

# European View

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# Navigating demographic dynamics: Strategies for tomorrow

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We are ageing and the trend will continue. Declining birth rates, increasing life expectancy and lifestyle shifts have created long-term hurdles. Eurostat predicts a 6% decline in the EU's population by 2100, which translates to 27.3 million fewer people.

While large-scale migration since 2015, including that of Ukrainian refugees, has offered some relief, the EU is facing challenges that are quite distinct from those confronting countries with population booms. The shrinking workforce strains social programmes, jeopardising pensions and health care. Additionally, labour shortages in key sectors could hinder economic growth and innovation.

Factors that have undeniably contributed to the decline in birth rates include changes in Europe's social fabric linked to women in particular: increased education, better career prospects and a focus on personal fulfilment. Empowered by higher education and careers, women often delay starting families. Furthermore, the high cost of living, especially housing, coupled with the perceived difficulty of raising children in a demanding work environment, discourages larger families. This prioritisation of individual goals is a positive step for gender equality and personal achievement, and has been pushing national governments to focus on accessible childcare and affordable housing.

Thus, these changes are in many ways positive developments. But as mentioned, they are also contributing to the demographic challenges the EU is currently facing. There are also opportunities within these challenges, but the way forward will not be easy. Swift

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action is needed to address the ethical and economic implications of these demographic changes. In the EU we must foster a spirit of intergenerational solidarity and ensure a fair distribution of resources and opportunities. By harnessing the potential of its diverse population and promoting sustainable growth, Europe can turn these demographic challenges into a catalyst for a sustainable and more dynamic future.

The centre–right has a history of addressing crises by prioritising the concerns and interests of Europe’s citizens. We at the Martens Centre want to contribute to a process of reflection that aims to identify options and come up with concrete proposals for political action for the next parliamentary term in 2024–9. We have been working on a project called The 7Ds for Sustainability, which aims to set forth proposals on how the EU should be transformed so that it can act more effectively and powerfully. We believe in completing the process of European integration by developing a genuine federation based on subsidiarity and sustainability, with demography being a key focus area.

This issue of the *European View* delves into the complexities of Europe’s demographic landscape, examining how compounding crises have exacerbated existing issues. We explore the strain on public finances as the working-age population shrinks, the pre-conditions for successful migration and integration policies, and the often-forgotten issues of brain drain and depopulation, which have been affecting some of our regions. We also present a holistic approach to the demographic changes and their consequences, with innovative solutions aimed at tapping the potential of all generations and categories of the population.

To guarantee the EU’s economic strength and social security, all of us must be involved. We need to find ways to make sure the Union is stable for the long term so that everyone gets the support they need, both current and future generations.

### Author biography



**Mikuláš Dzurinda** is President of the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies and a former Prime Minister of Slovakia (1998–2006). He has also held the positions of Minister of Transport and Minister for Foreign Affairs.



# Visions for a future European way of life

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## Abstract

In the wake of a shifting global landscape marked by a resurgence of authoritarianism, this article explores the challenges facing Western democracies. The euphoria of the post-1989 era has given way to self-doubt, with the rise of left- and right-wing populism a symptom and not a cause of the crisis. The lack of a cohesive vision for the future European society is identified as a major contributor to the current underperformance of Western democracies. Four key axes of development are outlined: societal cohesion, reinterpreting the concept of work, (re-)legitimising democratic political representation and unleashing new sources of value creation. The analysis delves into complex issues such as intergenerational justice, multi-ethnic integration and the re-evaluation of work, emphasising the need for a broader understanding of human existence. The article concludes by advocating for a renewed social vision, drawing on the historical insights of Christian Democratic thinking to navigate the challenges posed by the ongoing transformations in Western societies.

## Keywords

Democracy, Future of work, Christian Democracy, Centre-right, Representation, Intergenerational justice, European way of life

## Introduction

The pendulum could not have swung back more brutally. Gone are the euphoric times of the post-1989 world of eternal peace and the dominance of the liberal democratic order—a vision that kept the Western resistance against totalitarian regimes alive and spurred the European integration project.

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As waves of authoritarianism surge along the shores of the ‘larger West’, self-doubt within these societies about the democratic model itself has surfaced, and the temptation for autocratic solutions has grown—this is not quite the vision the forefathers of European integration had in mind after the Second World War.

As the German historian Heinrich August Winkler (2024) recently pointed out,<sup>1</sup> the most significant threats to Western democracies come from *within*. Yet, the public discussion often takes superficial phenomena, such as the rise of right-wing populist parties, as the cause of the crisis. But these phenomena are mainly symptoms, and politics is still too often trying to cure the symptoms instead of treating the disease. This is quite understandable, as addressing the root causes would mean acknowledging some inconvenient realities and making unpleasant decisions.

In the author’s opinion, a major reason for the current crisis is the lack of a new vision for the future European society. Vision, in this understanding, means a set of concepts and values that describes the idea of a ‘good society’ and serves as a common basis for a citizen-based, democratic community. This shared understanding and consensus have been eroded over recent decades due to massive changes in Western industrial societies’ ‘base and superstructure’ (Marx 2014). Whether a new common ground can be found and on what foundations it should be built are far from clear.

The following article will present some ideas and serves as an introduction and conceptual framework for this edition of the *European View*, which focuses on major societal and political developments of *longue durée*—developments which are already massively reconfiguring the foundations of Western liberal societies, from demography to the idea of labour. As dramatic and sometimes apocalyptic as they sometimes look, these challenges do not mean that the Western model is doomed to fail, as some of its ideological adversaries constantly assert. There is no reason to underestimate the capacities of democratic political systems and societies. But to ensure the survival of the underlying market-based economic system, Western societies have to drastically reform their political institutions so that they become more inclusive and can quickly adapt and respond to new developments.

We will focus on the internal developments of Western societies. But we are aware of the increasing global interdependence in all of the dimensions outlined below and will consider developments globally if necessary.

The following four challenges correspond to the core elements of democratic societies and are considered the key development axes:

1. finding a new basis for *societal cohesion*, be it intergenerational justice or the integration of a multi-ethnic society;
2. reinterpreting the *concept of work*;

3. (re-)legitimising *democratic political representation*; and
4. unleashing *new sources of value creation* without destroying the social and environmental fundaments.

These topics/dimensions are bound together and guided by the idea of *sustainability*, be it institutional, social or economic,<sup>2</sup> when we discuss the vision of a future society below.

### **Some thoughts about ‘visions’**

Talking about political or social visions from a conservative–liberal or Christian Democratic perspective needs some explanation. Historically, the idea of visions of (future) societies has been dominated by left-of-spectrum political forces. For good reasons and due to bad historical experiences, conservatives have always loathed the idea of ‘designing a society’ in the armchair, coffee house, or salon—the usual breeding grounds for fancy ideas in the long history of European social visions. Scepticism of the idea of (linear) progress and the human ability to govern complex societies, alongside the constant fear of creating an almighty ‘Leviathan’, have often prevented moderate conservative forces from entering the competition to conceive social visions.

But this is not quite the whole story. Let us consider the idea of a ‘good’ or ‘just’ society<sup>3</sup> as the core of any social vision. Leaving ancient and medieval debates aside, we can tap into a broader reflection among both Christian Democratic thinkers and at least some conservatives. This tradition is far less utopian and more realistic in terms of the *conditio humana* than its totalitarian alternatives, which have almost always ended up in a bloody history of attempting to impose new social visions upon existing societies.

Standing on the precipice of ground-breaking changes, the following can be seen as an attempt to identify those building blocks and mechanisms that could outline the vision of a society. It will tap into moderate conservative and Christian Democratic thinkers’ rich, often less-known history of social vision. At the same time, it tries to identify those developments of *longue durée* in post–Second World War European societies that are now irrevocably linked with and embedded in global developments. At a time when the siren songs of closed societies are becoming more and more attractive, the indisputable political framework for this vision remains an ‘open society’ (Popper 2011) and a liberal–democratic constitution.

### **The four dimensions of a societal vision**

To create a comprehensive framework for any debate on a sustainable societal vision, an analysis of the four policy fields covering the major developmental challenges for contemporary Western societies is necessary. This will be juxtaposed with the long history of Christian Democratic and conservative thinking since the nineteenth century. It may

surprise many that these challenges are, in many aspects, less novel than current debates suggest. However, some aspects are linked to technological progress or anthropogenic changes to the ‘earth system’ (Crutzen and Stoermer 2013), and therefore addressing these will require considerable intellectual effort and reinterpretation.

### *Finding a new basis for societal cohesion*

The debate about societal cohesion is one of the most divisive within Western societies. It can be clustered around three major dimensions: *ethnic homogeneity*, *intergenerational justice* and *‘belonging’* (in the sense of globality vs. locality).

In this debate, right-wing prophets often refer to the ‘golden age’ of ethnic homogeneity, best realised in a nation-state framework. They praise this form of statehood as a kind of ‘natural state’ of societal organisation and a precondition for societal cohesion. Nothing could be more distant from historical truth—Europe is the best proof of this. Throughout its history, multi-ethnic societies have been the normal state rather than the exception, given the continent’s geographic openness, multipolarity of state organisation and cultural adaptability. But it is equally true that concerns about social cohesion and disintegration, and fears of identity loss have been constant companions and powerful drivers for internal and external conflicts. In recent years, immigration to the EU, particularly from non-European regions, has reached unprecedented heights. Consequently, the increasing prevalence of different cultural and religious concepts concerning, among other things, statehood, the rule-of-law and gender relations has fundamentally called into question the dominant cultural and political norms that have constituted European identity so far.

