways in different states. The financial crisis of 2008–2009 exacerbated the problem as some Member States significantly reduced their budgetary spending on demographic policies, including family policy. It is clear that the EU Member States have long been burying their heads in the sand regarding demographic issues. As far back as the 1970s, Gérard-François Dumont coined the phrase 'a wrinkled Europe'. According to Évelyne Sullerot's 2003 speech, the biggest problem is that governments often see fertility as a private matter for couples, independent of the social context, as if policy incentives have no relation to individual choices.[18]

All childbearing, in all cultures, requires time and resources that are invested into raising children. Consequently, it seems paradoxical that the richest countries in the world, where incomes are the highest, have the fewest children. Indeed, even in the richest countries, typically the best-educated women – presumably with the best income prospects – have the fewest children. A recent study[19] examined the relationship between income and fertility, finding that among Swedish women and men born between 1940 and 1970, those with the lowest average fertility rates at the age of 50 were those who were born in 1940 and who had the highest accumulated net own income (including transfers and benefits). However, this pattern changed in subsequent cohorts. Among women born in 1950, who were already beneficiaries of the extended Swedish welfare state, there was less of a negative relationship between net accumulated income and fertility. For women born in 1960, there was a clear positive relationship between net accumulated income and fertility. The study found that when generous benefits are provided by the state, such as income support during parental leave and childcare allowances, the fertility of women with high incomes (and not just men with high incomes) is higher than that of women and men with low incomes.

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16 Eurostat, 2022b.
17 Berde and Drabancz, 2022.
18 Verluise, 2011.
19 Kolk, 2022, pp. 197–215.

3.2. Childbearing indicators: average age of mothers and total fertility rate

One study observed a fertility gap between the children planned and those actually born in European countries, noting that, on average, fewer children were conceived in the birth cohort than previously expected and more of them remained childless than originally planned.[20] The largest differences in fertility were observed in Southern European countries (Italy, Greece, and Spain record only 0.6 children per woman). Both childbearing intentions and actual childlessness are particularly low in Central and Eastern European countries. One of the study's clearest findings is that the highest rates of childlessness among highly educated women (18–26%) are found in German-speaking countries (Austria, Germany, Switzerland) and Southern European countries (Italy, Spain). Highly educated women are more likely to value work than their less-educated counterparts but are less likely to want to remain childless or have fewer children than women with a lower degree of education. Nevertheless, they demonstrate the highest fertility gap and the highest level of childlessness in almost all countries. Consequently, among policies that focus on the needs of women with higher education, support for reconciling work and family life would likely have the greatest impact on fertility rates.

Age and relationship play an important role in fertility intentions; however, employment status, religious affiliation, and general life satisfaction also have a significant impact.[21] Relationship status is key: a person with short-term fertility intentions has a very low chance of achieving them if they are not in a relationship. The legal status of the relationship also seems to have an effect: those in a legally recognised marriage are more likely to achieve their fertility intentions. For men, an optimistic outlook and general satisfaction seem to be important, with those who have a positive view of their current situation and their future more likely to have children and less likely to give up their intentions. One of the main reasons for the gap between the average expected number of children and the TFR in a given period is that young people at present are planning to start a family and have children later than in the past.

After the historically low fertility in Hungary in 2011 (1.23), the TFR started to increase, reaching 1.61 in 2021, due to Eurostat data. Between 2010 and 2021, Hungary recorded the highest increase in fertility rate, with 28.8%, followed by the Czech Republic (21.2%) and Lithuania (15.4%). In most countries, the TFR decreased compared to 2010 (it increased in only 11 countries). Finland (21.9%) and Norway (20.5%) experienced the largest decrease in fertility. With a fertility rate of 1.61 in 2021, Hungary already ranked high in the EU, from the last place in 2010 to the top

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20 Beaujouan and Berghammer, 2019, pp. 507–535.
21 Spéder and Kapitány, 2009, pp. 503–523.

third. In 2021, France (1.84), the Czech Republic (1.83), and Iceland (1.82) had the highest TFRs.[22]

In Hungary, a mother's average age at childbearing has risen slowly but steadily over the past few decades. According to Eurostat data, in 2021, women in Hungary had their first child at the age of 28.6. In Bulgaria and Romania, mothers are the youngest at the time their first child is born (26.5 and 27.1 years old, respectively). On average, women have their first child the latest in Spain (31.6) and Italy (31.6).[23]

The general European trend among people living in big cities is to plan and have fewer children and at a later age. This trend was highlighted by the Hungarostudy 2021 study, which showed that in Hungary, families with children consider at least two children per family ideal, regardless of the type of settlement they live in,[24] except in Budapest, where the proportion of families considering one child ideal is the highest. Budapest is home to the highest proportion of individuals who do not plan to have children, although it should be added that the majority of Budapest residents (94%) also consider life with children to be ideal, in principle.

3.3. Ageing and mortality

According to Eurostat data, crude death rates in the EU Member States fell to 9.9 per 1,000 deaths per person in 2001, 9.7 in 2004, and 9.7 in 2006. In 2021, the mortality rates were highest in Bulgaria (21.7 deaths per 1,000 population), Latvia (18.4), Romania (17.5), and Lithuania (17.0), and the lowest in Ireland (6.8), Luxembourg (7.0), and Cyprus and Malta (8.0).

The evolution of mortality rates is influenced by several factors in addition to ageing. Infant mortality has been declining significantly worldwide. Contraception, family planning, rapid advances in medical science, concerted international action against epidemics, and increasing food production, on the one hand, and wars, pandemics, barriers to accessing clean drinking water, uneven access to the increasing amounts of food, and climate change, on the other, all influence the different age structures and life expectancies of people in different regions. In turn, ageing has repercussions on the economy, the labour market, the sustainability of pension systems, and the increasing burden on health and social care systems.

In 2021, life expectancy at birth in the EU was 82.9 years for women and 77.2 years for men (a difference of 5.7 years in favour of women). In 2021, the median age of the EU population was 44.1 years, 14 years above the world average (30 years).

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22 Eurostat [Online]. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TPS00199/ default/table?lang=en (Accessed: 31 August 2023).

23 Eurostat [Online]. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/DEMO_FIND/ default/table?lang=en (Accessed: 31 August 2023).

24 Kapdebo, Papházi and Tárkányi, 2022, pp. 32–45.

In the world's most populous countries, the median age ranged from 20.2 years (Pakistan) to 37.9 years (China).[25]

The two age trees in Figure 1 illustrate the differences between the world population and the population structure of the EU. The world's population shows a declining five-year age distribution from the age of 35, whereas the EU population is dominated by the 50–54 age group that is close to retirement. A more striking change is the share of the population aged 80 and over, which has almost doubled since 2001 to reach 6% today.