When Western Europe entered the fourth phase of the demographic transition (Mather et al. 2021) between 1960 and 1980, with low fertility levels and a significant rise in life expectancy, a series of challenges unknown in human history also arose. These developments go beyond the dimension of individual identity and choice and cut into the known fabric of human societies. In this fourth phase, the creation and redistribution of resources during one’s lifespan and between the different age cohorts of society have put existing private and public institutions, particularly families and social security systems, under extreme pressure. Basic assumptions about intergenerational burden sharing, which can also be described as redistributive, intertemporal justice, are faltering. The (perceived) lack of fair distribution of the costs of adapting to these changes has the potential to force parts of society to terminate the (implicit) social contract. Systemic reforms are happening painfully slowly and face massive opposition from vested interests.

The third divisive dimension is the result of unprecedented mobility. Being liberated from the centuries-old bounds of space and traditions, societies are now segmenting themselves into a global class of ‘anywheres’ and the majority, who are ‘somewheres’ (Goodhart 2017). Combined with other cultural developments, such as woke-ism and post-colonialism, a strong sense of deprivation of traditions, identities and values is



being felt among significant parts of European society. The rising left- and right-wing populist and protectionist movements, often combining anti-globalist, anti-capitalist and anti-modernist sentiments, buy into and increase this driving apart of societies.

### *Reinterpreting the concept of work*

Since industrialisation, political debates in Europe have largely centred around the concept of work. It is, therefore, no surprise that the waves of major political and social conflict in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were linked to dramatic changes in employment conditions and labour market structures, primarily driven by technological changes and economic/trade (dis)integration processes on a global scale. From a broader perspective, social norms, societal hierarchies and value systems are largely determined by an individual's position and 'value' in the production process. This is not only Marxist thinking (Schaff 1965): from the papal encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* (Leo XIII 1891) to *Laborem exercens* (John Paul II 1981), Christian Democracy, largely based upon Catholic theology, has equally struggled to reconcile modern work with a more comprehensive understanding of human existence and the idea of a just society.

We are now at a similar stage of disruptive development, equal only to the first Industrial Revolution (Schwab 2017). But the recurrent debates about 'the end of work' (Rifkin 2004), which started in the 1970s and are now accelerating due to the revolutionary progress in artificial intelligence, miss major dimensions of the challenge as they often focus on the narrow concept of (paid) labour. Such approaches impose limitations when it comes to understanding the scope of the challenges and the potential solutions for the future of work and its role in a changing society.

Within the given legal and economic framework, technological change will lead to widening gaps (Georgieva 2024) in income, and changes to the idea of meaningful work and the sense of (non-)belonging. The consequences of feeling increasingly excluded will further loosen the bonds of societal cohesion. At the same time, more and more citizens will become dependent on state subsidies, opening the 'road to serfdom' (Hayek 2007). Furthermore, the traditional concept of work falls short of answering the challenges imposed by demographic changes.

From a Christian anthropological perspective, re-evaluating work as a central dimension of human existence is necessary to avoid a 'reductionist' view of work as a pure production factor. This change of perspective includes embedding an enhanced concept of responsibility to society and the natural environment (John Paul II 1981, Chapter II.6)

### *The (re-)legitimation of democratic political representation as the core of the European way of life*

Denouncing the established democratic order as 'undemocratic', 'elite-driven' or 'having lost contact with the people' is part of the left- and right-wing populist narrative in

Europe and the US. At the same time, global systemic rivals use these arguments and present their systems as truly democratic alternatives (*The Economist* 2014). The dominant mode of political participation in Western societies is delegating power to elected representatives, with political parties as the main intermediaries. Not surprisingly, the massive loss of trust in the political system goes hand in hand with equally low trust in political parties (European Commission 2020, 7). Another reason for this decline in legitimacy is the rising influence of non-state actors, often transnational ones, including international non-governmental organisations.<sup>4</sup>

Plenty of proposals and efforts have been made which aim to overcome the limitations of the established representative forms of political participation (Muzergues et al. 2023). The debates during the Conference on the Future of Europe and the citizen conferences (*consultations citoyennes*) that take place in France are among the most recent. Other symptoms are the (often short-lived) rise of ‘movements’ or digital parties. But a realistic focal point must be restrengthening the representative political order, which may also mean a redistribution of power in line with the principle of subsidiarity.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, this basic element of the European constitution has often been sidelined. Taken seriously, however, it could serve as a bridge between the principles of indirect-representative and direct-democratic political will formation. The crucial point is the experience of self-efficacy as a citizen (Barnett 2014). And quite paradoxically, enhancing the voice of neglected minorities has often led to the unwanted impression that the ‘silent majority’ is no longer being heard, increasing the lack of democratic representation (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018). The space for democratic deliberation has massively shrunk and has to be regained (Hefele 2023a).

### *Unleashing new sources of value creation*

A core element of any social vision is creating a sustainable material basis for a society. The need to revolutionise the current system of production and consumption hardly needs to be questioned, given its detrimental effects on the ‘earth system’ (Crutzen and Stoermer 2013). This is in line with the modern concept of enlarged responsibility (Joas 1985) in which the purely anthropogenic view must be left behind and the whole planetary system considered. Such an approach does not necessarily mean *degrowth*, as demanded by some (Hickel 2021). While, to some extent, a redistribution of resources on a global scale may be needed, technology and new business models are much more necessary for this transformation. In both cases, European societies need a common vision: to set and agree on shared objectives and to increase social acceptance of the unavoidable costs of this transition. Similar to what has been argued in the previous sections, value creation has to be understood in a much broader sense, including in terms of building social capital.

### **Conclusions from a centre–right perspective**

Despite being tainted by bad experiences during the twentieth century, the concept of ‘social vision’ has never become obsolete in modern political thinking or practice.

One could even argue that it is inherent in any reflection on society. In recent years, as during the Cold War, the surging systemic rivalry between the West and its autocratic adversaries has made it once again inevitable that the groundwork is laid for a renewed self-concept of Western open societies. In other words, a new social vision is needed to ensure the survival of this historically rather unique societal model.<sup>6</sup> Moderate centre–right political forces have to stand at the forefront of this endeavour as they bear the responsibility for stabilising the democratic and representative political order. In particular, the history of Christian Democratic thinking, as the main strain of the European centre–right, provides rich conceptual insights based on a comprehensive yet realistic idea of human nature and the proper functioning of societies. The idea of individual freedom, bound by social responsibility and embedded in a time continuum, also sets certain limitations for any attempts to radically and forcefully transform societies.

Developing a vision for how society can undergo a sustainable transformation can only be compared with the attempts in the nineteenth century to understand the forces unleashed by industrial modernity, and to create a new institutional framework for societal bargaining, resource allocation and the preservation of human dignity.

## Notes

1. The decline of democracies is lucidly described in Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) and Krastev and Holmes (2019).
2. On the concept of sustainability from a conservative–liberal and Christian Democratic perspective, see Hefele (2023b).
3. The close conceptual relationship between ‘good’ and ‘just’ was established at the dawn of political theory, in Greek philosophy.
4. While the debate usually focuses on private multinational companies or global regulatory bodies, the assumption that international non-governmental organisations contribute to the democratic deficit is often taken for granted. But this is far from evident as Beijerman (2018) shows, and needs further scrutiny.
5. Articles 5(1) and 5(3) of the Treaty on European Union.
6. On the uniqueness of Western societies and their values (‘the weirdest people’), see the inspirational Henrich (2021).

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### Author biography



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# The 'demographic winter' in Italy: Crisis factors, problematic issues and policy actions

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## Abstract

Demographic issues are becoming key to the debate on the future of Europe, and of Italy in particular, which has the lowest birth rate in Europe but is among the top-ranked countries for demographic ageing. The general improvement of living conditions and the ageing of large cohorts cannot be supported by the economic activity of the younger generations, which calls into question the security of certain aspects of the social pact, such as the provision of pensions and health care.

While encouraging an awareness among Italians of the trends and problems they will have to deal with, all national actors must cooperate to ensure the recovery of the birth rate, and to harness the economic benefits of incoming migrants and the experiences of older people. It is equally necessary to meet the needs of young people and enhance their social role. Only through such cooperation will it be possible to create a favourable climate for actions that will allow us to control and direct these demographic phenomena and not to suffer from them.

## Keywords

Demography, Italy, Demographic winter, Declining birth rate, Population ageing, Policy actions

## Introduction

Over the last four or five decades, the Italian population has undergone extraordinary changes in terms of both the events that affect the total number of inhabitants (births, deaths, immigrations and emigrations) and its main structural characteristics: sex, age, educational level, occupation and citizenship.

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For more than a century Italy managed to compensate for its increasingly high emigratory flows to every part of the world by maintaining a positive natural balance (more births than deaths). However, the data since 1993 show that this balance is no longer positive (with the sole exception of 2006). Furthermore, the deficit in births has recently increased, resulting in a cumulative effect over the last 30 years of a surplus of approximately 2.5 million deaths.

When even the recent positive migratory balance could no longer compensate for the negative natural balance, the total number of residents started to decline, resulting in the population shrinking by 1,349,000 people between 1 January 2014 and 1 January 2023. To find a similar decline in Italian demography, we have to go back more than a century, to 1916–18, when the population fell by 971,000. However, in 1918 Italy experienced the highest mortality rate it has ever recorded, due to the combination of the effects of the Great Influenza pandemic—the so-called Spanish influenza—and the persistent effects of the First World War.

While less disruptive than the Spanish influenza, the Covid-19 pandemic, which exploded at the beginning of 2020 with immediate and intense effects, still left its traces on the demography of the country, having a significant impact on deaths but also on the frequency of births, marriages and migrations. The pandemic experience, when combined with the pre-existing demographic phenomena, has definitively placed the Italian population in a long regressive phase—a ‘demographic winter’. This is indicated by the 14 years of continuous decline in the total number of births (2009–22) and the 9 years of progressive reduction in the number of residents (2014–22). These trends have recently shown signs of further accentuation.

Between 2020 and 2022 over 700,000 deaths per year were recorded—among the highest annual figure ever, and substantially similar to the numbers recorded in the middle of the Second World War (1942–4). During this same period the number of births continued to decline, setting new negative records, as had happened year after year from 2013 onwards. The data currently available for the first 11 months of 2023 indicate that the number of births was lower than for the same period in the preceding year (-3.3%). Thus, it is very likely that the low figure of 393,000 births in 2022 will have further contracted in 2023 once the final figures are known. Therefore, the presence of a negative natural balance appears to be something that we will have to live with in the years to come.

In addition to these regressive dynamics that have triggered changes in the population’s size, important transformations are also taking place in its age structure, with a progressive increase in the number of older people. Conventionally identified as people over 65, the older person component of the population totalled 23.8% in 2023, having grown from 18.7% at the beginning of the century (2002) and just 13.2% 20 years earlier (1982).

This ‘demographic ageing’ began at the end of the last century and will persist and increase over the next three to four decades. Three factors underly it. The first is the rapid

**Table 1.** Balance of the Italian resident population, 2010–22, annual averages in thousands.

	2010–19	2020–2
Births (A)	494	399 (-19.2%)
Deaths (B)	617	719 (+16.5%)
Natural balance (C=A-B)	-123	-320 (+160%)
Migration impact balance (D)	+118	+105 (-11%)
Population change (C+D)	-5	-215

Source: ISTAT, author's own calculations.

and dramatic decline in the birth rate, which is depriving the country of an adequate inflow of young people. The second and third factors interact with one another and must be understood in combination. The first of these is the—certainly welcome—increase in the capacity to survive to old age. The second is linked to the high birth rates in the past, which are now producing a very substantial contingent of ‘mature’ people who are likely to survive and become part of the older population.

## A path from the past

The demographic changes we are experiencing, both in terms of negative growth and ageing structure, do not represent a sudden novelty of our time. It is well known that demographic phenomena—excluding exceptional circumstances (conflicts, natural disasters, or serious health or economic crises)—follow the inertia principle: today incorporates the manifestations of yesterday and creates the conditions for building tomorrow.

The decline of the Italian population, as well as its progressive ageing can, in fact, be largely explained by the volatile dynamics of the birth rate over the last 70 years. After the post-war recovery (beginning in 1946) and its exhaustion between 1947 and 1951, an ‘economic miracle’ led to a baby boom in the mid-1960s. A gradual return to more ordinary numbers of births occurred in the following years, until 1974, when a downturn in the birth rate heralded the start of a 20-year period of drastic decline. From 886,000 in 1974, the number of births per year dropped dramatically to just 628,000 seven years later (1981). It then continued to fall, bottoming out at 526,000 in 1995. This low number was then surpassed in 2013—as noted above—and, in a downward spiral, the number of births consistently shrunk in each of the subsequent nine years (2014–22).

At the beginning of the new century the contribution of the incoming foreign population, along with the related mechanism of family reunification, gave the illusion of a weak recovery, albeit one that was short-lived when faced with the economic crisis of 2008. With fewer and fewer people in the fertile age range, the number of potential parents grew smaller, while the economic difficulties for families increased. It is no surprise that the conjunction of these two factors caused a new and rapid collapse in the birth rate, which has since continued uninterrupted.



**Table 2.** Birth phases in Italy since the Second World War.

Five-year period	Annual births (average)		Synopsis
	In thousands	Rate (per 1,000)	
1946–50	986	21.2	Post-war recovery
1951–5	870	18.1	Back to normal
1956–60	897	18.1	Economic growth—towards baby boom
1961–5	980	19.1	Peak of the baby boom
1966–70	955	18.0	Momentum begins to run out
1971–5	884	16.1	First signs of a new course
1976–80	725	12.9	A collapse of extraordinary intensity
1981–5	613	10.8	A slower, but still strong, decline
1986–90	570	10.1	A further slowing, but still in decline
1991–5	549	9.7	Still declining (more slowly)
1996–2000	538	9.5	Prospects of stability emerging
2001–5	547	9.5	Modest signs of a trend reversal
2006–10	566	9.6	An 'immigration-driven' weak recovery
2011–15	517	8.6	Re-emergence of a downward trend
2016–22*	427	7.2	A new strong collapse

Source: Data from ISTAT; author's own compilation.

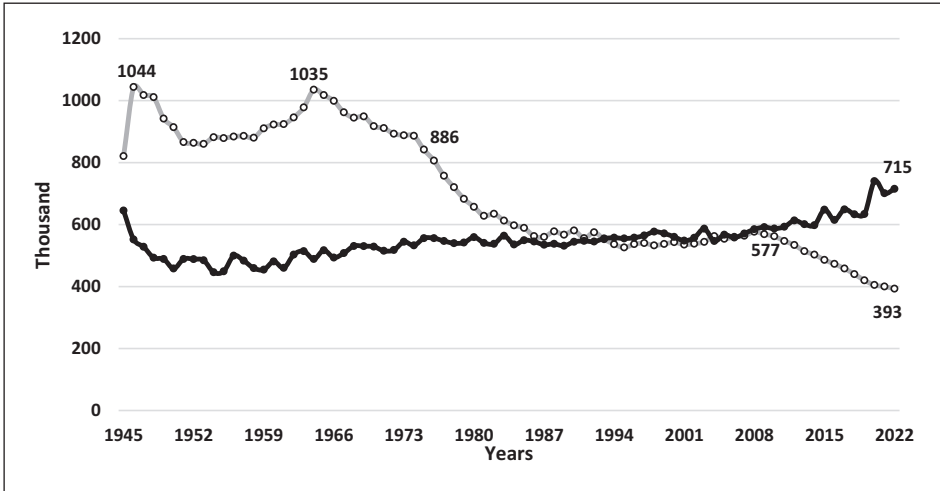
Note: \* = six-year period.

In 2020 Covid-19 burst onto the scene, having not only dramatic health consequences but a revolutionary impact on societal and family organisation. The changes it caused have strongly affected people's emotional well-being and reproductive attitudes, with consequences that are not yet fully understood.

As a result, the demographic regression we are experiencing is expected not only to continue but to speed up. The latest forecasts from the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT 2022b) predict—in the most likely scenario (the 'median variant')—a decline of 3 million in the number of residents in the next 20 years, and then a further decline over the following 20 years, to bring the population, now 59 million people, to under 50 million. Simultaneously, it is estimated that in 2043 not only will those over the age of 65 total a third of the residents, but that the number of elderly people (aged 90 and over) will be in the order of 1.3 million. Furthermore, the population's economically active component (conventionally 15–64 years old) will fall by more than 6 million in the next 20 years and then by a further 4 million in the following two decades.

## Consequences and problems

Knowledge of how these great structural and dimensional changes to the population will impact the country brings us to reflect on the resources we can rely on in the years to come. In this regard, a simple simulation exercise may be useful. Below we isolate and assess the effects on GDP of the expected population decline and the reduction in the share of working-age residents, as forecast by the National Statistical Institute.



**Figure 1.** Births and deaths (black line) in Italy since the Second World War.

Source: Data from ISTAT; author's own calculation.

The exercise shows how GDP, totalling €1,946 billion in 2022, may shrink to €1,625 billion by 2042 if—other conditions (activity rate, employment rate, average productivity per employee) being equal—the expected demographic changes to the population and its working-age component were to materialise. The decline compared to 2022 would be equal to 16.5% of GDP over 20 years (-12.2% at per capita level), rising to 25.7% over a 40-year horizon (-13% per capita).

Thus, the simulation shows how, at the national level, if no adequate support is provided through favourable changes to the three economic factors of reference (activity, employment and productivity), in 2062 there will be a loss of resources totalling approximately €500 billion due purely to demographic changes. This will happen precisely when, due to the ageing population, many more resources are likely to be needed. The collective expectation that the country is capable of guaranteeing good levels of quality of life, especially in terms of assistance and care, will simply not be realistic. This will be the result of both fewer economic resources being available and the fact that intra-family support is becoming increasingly fragile due to the progressive weakening of familial ties and the growth in the number of single elderly people.

Furthermore, with respect to the dynamics of consumption, these demographic shifts are also destined to bring about important changes to the Italian economy. The OECD assigns a consumption 'score' for each family unit based on a score of 1 for the first adult (the head of the family), 0.5 for each additional family member over 15 years old and 0.3 for those aged 0–14 years. If we apply these parameters to the population and the number of families expected in the 20-year period 2022–42 (ISTAT 2022a), consumption units are expected to shrink from 40.7 million to 39.9 million. This will likely affect aggregate demand, the production system and employment. These changes will have a fairly

limited negative impact at the national level (-1.84%), but will cause a more significant decline in southern Italy (-8.42%).

## From awareness to action

There can be no doubt that reversing the headlong demographic decline in Italy requires effective and timely interventions on multiple fronts. Although the effects will inevitably take time to filter through, the first line of action should involve addressing the birth rate and removing all obstacles that affect the reproductive choices of families, such as the cost of raising children, childcare problems, and difficulties in reconciling the respective spheres of parenthood and work. To seriously address the problem of the declining birth rate, we should combine the tools of politics and culture with a new and different approach that has a positive impact on the conditions that actually induce people to have a child (or an additional one). All of this should be done quickly, without any illusion of external help or magical solutions such as the important (but insufficient) contribution of foreigners, among whom the birth rate has halved over the last 20 years—from 23.5 per thousand in 2004 to 10.4 per thousand in 2022.