Figure 1. Age trees, World and EU, 2021[26]
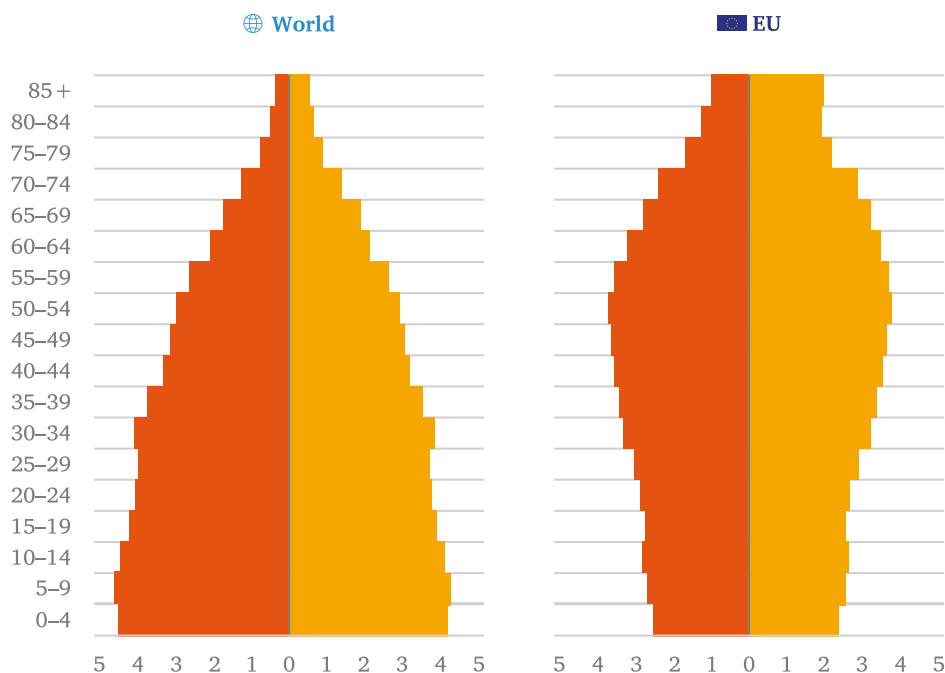
As the proportion of the population that is of retirement age rises, the dependency ratio of older people to the working-age population is growing. This is a major challenge for the most developed countries.

The ageing population has far-reaching implications for economic growth, productivity, inter- and intra-generational inequality, and the sustainability of public finances in G20 societies. Old-age dependency ratios are set to rise in all G20 countries over the coming decades, albeit at different rates.[27] Japan has the most rapidly ageing population, with 47 people aged 65 and over for every 100 working-age

25 Eurostat, 2023b.
26 Source: Eurostat. Note: men–left side, women–right side.
27 Rouzet et al., 2019.

adults in 2015, up from 19 in 1990 and predicted to rise to 80 by 2060. Among the developed G20 countries, Italy, Germany, and Korea also face the biggest challenges related to ageing.

In addition to ageing's impact on society, it also places a huge burden directly on families and individuals. Among the growing number of older adults, there is an increasing number of widows and widowers living alone. This particularly affects women who have reached a higher life expectancy. The gap between life expectancy in good health and life expectancy at birth is a good indication of the likely length of chronic diseases in our lives. According to a survey by the World Health Organization, the largest increase in female mortality over the past two decades has been due to Alzheimer's disease and other dementias, with the cases nearly tripling in number. These neurological disorders kill more women than men and cause around 80% more deaths and 70% more disability in women than in men. The World Alzheimer Report states that in 2015, there were 46.8 million people with dementia worldwide. In European countries, an estimated 10.5 million people suffered from dementia. Chronic diseases are responsible for 60% of all deaths worldwide and place a huge burden on the daily lives of patients and their relatives, as well as on society as a whole.[28]

Finally, longer life expectancy has created the need for active ageing, alongside the expectation of an increased number of healthy years. The OECD presents Lithuania as an example of possible 'good practice', as it (Lithuania) recognises the seriousness of the situation and takes a holistic approach to active ageing policy in three dimensions: labour market integration, social policy, and the analysis of participation in public and political life.[29] It provides tailored policy recommendations to improve the well-being of older people in terms of better employment and lifelong learning.

3.3.1. The demographic impact of ageing

An ageing society is characterised not only by increasing life expectancy but also by the declining presence of younger generations. Life expectancy at birth is rising, although the COVID-19 pandemic has almost invariably reduced average life expectancy at birth in the EU-27 (see Figure 2).[30] From 2019 to 2020, the largest declines were in Spain (from 84 to 82.4 years) and Bulgaria (from 75.1 to 73.6 years). In 2020, Bulgaria (73.6 years) had the worst average life expectancy at birth, followed by Romania (74.2 years), Lithuania (75.1 years), and Hungary and Latvia (both 75.7 years), according to the estimated data.

28 Boros, Gábriel and Monostori, 2021, pp. 163–182.
29 OECD, 2023.
30 Eurostat, 2023b.

Figure 2. Median age, world, EU, and selected countries, 2021[31]
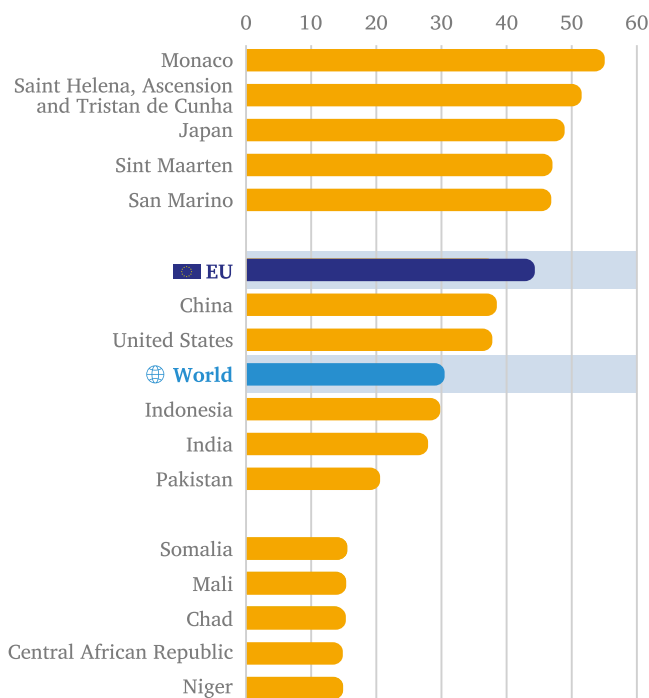
In 2021, the median age of the EU population was 44.1 years, 14 years above the world average (30 years). The average age of the EU population increased by 16% from 38 years in 2001 to 44 years in 2020. Among the 27 EU Member States, Italy has the highest average age (47.2 years), and Cyprus (37.7 years) and Ireland (38.1 years) have the lowest. The absolute number of people of retirement age is increasing, with their share of the population rising exponentially as birth rates fall.[32]

Between 2001 and 2020, the share of the population aged 65 and over increased from 16% to 21%, or by 5 percentage points. More strikingly, the share of the population aged 80 and over has almost doubled since 2001, reaching 6%. The ageing process is common to all 27 EU Member States (with the exception of Sweden, where the share of the population aged 80 and over has stagnated at 5%).

As the proportion of retired people increases, the dependency ratio of older people to the working-age population is also declining. In 2001, there were still an average of 3.9 people aged 20–64 (i.e. of an economically active age) per person aged

31 Eurostat, 2023: Key figures on the EU in the world – 2023 edition, pp. 14, doi: 10.2785/515035. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/15216629/16118334/KS-EX-23-001-EN-N.pdf/d4413940-6ef7-2fa8-d6f1-a60cdc4b89f3?version=1.0&t=1676459907834

32 Eurostat, 2023b.

65 and over in the EU. In 2021, the average was 2.8, and Eurostat forecasts that this figure will fall to 1.6 by 2080.