A second area of action must be in the field of international mobility. This should not only open up new routes for well-governed immigration, adequately accompanied by valid paths to full integration, but also act to contain emigration. The latter is a popular choice among younger cohorts that have excellent education levels, often at the graduate and post-graduate levels, but have limited (or even zero) opportunities to achieve success within the national borders.

Finally, to address (or simply attenuate) the problematic effects of demographic change, a further area for intervention is among the living conditions of ‘older people’—or the ‘differently young’—that is, those not yet belonging to the universe of the ‘elderly’. We are referring, in particular, to those who are still capable of being productive and for whom the boundaries of the seasons of life should not be defined on the basis of rigid age thresholds, but rather should be modulated over time according to progress in terms of life expectancy and physical and mental fitness. In this sense, for example, if we select from all those over 65 those expected to have (at the current life expectancy) ‘still more than 20% of their total life to be lived’, we can see that today nearly 3 million such residents, who are ‘differently young’, could potentially be economically and socially activated, with allowances made for personal choice and convenience. This number will grow to 5 million in the next 10 years.

In any case, if we utilise the logic of mobile boundaries—that is to say, old people are not *those who have lived for x years*, but *those who have less than x% of their expected total life left to live*—this weakens the phenomenon of demographic ageing. By adopting the measure of ‘20% of expected total life’ as the flexible threshold for changing status, the percentage of the Italian population who are to be counted as old would drop from the current 23.8% (if all over-65s are considered old) to 19%. Furthermore, rather than forming two-thirds of the total number of residents in 20 years’ time, their share would be reduced to less than a quarter.

**Table 3.** Numbers of 'older' Italian residents according to different definitions, 1982–2062.

Years	Aged 65 and over		With less than 20% of expected total life left to live	
	Million	Per 100 residents	Million	Per 100 residents
1982	7.5	13.2	7.6	13.4
1992	8.8	15.5	7.5	13.3
2002	10.7	18.7	8.8	15.4
2012	12.5	20.8	9.9	16.5
2022	14.1	23.8	11.2	19.0
2032	16.3	28.2	11.0	19.0
2042	18.7	33.3	13.4	23.9
2052	18.6	34.5	13.8	25.6
2062	17.2	34.0	12.7	25.1

Source: Data from ISTAT, author's own compilation.

## Conclusion: guidelines for sustainable demography

Looking at the present with one eye on the future, the demographic data convey a pressing need for the renewal of the population, both in a quantitative and a qualitative sense.

It is necessary to act on the availability of human capital, encouraging both its production, by removing any obstacle (economic, regulatory or cultural) that may hinder fertility, and its acquisition, with appropriate initiatives to govern international mobility flows. At the same time we must seize the opportunity to appreciate the component of the population that, despite its maturity, still has the energy and skills to be part of the economy and social system.

To seriously address the problem of insufficient generational turnover, it is necessary to combine the tools of politics and culture with a different approach in which resources, capacity and imagination help to introduce new solutions. This being said, we must not forget to utilise and enhance the valuable tools already at our disposal, including those outlined in the 2012 National Plan for the Family (Italy, Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Department for Family Policies 2012).

Additionally, it is important to start recognising young people as social subjects whose needs must be met if they are expected to play an active role in society. It is time for the country to embrace the European youth policies which promote the meaningful participation of young people in decisions and activities, both on a local and a national level. These policies must be considered a strong departure point for building a more democratic, more supportive and more prosperous society. Local authorities can play a leading role in promoting youth policies, guiding new generations in their education, training, autonomy and independence. For this reason it is necessary to create a cultural environment that respects young people and encourages their energies and aspirations for change, combining this with the needs of the regions, which must be made attractive and

viewed as sources of opportunity. Only in this way will it be possible to think positively about the future and limit the demographic consequences of ageing and depopulation, which are already affecting quality of life in many significant areas of the country.

Finally, we must consider that passing through the various stages of life affects and will increasingly also condition the transition to the elderly state. Being young, adult or elderly no longer only relates to biological and demographic factors. In fact, there is a growing distance between chronological age, its social representation and the perception that individuals have of it. The points in time and ways in which one passes from youth to adulthood and then into old age are partially a result of the economic conditions, lifestyles and, more generally, the human capital of individuals. But they also reflect the institutional and social context in which members of each generation interpret their life paths.

Ultimately, to ensure and preserve the presence of an active and involved older population, a comprehensive view of the entire life course needs to be developed. This overview would help to ensure that reforms and investments are made that promote the awareness and adoption of a healthy lifestyle from a young age. The ambition must be to encourage social and cultural participation through all stages of life in order to postpone the moment when we are overtaken by the effects of ageing, with their inevitable consequences for health and autonomy.

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## Author biography



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# From 'demographic bomb' to 'silver tsunami': Navigating global population shifts

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## Abstract

Just six decades ago, the world was experiencing remarkably high population growth rates, which led to the coining of the term 'demographic bomb' to describe concerns associated with population size. At the time, the global population was three billion. Since then, an extra billion people have been added every 12 years. However, the pre-eminent demographic challenge of the twenty-first century is population ageing, a global, irreversible and unprecedented trend. The number of people aged 65 and over has almost doubled since the turn of the century and currently accounts for 10% of the global population. An extra billion people are expected to age into the older category within the next 35 years. In Europe, half of the population is above 45 years of age, and the number of those above 65 years old is greater than the number of children under 15. Commonly referred to as the 'silver tsunami', it is feared that the increasing number of older people will have a destructive impact on economies and social systems. Never before have our lives been longer, our families smaller and our societies more multigenerational. The new reality of longevity requires a shift in how we approach ageing. This article explores ways to cope with the challenges of the silver era we are heading towards.

## Keywords

Demographic dynamics, Population ageing, Global population trends, Regional inequalities

## Introduction

'Demography is destiny': this well-known maxim, commonly ascribed to French philosopher Auguste Comte, remains as relevant and controversial today as it was in the early nineteenth century when it was formulated, and when the impressive growth in the

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global population began. Demographics have a fundamental impact on the economy, the society and the environment, as well as politics. Moreover, the current demographic trends have been dictated by previous developments and not only define the everyday lives of our generation, but also those of the generations who come after us.

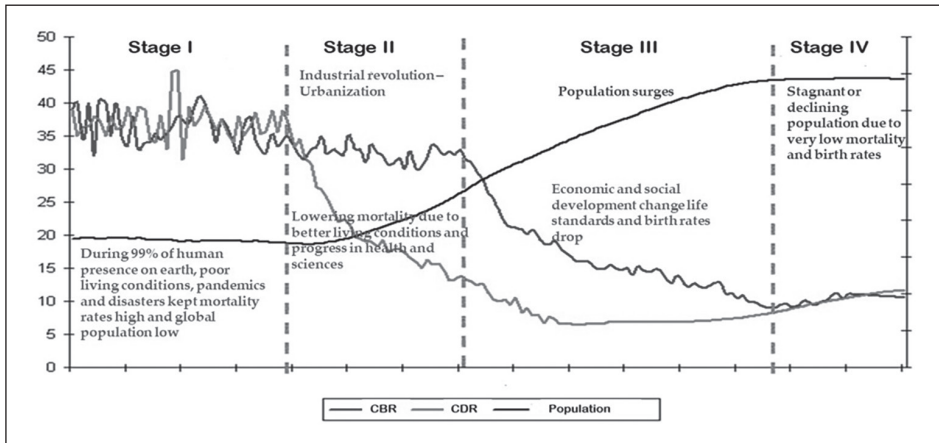
Throughout human history, population size and dynamics have been directly and positively associated with prosperity, stability and security (Livi-Bacci 2001, 1). According to conventional wisdom, all other things being equal, a large population is supposed to be capable of defending its rights more efficiently, forwarding its claims more powerfully and laying down its conditions on the international stage more decisively than a small one. Paradoxically, an equally widespread conviction blames high population growth rates for poverty, resource scarcity and political instability. Evidently, demographic considerations vary significantly across regions and time periods; however, the importance of population issues remains undeniable (Tragaki 2011, 436).

In 1900, the global population counted 1.6 billion people; by 1999 its volume had quadrupled. Eleven years later the world's population hit 7 billion people and another 11 years later it had reached the 8 billion milestone. It is astonishing how quickly the time needed to increase the population by an extra billion people is shrinking. However, while the global population is expected to keep growing, this will be at a reduced pace: according to UN estimations, the population may peak at 12 billion, at some point before the end of this century (UN, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2022). This would be a level well below the numbers feared a couple of decades ago, but still high enough from an environmental point of view.

## **The population bomb**

During 99% of the period of human presence on the planet, population growth rates were almost zero. Despite being high, fertility rates were offset by correspondingly high mortality. Persistently high mortality rates—due to wars, famines, poor living conditions, poor nutrition, epidemics and natural disasters—kept global population levels low. Then the Industrial Revolution arrived, which triggered the demographic transition.

The demographic transition describes the shift from a population of high mortality and high birth rates to low mortality and low birth rates. This transition occurs as populations pass through four discrete and successive stages, directly linked to their economic and social development. The low population level mentioned above represents Stage I. Then mortality rates decline (Stage II), followed by falling birth rates (Stage III). As mortality falls, more people survive childhood, become adults, and enter the reproductive and working ages of life. During this period the number of births largely outpaces the number of deaths. These are the years of high population growth rates. Birth rates then gradually follow a downward path due to economic development and urbanisation, which reduce infant mortality as well as causing a shift in gender roles that affects the desire to have a large family (Figure 1).



**Figure I.** The demographic transition model.

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Note: CBR refers to the crude birth rate (number of births per 1,000 persons) and CDR to the crude death rate (number of deaths per 1,000 persons).

During Stage III, the dependency ratio (defined as the ratio of active persons to those who are dependent) is favourable. If accompanied by effective governance, decreasing dependency ratios have the potential to translate into significant GDP growth. This phenomenon was notably observed in the majority of developed nations during the third quartile of the twentieth century, and was the catalyst for the economic upsurge in South-East Asia during the final quarter of the century. This is the 'demographic dividend', which can only be reaped if, at this crucial moment when the demographics are favourable, a country invests in human capital and makes structural reforms, such as those that will ensure inclusive access to financial services, encourage foreign direct investment, liberalise trade and set up a sustainable pension system. This demographic window of opportunity only lasts for a couple of decades before the last stage of demographic transition is reached, when both mortality and birth rates are low, offsetting each other and thus stabilising the population (Stage IV).

Evidently, different countries follow different timelines, with different starting points and varying durations spent in each stage. One common element shared by all countries in this transition process is the sequence of the stages. Declines in mortality come first, followed by declining birth rates. This sequence gives time for the population to grow. Currently, the so-designated more developed regions have concluded their demographic transition, with their population growth rates having slowed, while the least developed regions are still growing. This disparity highlights the geographical heterogeneity of population dynamics.

The global population will keep growing until all regions have completed the demographic transition. This is expected to happen sometime before the end of this century,



when population growth is expected to come to an end. If projections are correct, another four billion people (mainly in Africa) will have been added by the time the global population reaches its peak.

## Shifting population concerns

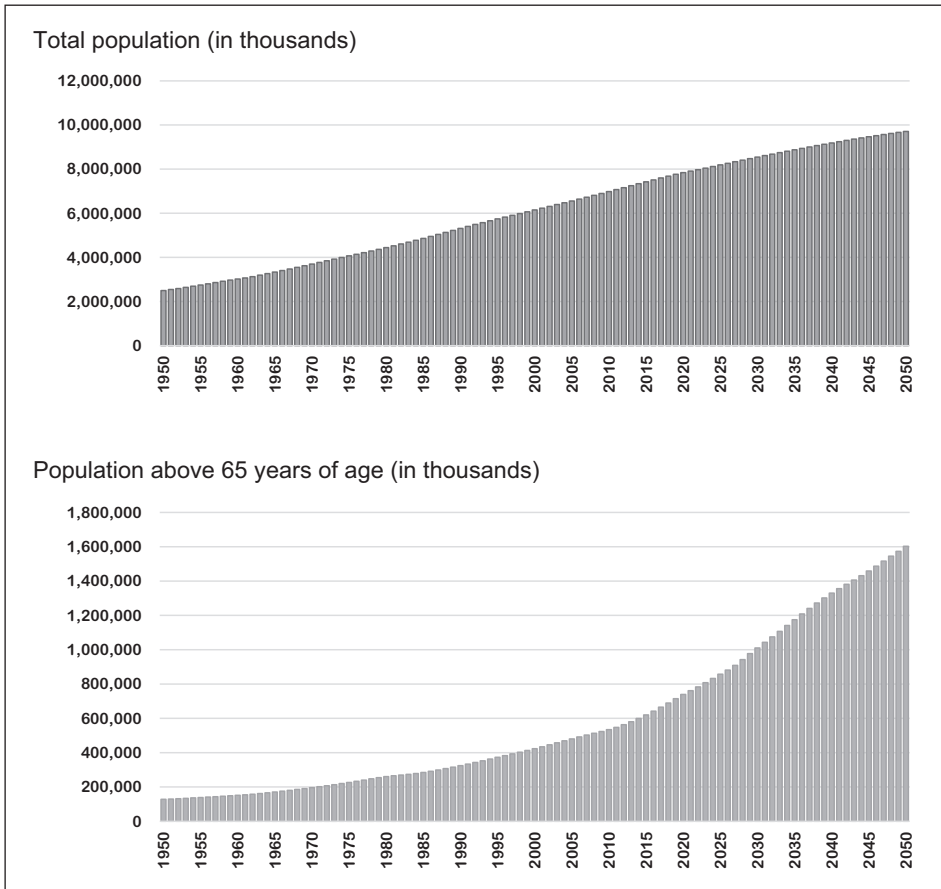
The population explosion that marked the twentieth century raised serious concerns about its effects on development and the environment. Economists have long argued about the interaction between population growth and economic development. It remains an open and unresolved subject of debate between those who regard population growth as a brake on economic development and those more optimistic about human adaptability, who claim that history has never confirmed Thomas Malthus's theory.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the population has kept growing, but so has per capita income; famines have occurred, but there has never been an absolute shortage of food. Actually, food production has grown faster than the population, and the global numbers of those living in poverty have declined. So, it appears that 'we have survived the population bomb' (Lam 2023, 14).

Currently, the major concerns have shifted from food shortages to food insecurity and the climate crisis, from population growth rates to the demographic and economic imbalances responsible for the huge migratory waves, and from the 'youth bulge' to a major shift that will profoundly affect the economic and social status quo: population ageing (Bongaarts 2023).

Population ageing reflects the increasing share of people above 65 years of age in the aftermath of the demographic transition. Falling mortality at all ages means longer lifespans for more people, not just for the lucky ones. The increase in life expectancy is, without exaggeration, one of humanity's most revolutionary achievements. A newborn baby today is estimated to live an average of about 72 years, at least 25 years longer than the average lifespan in 1950. Despite the persistent geographical and racial variations hidden by these averages, the overall progress is impressive. The population ageing process was initially caused by the spectacular increases in longevity and then accelerated by declining fertility rates. The increase in life expectancy allows a greater number of people to survive to older ages, while the declining birth rate is shrinking the size of younger cohorts. Thus, the relative weight of the over-65 cohort in the total population is increasing.

This increase has been even more spectacular than that of the total population, as shown in Figure 2. The recent falls in life expectancy, largely due to the Covid-19 pandemic, have not really influenced this trend (Schöley et al. 2022; Heuveline 2022).

Longer lifespans are a blessing at the individual level. There is, however, a pitfall: as we live longer, we get older. As massive numbers of people grow old and large cohorts reach the top of the population pyramid at the expense of the younger cohorts, the economic and social structures become endangered. The numerical explosion of



**Figure 2.** Population increase, 1950–2020.

Source: UN, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022).

older people is often described as a ‘silver tsunami’, an alarming term that warns of the massive destruction that is about to hit many nations. The growing share of elderly and older people in the population puts pressure on and affects practically all spheres of life (Goodhart and Pradhan 2020, 1).

The financial sustainability of the pension system and the surge in health care costs are among the first issues to cause anxiety. The pensions of an increasing number of retirees are covered by the contributions and taxes paid by a decreasing number of workers. Whether based on a pay-as-you-go or a funded system, pension schemes are equally vulnerable to demographic developments. The sustainability of the pay-as-you-go system is affected by the unfavourable change in the proportions of beneficiaries (pensioners) and contributors (employees) in the population, while the funded system is

particularly vulnerable to low returns due to demographic ageing. Equally, as a population ages, the demand for health care increases, with impacts in terms of both costs and the human resources needed: the more numerous the elderly, the higher the prevalence and incidence of age-related chronic diseases. Potential labour and skills shortages in this sector could jeopardise our living standards.

The working-age population will grow much less rapidly than it used to. In most developed countries it will soon be in decline, and in some, such as Japan, Italy and Greece, the labour force has already started to shrink. This is particularly alarming, not only because of the unsustainable pension commitments, but also in terms of output growth, tax revenues and future wage levels, and their impact on inflation and interest rates. Moreover, demographic ageing leads, in some cases, to a reduction in the number of users and beneficiaries of certain public goods or services. Thus, there is a serious risk that certain infrastructure (e.g. buildings, transport, roads) will become obsolete or that certain services (e.g. education) will cease to exist in regions where the number of users falls below the level necessary to make their maintenance economically viable. This is already the case in several rural European regions menaced by depopulation.

Population ageing is the pre-eminent demographic trend all over the world. However, Europe is the most aged of all the major regions, and the historic crossover has already happened here, with those over 65 years of age already more numerous than children under 15 years old.

In the decades to come the numbers of elderly and older people will continue to grow rapidly, while total population growth rates will slow down. In 2020, there were 727 million people aged 65 or older. This number is expected to more than double by 2050.

### **Is there a way out?**

Most of the people that will be alive in 2050 have already been born, and all of those who will be over 65 are already here. Also already here are all the potential parents for the years to come, so their procreation is highly predictable. Population ageing is much more than the main demographic trend of the current century; it is the ‘inescapable demographic future’ of humanity (Chamie 2022), for it cannot be slowed down nor solved (Coleman 2008; Potancokov et al. 2021). To make things even more complicated, population ageing is an unprecedented phenomenon, with no previous experience nor good practices to rely on. Ageing is here to stay, and whether we like it or not there is no other option but to cope with it . . . and cope with it successfully!

Living not just longer but also healthier lives is so crucial a parameter that the UN has declared the years 2020–30 the Decade of Healthy Ageing. Instead of just making old age longer, the real benefit of longevity will come from spreading middle age. This has already been partly achieved. The definition of ‘old’ has intensively evolved over recent years: 50 is already the new 35. The next goal is to make 80 the new 60. Formulated in

demographic terms, the key to this is the so-called *longevity dividend*: the gains that can be realised if higher life expectancy is matched by health improvements, changes in individual behaviours and shifts in social norms so as to achieve healthy, long, purposeful and productive lives. To that end, individual and social preparation are required so as to age in physically and emotionally healthy ways without putting economic sustainability and social cohesion in peril.