3.3.2. Mortality – the factor of natural decrease

In addition to migration, population trends are determined by the balance between births and deaths. This is the so-called 'natural increase', which is the difference between live births and deaths. Natural decrease is the opposite of this process.

The population of the EU is growing, but this is no longer due to natural increase. The difference between live births and deaths in the EU has decreased significantly since 1961 (see Figure 3), with the natural increase turning into the natural decrease in 2012, when deaths exceeded births. In line with the relatively low fertility rates, mortality rates are expected to deteriorate further as the population ages, and this negative trend is expected to continue.

Figure 3. Live births and deaths in the EU, 1961–2022[33]

Deaths – total   Live births – total
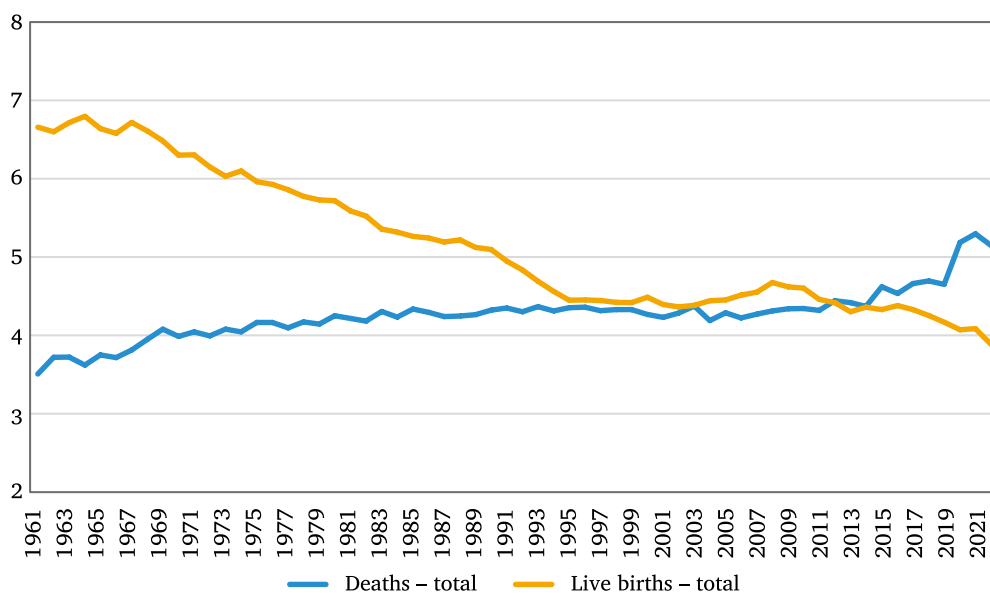
3.3.3 The role of young people in Europe

Sólyom[34] stresses that it is important to focus on aspects relevant to young people as they will be the future consumers and the newest voters, and thus, the

33 Source: Eurostat.
34 Sólyom, 2015, pp. 211–228.

development of different social groups and processes will depend on their values and attitudes. The literature is not consistent on who is considered young: until the 2000s, the age limit was set at 29, but in many cases, it has been extended to 35.

The share of young people aged 15–29 throughout the EU was 18.4% in 2010 and 16.3% in 2021.[35] This declining share of young people reflects decades of low and declining fertility and increasing life expectancy. The share of young people is projected to fall further to reach a low of 14.9% by 2052. In 2021, Bulgaria had the lowest share of 18–29-year-olds among the EU Member States (14.2%), whereas Cyprus had the highest (20.7%), with Hungary in the middle (16.6%).

In 2020, 87.2% of young people in the EU lived in the Member State in which they were born. The share of young people born outside the EU was 9.5%, and a further 3.3% were born in the EU but in another Member State. The share of native-born young people was the highest in Slovakia (98.1%) and Poland (98.0%) and the lowest in Luxembourg (57.3%).

In 2021, young people in the EU moved away from their parents at an average age of 26.5. Among EU countries, children left the family nest the earliest in Sweden, at an average age of 19.0. Further, 47.4% of 15–29-year-olds were employed. The Netherlands had the highest employment rate (77.0%) at more than double that of Romania, Spain, Bulgaria, Italy, and Greece. The unemployment rate for young people in the EU was relatively high at 13%. This rate was the highest in Greece (28.4%) and Spain (27.0%). Nine out of ten 16–29-year-olds (91.2%) considered their health to be good. In 2022, young people rated their satisfaction with life 7.4 on a scale of 1 to 10. Between 2013 and 2018, this value increased (from 7.5 to 7.7), returning to the 2013 level in 2021, and declining further (7.4) in 2022. The decline in satisfaction in recent years is explained by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the Eurostat summary publication. A total of 25.3% of 15–29-year-olds are at risk of poverty.[36] This rate is the highest in Romania (36.1%) and the lowest in the Czech Republic (10.6%).

3.4. Marriage, the prelude to having children

Marriage has long been the most common and accepted form of relationship in society, despite the fact that there were previously many types of relationships. Since the second half of the 20th century, alternative forms of cohabitation have become increasingly accepted alongside the traditional form. Although society is still pro-marriage, cohabitation is becoming more common across Europe.[37] Consequently, children are often born outside marriage.

In Hungary, 48% of children were born out of wedlock in 2015. However, in recent years, the proportion of children born within marriage has started to increase

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35 Eurostat, 2022.
36 Ibid.
37 Pongrácz, 2008, pp. 1–3.

again, and 'in 2022 the proportion of children born in marriage increased to 75%, the highest in 25 years'.[38] The dynamic increase in the number of marriages has been accompanied by a decrease in the number and proportion of children born out of wedlock. This is also a high figure among the EU Member States, with only Greece (83%) and Croatia (76%) having higher rates. In France, only 36% of children were born to married couples in 2022.[39]

The link between marriage and fertility has long been taken for granted by demographers.[40] Fertility studies show that in stable relationships (marriages), the children wished for are born and more children are born overall. However, these studies approach the issue from the opposite direction: in unstable relationships, the children wished for are not born and fewer children are born due to procrastination.[41] In higher-income countries, the positive relationship between the TFR and marriage is less clear as many Western European countries still have high fertility rates despite the fact that the majority of children are born out of wedlock. In Northern European countries, couples marry later, and unmarried women have high rates of childbearing, yet these countries have some of the highest fertility rates among developed countries.

In the US, the average age of first marriage increased from 23.9 in 1990 to 25.3 in 2005. During this period, the fertility rate was approximately 2.1. Between 2005 and 2019, however, the average age at first marriage increased more rapidly, reaching 28 years in 2019, and fertility declined significantly over this period, with the TFR falling to 1.7 in 2019. Looking at fertility in European countries since 2000, the referred study highlights that even in high-income countries, married people have more children than unmarried people. In Ireland, Albania, Turkey, Montenegro, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, married women have on average two more children than unmarried women. Further, in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, married women have 0.6–0.8 more children than unmarried women. These data illustrate that the 'marriage effect' has a strong influence on fertility.