Ageing is an issue to be discussed within different contexts so as to increase awareness across all ages. Ageing is not only about old people; it concerns us all, no matter what stage of life we are at. Living longer demands that we redesign our lives—so as to virtually remake every stage of life. The model of education–work–retirement, dictated by age segregation, is simply no longer viable. The importance of lifelong learning is widely recognised, with activity and social involvement after retirement promoted and small career breaks used to help redefine one’s professional path. The different stages of life need to be less age-driven than they used to be, and intergenerational collaboration greater than ever before.

Population ageing has reshaped the structure and composition of modern societies: never before have our lives been longer, never before have our families been smaller and never before have so many age cohorts coexisted. Since the turn of the millennium, major demographic shifts have unfolded, affecting the social, economic and physical environment. Europe has recognised that the well-being of future generations is subject to how rapidly and efficiently the transformations necessary to cope with these shifts are carried out.

The relevant discussions, though, remain rather superficial and fragmentary. The public is largely unaware, even ignorant, of the demographic challenge and its implications, while policymakers are failing to detect the substantial inequalities within the population, instead coming up with ‘one-size-fits-all’ solutions.

Despite being universal, the gains in life expectancy have highlighted social and regional inequalities. We age differently: different cohorts age differently, people of different social milieux and economic backgrounds age differently.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, different regions age differently: economic performance, social cohesion and environmental conditions, but also (surprisingly) common beliefs and social stereotypes influence both the length and the quality of our lifespan (Levy 2022). Coping with ageing demands a completely new mental framework: we need to rethink, both individually and as societies, the way in which we approach life and ageing, so as to stay healthy, active, updated and involved—in other words, to age successfully (Cavendish 2019).

Moreover a new economy, the Silver Economy, will emerge. The Silver Economy will grow in importance and profitability in various areas, both public and private. Health, finance, employment, tourism, leisure and well-being, education, and the use of digital tools make up a non-exhaustive list of areas with great potential for growth.

## Conclusion

Ageing is taking place in a very specific context along with two more drivers of global change: the climate crisis and the development of artificial intelligence (AI). With regard to the first, the climate crisis is not age-neutral (Cooper 2022; Haq 2023): it is well-documented that older people are more likely to have health conditions that make them more sensitive to climate hazards, such as extreme heat. Moreover, the elderly are more vulnerable to natural disasters due to their physical limitations, slower reactions and even their unwillingness to abandon their homes in time. With regard to the second driver of change, AI could, subject to certain conditions, ease some of the negative effects of labour shortages in specific sectors; alleviate the pressure of health care costs, especially for long-term care; and help improve the everyday lives of those in need. Safe, smart and affordable houses; remote health care; reliable transportation; and wearable devices are expected to make ageing at home feasible for a growing number of people. Care-delivering robots are already being successfully used in nursing homes in Japan (Wright 2023). The use of generative AI in social care is one of the most promising developments: the early detection of health issues, the creation of personalised health care plans, and the provision of chatbots for mental health support and robotics for companionship may radically change the way we live and age in the years to come.

Population ageing is the great game changer. It demands the mobilisation of all economic and social agents. The magnitude of its impacts cannot be fully grasped; nor can the scale of the opportunities that stem from it. Longevity was the great human achievement of the twentieth century. The proper management of it, for the benefit of present and future generations, needs to be the accomplishment of the twenty-first century.

## Notes

1. Malthus was convinced that the population grows geometrically while food production increases only arithmetically. In his famous Malthusian Theory of Population, formulated in 1798, he thus argued that in the absence of a ‘control’ there will be a larger population than could be supported by the available food, and many would therefore inevitably die from this shortage. He theorised that a correction would take place in the form of a ‘natural check’ (such as natural disasters, wars and famines) unless ‘preventative checks’ (such as family planning, late marriage and celibacy, especially among poor population groups) were applied by governments. These checks would lead to a Malthusian catastrophe, which would bring the population back to a ‘sustainable level’ (Malthus 1998).
2. There are populations in the US with life expectancies of below 60 years of age—similar to those of Sierra Leone, Mozambique and Burkina Faso.

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# Changing the narrative: The future we want to see. Insights from older generations

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## Abstract

Demographic change, a prominent trend in our societies, impacts the labour market, pensions, and the health and care sectors, among others. Concurrently, ageing brings opportunities, as older people actively contribute to society through work, caregiving and knowledge sharing. When looking at demographic change, it is important to consider its intersections with other global trends, such as inequality, climate change and technological advancements, and how this interconnectedness impacts people's daily lives across their lifespan.

This article delves into recent European policy approaches and research on demographic change, pinpointing shortcomings and suggesting initiatives to reshape perceptions of ageing and revise the current narrative of old age. Drawing on insights from AGE Platform Europe, the European advocacy organisation of and for older people, this article highlights the collective advocacy efforts at the European and international levels. These efforts aim to truly embody the European motto 'United in Diversity' and to foster fairer and more resilient societies.

## Keywords

Age, Ageing, Demographic change, Narrative, Europe, Policies, Future

## Introduction

Demographic change is one of the most significant trends faced by contemporary societies. Its impact stretches from the labour market, where it is shrinking the working-age population; to pensions, where it is resulting in an increasing proportion of retirees relative to the working-age population; and to the care sector, where there is a forecast

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increase in the need for care services, among others. At the same time, the ageing population offers the inestimable potential of older people, who are actively engaged in our societies through paid or voluntary work, informal care, political participation, and the sharing of their skills and knowledge with other generations.

Demographic change, however, does not happen in a vacuum: it connects with other major global trends, such as the widening of inequalities, climate change and environmental degradation, the acceleration of technological change and hyperconnectivity, and the changing nature of work. And it affects people in their daily lives.

This article explores some of the most recent policy tools and research work on demographic change, highlighting the relevant shortcomings and proposing initiatives that are more likely to change the narrative around age and ageing. Based on work carried out by AGE Platform Europe, the article highlights the work of a whole movement of advocates at the European and international levels which aims to translate into practice the European motto ‘United in Diversity’ and to provide an opportunity for Europe to build a fairer and more resilient society.

## **One toolbox does not fit all: European initiatives on ageing**

Europe is and has long been one of the fastest ageing continents in the world. Since the establishment of the European Union, research and policies have been shaped to deal with demographic change, its far-reaching consequences, and its interdependency with other major societal trends and challenges.

The EU and its member states, which share an interest in responding to the impact of demographic change, pool knowledge and resources for the benefit of all Europeans. One of the most recent outcomes of this work is the Demography Toolbox (European Commission 2023).

Released by the European Commission at the end of 2023 to respond to demographic change and its impacts on the EU’s society and economy, the Demography Toolbox is structured around four pillars. These are (1) support for parents through the introduction of work–life balance policies, (2) support for younger generations to access the labour market and affordable housing, (3) support for older generations to promote their autonomy and participation, and (4) the attraction of talent from outside the EU to address labour shortages.

In line with the conclusions of the European Council (2023), the Toolbox seeks to support member states in fine-tuning and coordinating European and national policies that mitigate the impact of demographic change on Europe’s competitiveness. However, in line with its mandate, while the Toolbox takes a stance on economic issues, it misses the opportunity to approach ageing from the perspective of rights and quality of life.

Putting ‘welfare’ above ‘well-being’ hinders the change of paradigm and narrative around demographic change. Furthermore, from the analysis carried out by AGE Platform Europe (2021a), other key tools that have been proposed at the European level to deal with demographic challenges also present some shortcomings.



The Employment Equality Directive (European Council 2000) is meant to protect against age-based discrimination at work. However, more than two decades since its adoption, the Directive is not very effective at preventing stigmatisation and ageism at work. A major hitch is that the Directive leaves it up to the member state to define age limits in employment and vocational training, which results in its heterogeneous application across the EU. Furthermore, the Work–Life Balance Directive (European Parliament and Council 2019) does not duly consider middle-aged informal carers, who are squeezed between work duties and caring responsibilities.

The adoption of the Horizontal Equal Treatment Directive (European Commission 2008) would be key to banning age discrimination in all areas of society, looking beyond the employment sector. Unfortunately, progress on this draft directive has not advanced, and has been blocked by member states since 2008, despite longstanding lobbying efforts by civil society organisations.

Alongside these Directives and other acts and policies, the European Commission carries out wide-ranging research and academic work on demographic change, conscious of how research and innovation can support the flexibility and responsive capacity of stakeholders in crisis periods. This helps, for instance, by informing policy development and decision-making on enhancing resilience and preparedness for future events.

Among the relevant projects financed by the Commission’s Horizon Europe Programme, the Futuresilience and FutuRes projects are worth mentioning. The first facilitates the fast and effective use of policy research findings through 10 selected pilot case studies called ‘Future Resilience Labs’. The aim of the project is to develop innovative tools with which the EU can foster resilience, including a knowledge base, a toolbox and a policy roadmap.

The latter, FutuRes—Towards a Resilient Future for Europe, aims to identify the demographic policies that will be needed in the future and how they can be improved to ensure that people of all ages will be better equipped to face various kinds of crises and unexpected shocks. In adopting a life-course perspective and studying resilience across many countries and populations, FutuRes works to prepare society for future challenges, both at an individual level (e.g. unexpected exposure to unemployment, illness or loneliness) and at a societal level (e.g. inflation, mass migration or natural catastrophes). FutuRes research combines population data with economic modelling and innovative foresight methods to formulate future scenarios to support policymakers. FutuRes is designing a platform through which decision-makers from research, politics, business and civil society can engage and work closely together to produce evidence-informed solutions, suitable for all generations.