There is a significant correlation between having children and marital status, according to the Hugarostudy 2021 study,[42] which shows that more than two-thirds of married couples have children, compared to 45% of cohabiting couples and 5–7% of single people. 'Looking at the trend in the number of children, it is clear that the average number of children is highest in [the] case of married couples (1.51) and much lower in [the] case of cohabiting couples (0.79). The nature of the relationship therefore influences the probability of having a child and the number

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38 HCSO, 2023c.
39 Eurostat Database, Population and Demography [Online] Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/population-demography/demography-population-stock-balance/database (demo_fager) (Accessed: 21 August 2023).
40 Stone and James, 2022.
41 Jones, 2007, pp. 453–478; Billari, 2008, pp. 2–18; Spéder and Kapitány, 2009, pp. 503–523; Pári and Balog, 2021, pp. 147–167.
42 Engler, Markos and Major, 2021, pp. 51–69.

of children'.[43] The number of children perceived as ideal is also higher among married couples than among those in other relationships: on average, married people consider 2.26 children in a family to be ideal, cohabiting couples 2.14, and singles 1.88. Another important finding of the Hugarostudy 2021 study is that the desire to start and expand a family is particularly high among married people.

3.5. Migration trends

The balance of external migration, that is, immigration to and emigration from the EU, has been typically positive since 1960, except for periods in the 1960s and 1980s. This has allowed the populations of the Member States to grow overall despite natural mortality and significant regional disparities. However, this reveals a problem: for eight consecutive years (2012–2019), external migration was necessary to avoid population decline, meaning that the EU is permanently unable to reproduce its own population.[44]

Europe is a major destination for global migration flows, with large numbers of migrants arriving from both the northern and southern hemispheres.[45] In this process, the former colonial status of the region (e.g. the relationship between Portugal and Brazil) is also important.[46]

Overall, migratory pressures are becoming an increasingly serious issue as the migration balance of the EU Member States is on an upward trend (0.4 million in 2010, 1.5 million in 2015 and in 2019 also).[47] In terms of destinations, the majority of migrants – 80–90% in the last 10 years – choose the Western European countries that joined the EU before 2004 over, for example, the countries in the Central and Eastern European region that acceded later.[48] By country of origin, the main emigration regions are the Middle East, North Africa, and from the European continent, Albania. Although the number of asylum seekers has increased in recent years, they still represent only half of the total number of foreigners entering the EU.[49] In addition, the issue of illegal migrants to the EU is a further problem. From 2010 to 2020, the number of illegal border crossers varied between 0.1 and 1.8 million per

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43 Translation of 'A gyermekszám alakulását vizsgálva egyértelműen látszik, hogy az átlagos gyermekszám a házasságokban a legmagasabb (1,51), az élettársaknál jóval kevesebb (0,79). A kapcsolat jellege tehát növeli a gyermek vállalásának esélyét, illetve a gyermekek számát', Engler, Markos and Major, 2021, p. 56.

44 Novák and Fűrész, 2021, pp. 17–48.

45 Pison, 2019, pp. 1–4.

46 Góis and Marques, 2009, pp. 21–50.

47 Eurostat Database [Online]. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/MIGR_IMM8_custom_643357/default/table?lang=en (Accessed: 24 August 2023); Eurostat Database [Online]. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/MIGR_EMI2_custom_643446/default/table?lang=en (Accessed: 24 August 2023).

48 Eurostat Database, [Online], available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/MIGR_EMI2_custom_643446/default/table?lang=en (Accessed: 24 August 2023).

49 Frontex, 2023.

year. As a delayed effect of the 'Arab Spring' starting in 2011 and the Syrian crisis, 2015 and 2016 were outliers, with 2.4 million people entering the EU by irregular means in 2 years. Today, the main sources of irregular migration are Syria, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Afghanistan.[50]

There has been a correlation between the fertility rate and immigration over the last 10 years. Migration has been lower in the countries that have made the most progress in having children. On the other hand, the number of newborn children is falling in the western and northern parts of the continent, which seems to open up space for immigration policies, with a significant base of newcomers from Africa and Asia.[51]

The main form of emigration within the European Union is mobility for employment.[52] In terms of absolute emigration numbers, three of the four countries (Germany, France, and Spain) with the largest populations have the highest emigration rates. The top three are followed by Romania, where 234,000 people emigrated in 2019 alone. The case of Romania highlights the emigration process typical to the Central and Eastern European region.

The natural population decline could not be offset by immigration during 2020 and 2021 owing to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic; however, apart from this period, immigration has kept the overall population growth balance positive for decades. Nevertheless, the picture differs significantly across the various Member States.[53]

Most EU countries (Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Spain, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Austria, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Finland, and Spain) were expected to experience population growth due to migration, while showing a natural decrease, in 2022. In six countries (Ireland, France, Cyprus, Luxembourg, Malta, and Sweden), both natural increase and positive net migration contribute to population growth.

Of the seven EU Member States that reported a population decline in 2022, only Greece recorded such a decline due to negative natural change and negative net migration. In the other six countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Italy, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Croatia), positive net migration was not sufficient to compensate for negative natural change.

3.6. The importance of family policy for population growth

The TFR in all EU countries is now below the replacement rate of 2.1, according to Eurostat. In 2010, this indicator was close to or above 2 in Ireland, France, and

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50 European Commission, Detection of illegal border crossings – Frontex data [Online]. Available at: https://data.europa.eu/euodp/hu/data/dataset/detections-of-illegal-border-crossings/resource/4256fc16-31f6-4ed0-b816-c5c75c675dfd (Accessed: 24 August 2023).

51 Novák and Fűrész, 2021, pp. 17–48.

52 McCollum et al., 2017, pp. 1508–1525.

53 Eurostat, 2023a.

Sweden but has since started to decline, with fertility rates falling by 16% in Sweden, 13% in Ireland, and almost 10% in France compared to 2010, to around 1.7–1.8.[54] There is a significant difference between the fertility rates of the native and immigrant populations in these countries, with the fertility rate of women from a migrant background in France being twice that of native French women: the former had an average fertility rate of 3.4 per woman in 2010, compared with 1.7 per woman among the latter.

Fertility data clearly show that despite a large wave of immigration in recent years, fertility in Europe has declined and fewer children are being born, with an increasing number of them coming from immigrant backgrounds. In 2013, one in eight children in the EU were born to foreign mothers, rising to one in six in 2021. Two-thirds of births in Luxembourg were to a mother of foreign origin, whereas one in three in Belgium, Germany, Austria, Sweden, Cyprus, and Malta; one in four in France, Spain, and Ireland; and one in five in Italy, Denmark, Greece, the Netherlands, and Portugal were the children of immigrants. In Hungary, the rate was much lower, standing at 4%.

Instead of a quick and seemingly easy migration solution, which causes significant social hardship in the long term, Hungary has chosen the hard way: supporting families. This has now proved to be the more successful way from a demographic perspective. Since 2010, family protection and the pro-natalist approach – the 'pro-family' movement that stabilises the situation of families and encourages childbearing – have been central to Hungarian family policy. After 2010, Hungary promoted family values (the traditional family model) and the decisive community-forming power of the family, whereas in many European countries, migration is seen as a solution to halt population decline.[55]

During this period, the focus of family allowances in Hungary has shifted from benefits based on citizenship to employment-linked allowances, with the family-taxation (since 2011) being the dominant feature and now available to 95% of families with children.[56] Since 2014, it has been possible to claim the allowance not only from personal income tax but also from other social security contributions, which supports lower-income families. The work-based family support system, along with one of its most important elements, the family-based taxation system, also played a significant role in Hungary achieving the second-highest economic growth in the EU in 2019.[57]

From a demographic viewpoint, the most significant impact of Hungary's introduction of a family housing subsidy (CSOK) in 2015 and its continuous expansion

54 Eurostat, [Online]. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TPS00199/default/table?lang=en (Accessed: 23 August 2023).

55 Fűrész and Molnár, 2021, pp. 6–17; Gellérné, 2021a, pp. 229–242.

56 Pári, Varga and Balogh, 2019, pp. 12–25.

57 Fűrész and Molnár, 2021, pp. 6–17.

is that for every third family that received it, couples have had a new child, thus increasing the fertility level of these families.[58]

The Family Action Plan introduced in 2019 significantly helped to reduce the financial barriers to starting a family.[59] This set of measures included elements such as the baby expecting subsidy, the CSOK or car purchase support for large families,[60] the grandparental childcare fee (GYED for grandparents), and the personal income tax exemption for mothers with at least four children. As a new element, the government introduced a tax credit for mothers under 30 from January 2023. In this way, Hungarian family support schemes seek to address all life situations, with a particular focus on young people about to have children, the impact of which is also reflected in demographic indicators.

Since 2011, Hungarian population indicators have developed favourably in comparison to those of Europe. According to Eurostat, the TFR, which is an indicator of the propensity to have children, rose in Hungary by the highest rate (30%) in the EU between 2010 and 2021, from 1.25 to 1.61.

However, the improvement in Hungarian demographic indicators after 2010 is due not only to family benefits but also to the increasingly family-friendly attitude of society as a whole. Among Europeans, Hungarians in particular hold the family to be very important,[61] with the highest proportion of Hungarians (almost 100%) agreeing with this idea. As regards the perception of family support measures, there is a consensus that the majority of Hungarian society is satisfied with the measures.

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4. Comparing demographic trends between Hungary and Europe

4.1. *Hungary's population has been declining since 1981*

Hungary's population has been steadily declining since 1981. In 1980, the country's population was just over 10.7 million, the highest in history. In the next four decades, Hungary's population has fallen by one million. The most recent census data

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58 Papházi, Nyírády and Pári, 2021, pp. 77–88; Papházi and Pári, 2023, pp. 46–65; Uhljár, Pári and Papházi, 2023, pp. 41–52; Spéder, Murinkó and Oláh, 2020, pp. 39–54.

59 Pári, Varga and Balogh, 2019, pp. 12–25; Fűrész and Molnár, 2021, pp. 6–17; Kapdebo, Papházi and Tárkányi, 2022, pp. 32–45.

60 The car purchase subsidy for large families was available until 31 December 2022. See: https://www.allamkincstar.gov.hu/csaladok-tamogatasa/Csalad_gyermek/nagycsaladosok-autovasarlasi-tamogatasa (Accessed: 24 August 2023).

61 Gyorgyovich, 2022, p. 47.

for 2022 show that the population decline has continued, with Hungary's population standing at 9,604,000 on 1 October 2022, 333,000 fewer than in the 2011 census.[62]

Population decline is linked to negative natural population growth, that is, more people dying than being born. Hungarian society is ageing, and this advancing age structure is causing more deaths than births. Another difficulty is that, in an ageing population such as that of Hungary, while the number of older adults is increasing, the number of women of childbearing age (i.e. 15–49) is falling significantly by an average of 15,000–20,000 a year. During the 2010s, a specific Hungarian phenomenon, or rather endowment, the so-called 'Ratkó effect', had a particularly strong impact on the natural decrease. This decade saw an acceleration in the decline of the baby-bearing age as a very large cohort of people advanced past the childbearing age. Between 2010 and 2020, the number of women aged 20–40 years fell by 17%. Given that fertility increased, this meant that fewer women gave birth to more children in these years, although there was still no breakthrough in the number of births. The result was that, despite rising fertility, there was no significant reduction in the level of negative natural population growth.

4.2. *The proportion of people aged 65 and over is rising in all EU Member States*

Just over a fifth of the EU population will be aged 65 or over in 2022, according to Eurostat data, an increase of 3.1 percentage points compared to 2012. It is noteworthy that all the EU Member States are witnessing a growing proportion of their population aged 65 and over. In eight Member States,[63] the proportion of older people is at or above the EU average, with Italy and Portugal having the highest proportions and Luxembourg and Ireland the lowest. In Hungary, the rate was 20.5% in the latest data, 3.6 percentage points higher than 10 years earlier. Poland recorded the highest increase over the same period (5.1 percentage points) and Luxembourg the lowest (0.8 percentage points).[64]

According to the 2022 census, one-fifth (21%) of the population in Hungary was aged 65 and over, an increase of 318,000 compared to 2011, which is linked to the children of the 1950s Ratkó era reaching retirement age. The number of economically active people aged 15–64 has decreased significantly by 9%.[65] Population ageing is also associated with fertility below the replacement level and an increase in average life expectancy at birth.

The average life expectancy at birth, which also influences the age composition of a population, was 75.84 years in Hungary in the latest data for 2022. Women continue to live longer, with a more favourable life expectancy (79.05 years) than men

62 HCSO, 2023b.
63 Data from 1 January 2022: Italy (23.8%), Portugal (23.7%), Finland (23.1%), Greece (22.75), Germany (22.1%), Bulgaria (21.7%), Slovenia (21.1%).
64 Eurostat, [Online]. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Population_structure_and_ageing (Accessed: 24 August 2023).
65 HCSO, 2023b.

(72.55 years). The European Commission forecasts that life expectancy at birth will continue to rise in all EU Member States in the coming decades.

4.3. Hungary had the highest increase in fertility between 2010 and 2021

The TFR is a measure of fertility and shows how many children a woman would have in her lifetime if fertility in a given year were to remain constant. A TFR of 2.1 would be needed for a society to reproduce itself. According to the most recent data, this level (i.e. the level needed for population reproduction) has not been reached by any EU Member State, including Hungary (Eurostat 2023). In Hungary, the TFR was at a historic low in 2011 (1.23), after which there was a significant increase until 2021, when the value of this indicator was 1.59 according to the Hungarian Central Statistical Office[66] and 1.61 according to Eurostat. At the same time, the TFR has been declining at the EU level, falling from an average of 1.57 in 2010 to 1.53 in 2021. Only 10 EU Member States saw an increase in the propensity to have children between 2010 and 2021, with Hungary showing the biggest improvement. Fertility in Hungary has increased from its low in 2011, although the number of women of childbearing age is falling year on year, meaning that fewer and fewer women are having more and more children.