Despite the many initiatives and progress throughout the decades, Europe still lacks a comprehensive paradigm on age and ageing. The good news is that such a paradigm has already been drafted, and some initiatives are becoming more and more prominent in the European landscape.

## Changing the narrative around ageing

We age from the day we are born, and we have all changed since that day. But in contrast to what happens to us when ageing, our human rights do not change based on how old we are. Despite this, ageism, that is, discrimination on the grounds of age, is a reality we often face, and one that poses a threat to our ability to fully exercise our rights as we grow older.

Ageism impacts the way we think of (stereotypes), feel about (prejudice) and act towards (discrimination) others or ourselves according to age. It affects people of all ages around the globe and prevents the enjoyment of our human rights across our lifetimes. Ageism is associated with earlier death, with a lower quality of life, and with poorer physical and mental health, including the onset of depression. Moreover, it increases risky health behaviours (e.g. eating an unhealthy diet, smoking), social isolation and loneliness (WHO 2021). Ageism furthermore pits generations against each other, with the old discriminating against the young and vice versa. It also intersects with gender, race, disability and so on, creating specific forms of multiple discrimination, such as against older women, or older people with disabilities.

How to combat ageism? It is necessary to change the narrative around ageing, to unveil and correct discrimination, prejudice and stereotypes based on age. The 194 member states of the World Health Organization (WHO) have requested that the organisation works across sectors and stakeholder groups to set up and implement a global campaign to combat ageism (WHO n.d.). This campaign aims to build a world for all ages; to raise awareness of ageism, highlighting the risks it brings; and to show how policies can cope with and dismantle ageism by changing how we all think, feel and act with regard to age and ageing.

At the European level, 2019 marked the seventieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and AGE Platform Europe conceived and ran a 70-day global campaign against ageism. Called Ageing Equal, this online campaign was the first Europe-wide effort to raise awareness that ‘human rights do not diminish with age’ (AGE Platform Europe 2018). Still available, with content and testimonies, the Ageing Equal (n.d.) website calls for equal rights for all ages and raises awareness of the harmful consequences of ageism.

More recently, the Age Without Limits (n.d.) campaign, by the Centre for Better Ageing, aims to change the way we all think about ageing and underpins a growing movement of people and organisations working to make society more age-inclusive. Since 2023 this campaign has boosted the positive depiction of later life, making available the first free library with positive and realistic portrayals of older people, and has challenged everyday ageism through the production of a dedicated guide.

From awareness-raising among European citizens to awareness-raising among European policymakers, many actions can be taken. In its EU Strategy for Age Equality,

AGE Platform Europe (2021b) goes the extra mile to sensitise European institutions to ageism and drafts age-inclusive policies that would benefit both younger and older generations.

## **Towards age equality in Europe**

The European goal of achieving a ‘Union of Equality’ (European Commission n.d.) cannot be reached unless the narrative around ageing embraces equality and human rights from a life-course perspective, that is, from the cradle to the grave. To effectively cope with the challenges of demographic change, discrimination must be eradicated, and space given to equality. The topic of ageing should be mainstreamed, and equality and human rights at all ages should be advanced across many areas, starting with equal access to essential services, the opportunity to age in a healthy way, sustainable and high-quality working lives, adequate pensions, an old-age minimum income, and protection against all forms of abuse and violence.

This is a clear call to action for the European institutions, and a much-needed one in these uncertain times: this is a moment when solidarity and resilience must be strongly cultivated to allow the European population to remain united in its diversity. However, a few months ahead of the 2024 European Parliament elections, the EU seems to be struggling to find balance and unity. Elections are divisive moments in many countries, with competing ideologies, values and claims being debated. Differences in political beliefs, socio-economic perspectives, cultural values and ideas of the future, among others, can trigger divisions. At the European level, such divisions are echoed and sometimes magnified, making the search for unity a real battle.

Achieving a Union of Equality requires ongoing collaboration, vision, strategy and commitment among and across the member states. It requires ensuring age equality; gender equality; and equal opportunities in education, healthcare and employment. It is also a matter of rule of law and democracy, upholding democratic values and protecting human rights.

The next European legislature would benefit hugely from a European Parliament Intergroup that supports a human rights-based approach to age and ageing, and that gives voice to tangible proposals regarding ageing in the areas of health care, employment, social protection and inclusion, digitalisation and the environment, among others. By utilising the EU Strategy on Age Equality proposed by AGE Platform Europe, the European Parliament Intergroup could maximise its efforts and count on clear guidelines for a more inclusive and egalitarian EU.

Furthermore, AGE Platform Europe works with its members and allies to ensure that both current and future older generations are valued and respected across their lifetimes, regardless of people’s abilities and needs. In collaboration with the European Youth Forum, AGE Platform Europe calls for an intergenerational dialogue and exchange of cultural, professional and technological knowledge and skills between younger and older

people, as highlighted in their joint declaration (AGE Platform Europe and European Youth Forum 2023).

While respecting and celebrating diversity, there is also a need for consistency and coherency in policies and practices across the EU. These are crucial to ensuring equal treatment, fostering solidarity, and maintaining the integrity of the single market and other shared institutions. With a new European Commission on the horizon, AGE Platform Europe is working closely with various Directorate-Generals within the European Commission to mainstream age equality and ensure the effective coordination of policies and services.

## **Ageing, globally**

Across the EU, age discrimination remains one of the most pervasive forms of unequal treatment, with over 45% of individuals believing that age discrimination is widespread in their country (Eurobarometer 2023). Globally, one in two people are ageist towards older people (WHO 2021). In the EU, age discrimination is the most socially accepted and the least legally protected characteristic, because of both the lack of an adequate legal and policy framework, and the varying interpretations of the exemption clauses included in the existing and proposed EU non-discrimination legislation. One of the beacon organisations in the field of human rights and ageing at the international level is the Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People (GAROP). Established in 2011 on the initiative of nine organisations<sup>1</sup> with the aim of strengthening the rights and voices of older people globally, today GAROP has over 400 organisational members worldwide, supporting civil society engagement with member states and human rights institutions at the national, regional and international levels around a proposed UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons.

GAROP is holding a global conversation with citizens across the globe to design the future we want. To mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of the UN, GAROP organised a far-reaching international debate and gathered views on people's priorities, challenges and solutions to bridge current gaps and cope with future risks. One of the recommendations that emerged from this consultation was that governments should take steps to progress the writing of the above-mentioned proposed UN Convention. This important outcome underlines the urgent need for a change of narrative, explicitly recognising older people in international human rights laws, and legally binding and making governments accountable for fulfilling the rights of all people across the life-course.

As ageism and age discrimination can result in a violation of people's rights that knows no boundaries, the world needs an international instrument to ensure our rights as we grow older. With the EU and its member states being global leaders in the defence and promotion of human rights (AGE Platform Europe 2022), the next European Commission should lead the calls for the establishment of the UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons. 'To date no international human rights treaty has been adopted without the support of European states. The ongoing debate about the feasibility of a new

UN convention allows the EU to demonstrate in practice its leadership to ensuring equal respect of everyone's rights at all ages' (AGE Platform Europe 2022).

## Conclusions: embracing age equality in Europe

The challenges brought about by demographic change require Europe to recognise the diversity of ageing across society and its intersection with other societal trends. Initiatives such as the European Commission's Demography Toolbox and the advocacy work of AGE Platform Europe highlight the need for comprehensive policy responses to address age-related challenges and to prioritise equality across all ages and policies.

As Europe faces a period of internal and external tensions, and is confronted by many global crises (war, climate change, the energy crisis, migration etc.), fostering unity and solidarity becomes paramount. Achieving a Union of Equality requires collaborative efforts across the member states, grounded in democratic values and human rights principles.

Looking ahead, the next European Commission must seize the opportunity to lead on age equality, both domestically and internationally. By championing initiatives such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons, Europe can reaffirm its commitment to human rights and set a global precedent for age equality.

### Note

1. GAROP was founded through the efforts of the following organisations: International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse, International Longevity Centre – Global Alliance, International Federation on Ageing, International Association of Homes and Services for the Ageing, International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics, HelpAge International, AGE Platform Europe, Age UK and AARP – The American Association of Retired Persons.

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**Ilenia Gheno** is a project manager at AGE Platform Europe. Since 2009 she has worked on European projects related to universal design, health and e-health, accessibility and new technologies, rooting for the genuine involvement of older adults in projects and monitoring the ethical implications of research. She is also active in disseminating the projects' results, with the goal of bringing scientific evidence to the attention of European policymakers and stakeholders.



# Strengthening the labour force participation of low-qualified individuals in Europe

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## Abstract

This article addresses the labour market challenges faced by adults with low formal qualifications. While low-level formal qualifications are usually associated with a lower skill level, it is crucial to recognise the large heterogeneity of skills within the group of low-qualified individuals in all countries. Although better skills enhance the job opportunities of low-qualified workers, their lack of formal qualifications limits their job prospects, even if they are as skilled as more highly qualified workers. Their placement in low-skilled jobs has implications for their participation in further training. Limited access to adult training is primarily caused by employment in these low-skilled jobs rather than by differences in cognitive skills or motivation to learn. Policies should, therefore, focus on strategies that improve training opportunities in the workplace, and employers should consider modifying hiring methods to place greater weight on actual

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skills in addition to formal qualifications. Both approaches would, economically speaking, enable the utilisation of the existing skill potential of low-qualified adults and, socially, enhance the employment prospects of this group.