4.4. Hungary has the highest number of marriages per 1,000 inhabitants

Hungarians are pro-family and pro-marriage, as indicated by the fact that the number of marriages per 1,000 in Hungary doubled between 2010 and 2021. This trend has continued to rise steadily during the COVID-19 period, while EU Member States have experienced a decline. In 2021, the number of marriages per 1,000 inhabitants was the highest in Hungary (7.4) among the EU Member States, compared to an average of 3.9 in the other EU countries.[67] The results of the Hungarostudy 2021 survey also show that Hungarians still consider marriage to be the most ideal form of cohabitation, especially for raising children,[68] as evidenced by the fact that 75% of newborns were born within marriage in 2022, compared to 59% in 2010. This is an outstanding achievement at the international level. After Greece, Croatia, and Lithuania, the lowest rates of out-of-wedlock births among the EU Member States are observed in Hungary and Poland, whereas in France, Portugal, and Bulgaria, six out of 10 babies are born out of wedlock.[69]

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66 HCSO, n.d.a.
67 Eurostat, [Online]. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_nind/default/table?lang=en (Accessed: 24 August 2023).
68 Engler and Pári, 2022.
69 Eurostat [Online]. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/DEMO_FIND_custom_7244091/default/table?lang=en (Accessed: 24 August 2023).

4.5. The family-friendly turnaround in Hungary since 2010

At present, developed countries are facing a crisis of values, which has many social, economic, and societal components. The changes of the 2000s have disrupted the existential and spiritual foundations that are essential for the harmonious functioning of families and society. Families have been pushed into the background by individualistic aspirations and the austerity measures imposed in Hungary under the left-liberal government, which left them financially and existentially insecure.[70]

Since 2010, Hungary has undergone a family-friendly turnaround, with the new conservative government starting to pay special attention to supporting families. The priority was to ensure that having children did not put families at risk of poverty and that they could have the children they wished for, as surveys showed that Hungarians wanted more children than were being born. The legal basis for family-centred governance is laid down in Hungary's Fundamental Law and in Act CCXI of 2011 on the Protection of Families. The Fundamental Law defines the family, thus also providing it with protection. The cardinal law on the protection of the family enshrined the case for and importance of supporting families and conveys, in a separate chapter, that employment and childbearing are factors that mutually reinforce each other for the well-being and prosperity of Hungarians. From 2010 onwards, family policy was defined separately from social policy based on the principle of need and became an independent sectoral policy. Family support was significantly upgraded, and the focus shifted strongly towards support linked to employment and wages.[71] At the same time, this paradigm shift not only took place at the legislative level but was also gradually incorporated into everyday life. Year by year, as families received more attention and support, the number of family-friendly initiatives and programmes increased, with targeted and predictable measures.[72]

Strengthening families is a major task in both material terms and spiritual, intellectual, and cultural terms. The family is the unit in which a person can truly fulfil his or her potential. Satisfaction with life, inner balance, and self-confidence are health-promoting factors, of which the family is the most important source. Research shows that people who are happy, love, and are loved by their families live longer. Having a child is a life task: it gives meaning to life and a secure future for society.[73] The family is a source of strength because its members help each other in a loving community – they relate to each other differently than outsiders. In Hungary, close family ties are the strongest form of social support, far more than all other forms of relationship, owing to historical reasons and the traditionally family-oriented mentality of Hungarians. Being married and being a parent are sources of strength precisely because of the relational embeddedness. Their impact on career,

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70 Novák et al., 2018, pp. 210–211.
71 Fűrész and Molnár, 2021, pp. 6–17; Gellérné, 2021b, pp. 91–110.
72 Novák et al., 2018, pp. 210–211; Fűrész and Molnár, 2021, pp. 6–17; Gellérné, 2021a, pp. 229–242.
73 Kopp and Skrabski, 1995.

work, well-being, and health is explained by the multi-directional benefits of family relationships.[74]

As a result of the Hungarian government's targeted family support measures, the propensity to have children has been reversing the steady decades-long decline in the number of children born. According to Hungarian vital statistics, fertility has increased by a quarter in a decade compared to the 2011 low, the number of marriages has doubled, divorces have fallen by a quarter, and the number of abortions has halved.

In the 2024 Hungarian budget, family support was increased by 3.5 times compared to 2010, reaching the highest level in Europe at 3.9% of GDP.[75] Most family support is linked to employment, with a wide range of family benefits available to those having and raising children. As a result, Hungary has seen a simultaneous increase in the propensity to have children and to work.

According to 2021 statistics, 70% of the population in the EU Member States lives in a home or apartment of their own, compared to 92% in Hungary.[76] According to the Századvég Europe Project, Hungary has the highest proportion of people in the EU who consider it important to have their own home (91%), which is a key factor in starting a family and raising children. This makes it a priority for families in Hungary to have access to home ownership, supported by home-ownership programmes. By the end of 2022, it was expected that one in five Hungarian families would have benefited from the Family Housing Subsidy (CSOK).[77]

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5. Population projections for Europe and Hungary in the coming decades

5.1. Europe accounts for an ever-smaller share of the world's population

One of today's biggest challenges is demographic change, caused by population growth in developing countries and ageing and subsequent population decline in developed countries. The world population is now estimated by the UN to be over 8 billion and will continue to rise in the coming decades, but at a slower pace.[78]

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74 Engler, 2011, 2017.
75 See: https://csalad.hu/csaladban-elni/megorzik-a-csaladtamogatasi-rendszert-a-2024-es-koltsegvetessel (Accessed: 24 August 2023).
76 Eurostat, [Online]. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Archive:Housing_statistics/hu&direction=next&oldid=498665 (Accessed: 25 August 2023).
77 Papházi and Pári, 2023, pp. 46–65.
78 Novák and Fűrész, 2021, pp. 11–16; HCSO, 2023a.

According to the mid-range UN projections,[79] Asia will be the most populous region between 2040 and 2050 and in 2100, while Europe's population – and share of the world population – will decline.[80] Whereas 50 years ago, Europe accounted for one-fifth of the world's population, it now accounts for less than one-tenth. Currently, only 9.3% of the world's population lives in Europe, and by 2100, this share is expected to be only 5.7%. In 1950, eight of the world's 25 most populous countries were in Europe; however, in 2023, only five of these countries are European, and by 2100, only Russia is expected to be on the list.

Population projections are based on vital statistics, that is, the number and occurrence of live births, deaths, and emigration. Taking these factors into account, several versions of a projection exist. The baseline or intermediate version indicates the projection that has the highest probability of being achieved in the future.[81] Among the projections, it is important to mention the annual UN calculation, which provides detailed data on world population projections, although the European Commission also regularly produces projections.[82] This chapter focuses on both of these projections, using the most recent data available. However, it should be noted that these calculations were made before the publication of the 2021/2022 census data. The data from the censuses are also part of the projections and will, therefore, be included in the estimates expected in the coming years. Furthermore, the current projections do not reflect the expected demographic changes resulting from the Russian-Ukrainian war as the calculations were made before the outbreak of this conflict:

> The number of Ukrainian refugees, which had reached over five million by June 2022 in EU countries, is high and distributed relatively unevenly among EU countries. Poland and some other Eastern European EU countries, Moldova, but also Germany and Italy received relatively large numbers of refugees. After an initial transition period, some refugees will find access to the labour market of the respective host countries – learning the language of the host country is important here. Therefore, refugees often become guest workers in the medium term. There are analyses of the economic effects of guest workers from Ukraine, for example for Poland, even before 2022, which can be used to estimate the economic effects of accepting Ukrainian refugees in EU countries. In addition, a likely distribution among different EU countries for the case of general migration can be obtained from the literature. In addition, income transfer effects for Ukraine need to be reflected.[83]

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79 United Nations, 2022.

80 HCSO, 2023a.

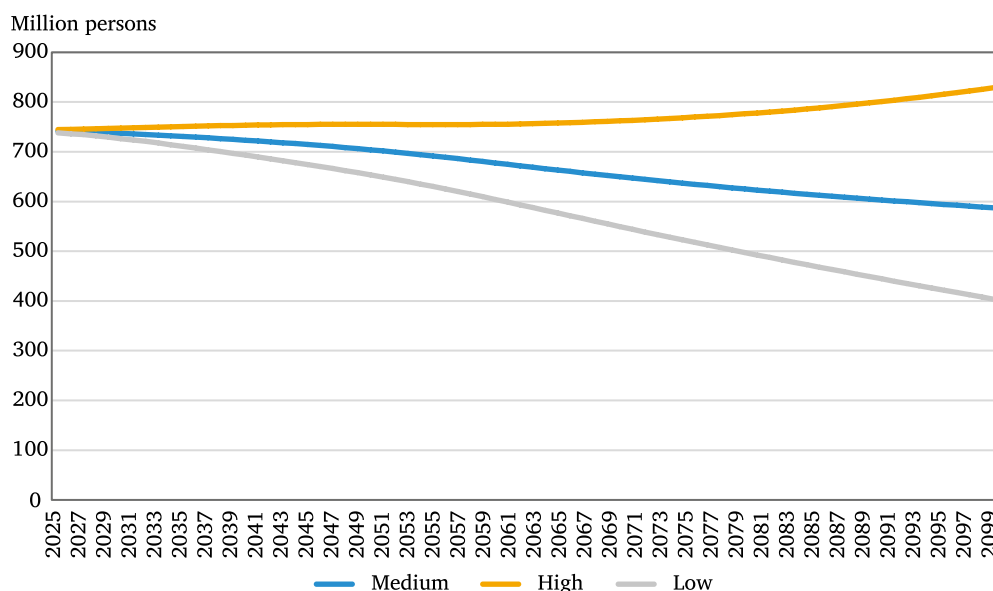81 The high version of the population projection assumes high fertility, high life expectancy at birth, and a positive migration balance, the latter assuming that the number of immigrants exceeds the number of people leaving the country or a given territorial level. Unlike the high version, the low version is characterised by lower values for the above factors.

82 European Commission, 2021.

83 Welfens, 2022, p. 155.

Europe's population is projected to decline in the coming decades, according to the medium and low versions of the UN's projections (Figure 4). Whereas the former projection estimates the continent's population at 704 million in 2050 and less than 600 million (587 million) in 2100, the latter forecasts an even larger population decline, with Europe's population projected at 654 million in 2050 and 403 million in 2100.

Figure 4. Three versions of the UN population projections for Europe from 2025–2100[84]


Million persons

5.2. Population projections for Hungary

According to the medium (baseline) version of the UN population projections, Hungary's population will continue to decline in the coming decades: it is projected to be around 9.3 million in 2040, only 8.8 million in 2050, and less than 7 million in 2100 (Figure 5). The low variant, which assumes low fertility, lower life expectancy at birth, and negative net migration (emigration), also forecasts a continued population decline and an even lower population than before. This variant projects a population of approximately 8.9 million in 2040, 8.2 million in 2050, and less than 5 million in 2100. The high variant is the only estimate for Hungary that, while also projecting a decline until the late 2060s, expects a rise thereafter, reaching 10 million again by 2100.

84 United Nations, World Population Prospects, 2022.

Figure 5. Three versions of the UN population projections for Hungary from 2025–2100[85]

Million persons
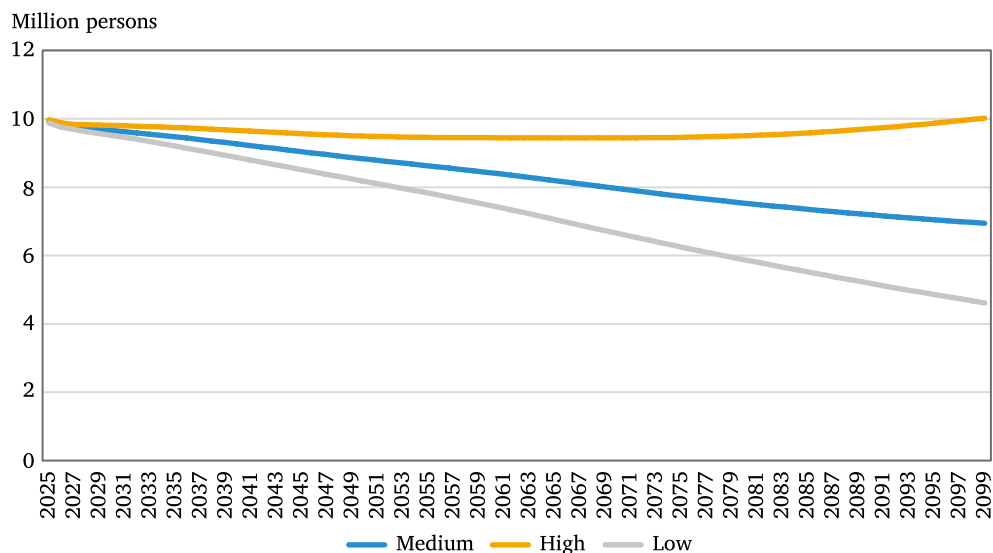
According to the UN, population decline is expected not only in Hungary but also in the vast majority of EU Member States. Looking at Hungary's neighbours, the UN estimates that between 2040 and 2050, Serbia (-8.5%) and Croatia (-7.4%) are expected to see their populations decline at a rate even higher than that of Hungary, whereas Austria (-1.3%) and Slovenia (-2.9%) will experience more modest decreases (Table 1). In Romania, the population is projected to fall by almost the same rate (-4.6%) as in Hungary. However, it is important to note that these projections do not reflect the impact of the war in Ukraine, for example.

Table 1. Medium (baseline) version of the UN population projections for Hungary and neighbouring countries from 2025–2100[86]

million persons

Year	Hungary	Austria	Romania	Serbia	Croatia	Slovenia
2025	9.9	9.0	19.5	7.1	4.0	2.1
2030	9.7	9.1	19.1	6.9	3.9	2.1

85 United Nations, World Population Prospects, 2022.
86 United Nations, 2022.

Year	Hungary	Austria	Romania	Serbia	Croatia	Slovenia
2040	9.3	9.1	18.3	6.3	3.6	2.1
2050	8.8	89	17.5	5.8	3.3	2.0
2060	8.4	8.7	16.6	5.3	3.1	1.9
2070	8.0	8.5	15.5	4.7	2.8	1.8
2080	7.6	8.3	14.6	42	2.6	1.8
2090	7.2	8.1	13.8	3.7	2.3	1.7
2100	6.9	7.9	13.1	3.3	2.1	1.7

4.3. The proportion of older adults in Hungary is expected to be lower than the EU average, whereas the proportion of children is expected to be higher

According to the latest census data for 2022, the age composition of Hungary's population has continued to grow older. The proportion of the population under 45 years old has decreased, whereas the proportion of the population over 45 years old has increased compared to the 2011 census, with the exception of those aged 55–64. According to data from 1 October 2022, one-fifth (21%) of the population was aged 65 and over, and 15% of the population were aged 0–14 (i.e. children). Encouragingly, the number of children under 15 years of age did not change significantly, remaining at 1.4 million, whereas the number of people aged 65 and over increased by 318,000 compared to 2011, which may be linked to the fact that the 1950s Ratkó children reached retirement age. The number of economically active persons aged 15–64 decreased significantly by 9%.[87]

The proportion of older people in the population is rising not only in Hungary but also at the European level. The European Commission projects that the proportion of people aged 65 and over in Hungary will reach 25% by 2040, 28% by 2050, and almost 30% by 2070. With these ratios, Hungary is expected to have a slightly lower and more favourable rate than the EU in all three years under review. Among the Central and Eastern European countries, only the Czech Republic will have a lower share of the population aged 65 and over in 2050 and 2070 than Hungary. The share of the population aged 80 and over will also continue to rise in the coming decades and is projected to be around 12% in Hungary (Table 2).[88]

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87 HCSO, 2023b.
88 European Commission, 2021.

Table 2. Projected change in the proportion of the population aged 65 and over in the EU Member States between 2040 and 2070[89]

%

Country name	2040	2050	2070
Poland	25.5	30.4	34.0
Italy	32.2	33.7	33.3
Portugal	30.9	33.7	33.1
Lithuania	29.6	31.6	32.9
Croatia	27.8	30.3	32.7
Malta	22.3	25.6	32.4
Finland	27.0	28.3	32.1
Spain	29.4	32.7	32.0
Latvia	28.7	31.3	31.8
Slovakia	24.6	29.6	31.7
Romania	26.9	30.7	31.5
Bulgaria	27.5	30.8	30.9
Estonia	25.8	28.4	30.5
Slovenia	28.0	30.8	30.4
European Union Total	**27.7**	**29.6**	**30.3**
Luxembourg	22.4	25.7	29.7
Hungary	**24.6**	**27.8**	**29.6**
Austria	26.5	27.8	29.3
France	26.8	27.8	28.7
Netherlands	26.3	26.4	28.6
Germany	27.9	28.1	284
Belgium	25.2	26.4	28.0
Czech Republic	25.0	28.3	27.9

89 European Commission, 2021. Data in the table are presented in descending order by the year 2070.

Country name	2040	2050	2070
Norway	23.3	24.5	27.8
Denmark	25.2	25.6	27.7
Ireland	21.2	24.8	27.5
Cyprus	20.9	22.4	27.1
Sweden	22.8	23.5	26.3

The European Commission forecasts a decline in the proportion of people under 15 in most EU countries between 2040 and 2070, which is linked to falling fertility and an advancing age structure. In Hungary, the proportion of children will be close to 19% in each of the three years under review, which is expected to be somewhat above the EU average. Among the Visegrad Group (V4) countries, only the Czech Republic is expected to have a more favourable rate than Hungary. The neighbouring countries are also expected to have lower rates than Hungary (Table 3).

Table 3. Projected change in the proportion of the population aged under 15 in the EU Member States between 2040 and 2070, based on European Commission projections[90]

Year	2040	2050	2070
Sweden	21.8	21.8	20.9
France	21.6	21.5	20.8
Denmark	21.6	21.0	20.7
Ireland	22.2	22.0	20.6
Czech Republic	19.6	19.9	20.0
Netherlands	20.3	19.9	19.7
Belgium	20.1	20.1	19.5
Germany	18.8	18.8	19.5
Cyprus	20.6	19.8	19.4
Norway	20.4	20.0	19.2

90 Format: European Commission, 2021. The data in the table are presented in descending order by the year 2070.

Year	2040	2050	2070
Hungary	**18.8**	**18.7**	**18.7**
European Union Total	**18.4**	**18.5**	**18.5**
Austria	18.5	18.2	18.4
Latvia	18.1	18.3	18.3
Bulgaria	17.8	18.2	18.2
Estonia	18.3	18.8	18.2
Slovakia	184	18.1	18.1
Slovenia	17.2	17.9	17.8
Romania	18.0	18.0	17.8
Portugal	17.4	17.3	17.7
Luxembourg	18.5	17.9	17.5
Lithuania	17.5	17.1	17.3
Spain	16.3	16.7	16.8
Croatia	17.1	16.9	16.7
Finland	17.4	17.5	16.5
Poland	16.5	16.4	15.9
Italy	15.4	15.6	15.8
Malta	16.4	15.7	15.6

6. Summary and conclusions

Europe, and the EU as part of it, is undergoing a major demographic transformation that will profoundly shape the continent's, cultural, economic, and competitive future. Europe's weight in the world's population has shrunk to less than 10%. The European population is not yet in drastic decline; however, this is due solely to the large-scale, often illegal, immigration that has begun to transform European life, both ethnically and culturally.

On the old continent, there are more and more coffins and fewer and fewer cradles. People in Europe still want more children than are actually born. The gap

between the children that are planned and those that are born is observed in European countries and is particularly high among highly educated women. Nevertheless, this does not mean that women with tertiary education want to remain childless or have fewer children than women with a lower degree of education. Consequently, among policies that focus on the needs of women with higher education, support for reconciling work and family life would likely have the greatest effect on fertility rates.

In every country in Europe, the natural decrease has become a 'natural' phenomenon, with births nowhere near exceeding deaths. Some countries are trying to deal with this situation by increasing migration; however, data from recent years show that it is precisely in the countries with the largest migration surpluses that fertility rates, which are a sign of a desire to have children, have fallen rather than increased. The fertility rate is under 2.1 – that is, the replacement level – in all European countries. Unfortunately, looking at the EU statistics as a whole indicates that both the birth rate and the number of marriages, which are considered to be a prelude to childbearing, are declining. These results are especially important because in stable relationships (marriages), more of the children couples wish to have are born, and more children are born overall. In most European countries, the link between marriage and fertility is clear, although there are some Western European countries where the fertility rate remains high despite the fact that most children are born out of wedlock. Many Western European countries also have high rates of childbearing, yet these countries have some of the highest fertility rates among developed countries.

However, there are exceptions, such as Hungary, which saw the largest increase in childbearing and marriage rates in the EU between 2010 and 2022. Hungary has moved from demographic collapse to the strongest top third within the EU solely through its own efforts and active family policies. The Hungarian family and population policy model offers solutions that work and that have been able to substantially improve Hungary's demographic situation, even despite the unfavourable Hungarian circumstances, such as the significant decline in the childbearing age group. Hungarian family policy has adopted several specific, often pro-natalist measures, many of them aimed at the well-being of families, with a focus on the family as the most important community, marriage as the most stable form of intimate relationship, and respect for tradition and life. Hungarians are traditionally a family-friendly nation who wish to have more children than are born, which is why Hungarian family policy aims to break down barriers to having children and create decent conditions for raising them. The message of the Hungarian example is that having a family and children cannot be a privilege, and it is not just a private matter but the most personal public matter, which must be fought for and acted upon in order to preserve Europe and European culture and values.

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