### **Keywords**

Low-qualified workers, Skills, Job placements, Adult training, Hiring practices

## **Introduction**

Although the share of low-qualified adults who have not completed upper-secondary education decreased from 28.8% in 2013 to 24.9% in 2022, this group still represents a quarter of the working-age population (aged 15–64) living in the EU27 (Eurostat 2023a). Low-qualified adults are one of the most vulnerable groups in the labour market. They are at high risk of being unemployed or being excluded from the labour market altogether, or of ending up in low-paying jobs. According to the latest Eurostat data (Q3, 2023), the EU27 working-age unemployment rate among this group was 11.6%, compared to only 5.6% for those with upper-secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education (Eurostat 2023b).

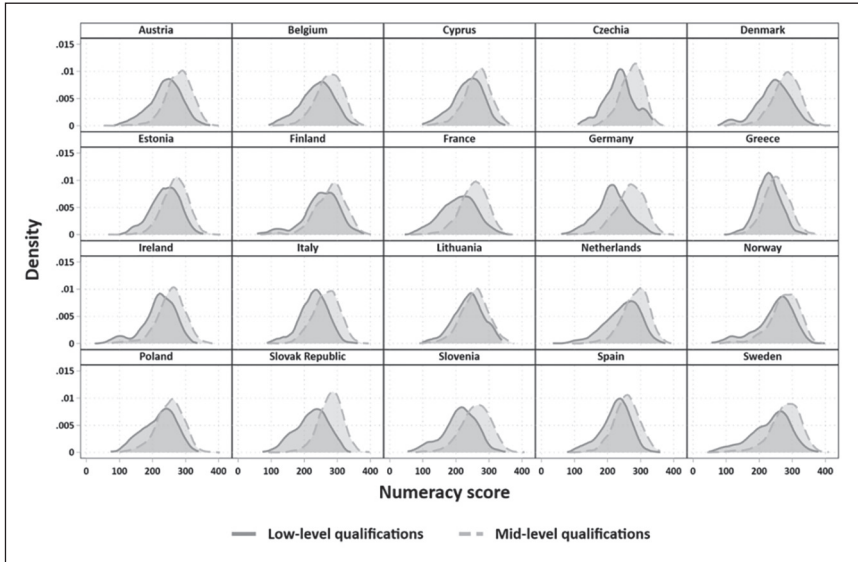
In a series of research articles, summarised below, we used data from the first cycle of PIAAC, the OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, to better understand how a lack of skills and formal qualifications and unequal training opportunities contribute to these labour market risks. The first cycle of PIAAC, sometimes referred to as ‘Adult PISA’, was conducted in almost 40 countries (20 of them from the EU) between 2012 and 2017.

## **Low-qualified workers are not always less skilled**

Having low formal qualifications is usually associated with having low levels of competence and skill, but our research shows that this is not always the case. In several studies we examined how the level of formal qualifications relates to individuals’ literacy and numeracy skills (Heisig 2018; Heisig and Solga 2015). We found that, on average, low-qualified adults do indeed tend to have a lower skill level than more highly qualified adults, creating a ‘skill gap’. However, we also observed that people with similar formal qualifications, including those in the low-qualified group, can differ widely in their actual literacy and numeracy skills. This more or less holds for all the countries we have studied and means that quite a number of low-qualified workers have a similar or higher skill level than workers with higher qualifications (see Figure 1).

Furthermore, both the size of the skill gap and the variability of skills within the low-qualified group differ a lot between countries. Education systems seem to be an important cause of these differences. In countries where students are sorted into different types of secondary schools (tracked systems), there is a larger skill gap between low- and higher-qualified adults. However, there is also less variety of skills among low-qualified





**Figure 1.** Distribution of numeracy skills among 25–54 year-olds in 20 European countries. Source: OECD (2016), authors' calculations.

Note: Low-level qualifications = below upper-secondary education level; mid-level qualifications = (general or vocational) upper-secondary education level.

adults in these countries—meaning that low-qualified workers are less likely to have the same level of skill proficiency than higher-qualified workers (see e.g. Germany and Czechia in Figure 1). In countries such as Germany, where tracking is combined with strong vocational education and training, the negative impact of sorting (tracking) on general skills is somewhat reduced.

*First lesson learned.* Low-qualified workers are not always less skilled, and the strength of the link between formal qualifications and skills varies between countries. The latter implies that countries differ in the skill transparency of formal qualifications—that is, whether actual skills are reflected in formal qualifications and thus whether formal qualifications give a clear signal about individuals' actual skills. Formal qualifications are more informative (transparent) about a person's actual skills in places where the skill gap between low- and higher-qualified adults is large and where differences in skills among low-qualified workers are smaller (meaning they have a similar skill level).

## Formal qualifications shape job opportunities, even after accounting for literacy and maths skills

We also looked into whether these variations between countries can help explain why low-qualified adults face different challenges in the labour market in different countries

(Heisig et al. 2019). It turns out that having more skills is important: in all countries, low-qualified workers with better literacy and maths skills fare better than less competent low-qualified workers. They are more likely to be employed in skilled jobs and less likely to end up in low-skilled jobs with low wages and high job insecurity.

At the same time, formal qualifications continue to matter. That is, those with lower formal qualifications work in less attractive jobs than those with higher qualifications, even if they have similar skills.

Another interesting finding of this study is that this disadvantage of having low formal qualifications is particularly large in countries where the skill transparency of qualifications is high. A likely explanation is that employers pay greater attention to formal qualifications in their decision-making (e.g. when conducting an initial screening of job applicants).

Formal qualifications (or a lack thereof) thus shape labour market outcomes even after accounting for differences in fundamental skills—particularly, but not only, in countries where the skill transparency of formal qualifications is high. However, as educational qualifications only imperfectly reflect the skills that people have (see the first lesson above), this means that countries are not fully utilising the skills that low-qualified workers actually have.

*Second lesson learned.* Better skills matter for the job prospects of low-qualified workers. In all countries, however, low formal qualifications reduce job opportunities, even if low-qualified workers are as skilled as higher-qualified workers. There is, therefore, room for improvement in recognising and utilising the actual skills of low-qualified workers.

## **The limited participation of low-qualified workers in further training primarily stems from their inferior job placements**

In the light of these research findings, a straightforward policy recommendation to tackle the challenges low-qualified workers face in the labour market would be to provide them with additional adult training. As the world of work undergoes the digital transformation, with ongoing changes to work tasks, equipment and processes, adult training is becoming increasingly important. However, our research highlights that low-qualified workers' access to training remains limited in all countries (Hornberg et al. 2023). This inequality in training persists despite considerable policy interest and efforts to equalise access to training.

We compared the participation of low-qualified workers in job-related non-formal training (NFT)—the dominant form of adult education and training—with that of those who have completed upper-secondary education (without further study). NFT activities are learning activities intended to improve job-related skills, usually organised by a training provider, and commonly delivered through courses, seminars and workshops. They do not lead to formally recognised qualifications but may be certified. They are usually financed, wholly or partly, by the employer.

Our key finding is that differences in literacy and numeracy skills play only a minor role in explaining the lower NFT participation of low-qualified workers, and that differences in individuals' motivation to learn plays no role at all. Instead, the main barriers to participation appear to be located within the workplace: low-qualified workers are less likely to participate in training because of their various job tasks and occupational positions, and because they are more likely to work part-time and in smaller companies. Moreover, institutional differences between countries seem to play a role, too: strong trade unions are associated with less training inequality, while high skill transparency in educational qualifications (see above) is associated with greater inequality.

Additionally, although the political discourse often emphasises the importance of skill development for the future of European labour markets, companies too often view the training of employees as a cost rather than an investment. This perception results in a lack of training investment, partnerships and cooperation, as well as insufficient knowledge of the skills-development landscape (Erola et al. 2023).

To identify promising approaches to reducing training inequalities, we recently conducted an insightful discussion with experts in training and employment policies as part of the EU-funded Mapping Inequalities Through the Life Course project. Key recommendations, summarised in a recent policy brief (Erola et al. 2023), included fostering cooperation between education and training providers and encouraging the greater involvement of public authorities and sectoral associations. The group also explored ways of promoting training opportunities outside companies, recognising that, in many cases, there is no wage increase after training and that training participation depends on an individual's capacity to devote extra time (on top of work and caring responsibilities). The suggestions revolved around the use of small and flexible course formats to enable individuals to create tailored learning experiences that meet their needs (Erola et al. 2023).

*Third lesson learned.* Participation in job-related NFT by low-qualified workers remains limited. Workplace characteristics, rather than cognitive skills and motivation, appear to be the primary reasons for this participation deficit. It is therefore essential that policymakers and employers view employee training as an investment, not a cost.

## Conclusions

The relationship between the workplace and training, as discussed earlier, often creates a vicious circle: low-qualified workers are more likely to have jobs with fewer chances for participating in adult training, which further perpetuates their limited employment opportunities. This situation also raises concerns about responsibility. The fact that low-qualified workers' motivation to learn does not account for their low participation in training strongly suggests that placing the entire responsibility for training participation on individuals is not a sustainable solution for European labour markets (Erola et al. 2023).

Our main message is that skill development is not enough if workers' actual skills are not recognised by employers. Thus, policies aiming to increase the involvement of low-qualified workers in training should concentrate on the workplace and the human resource strategies of companies.

The fact that the absence of formal qualifications significantly impacts the job prospects of low-qualified workers, sometimes even more than their actual skills, does not mean that investing in the training of low-qualified adults does not pay off; quite the opposite. Education systems play a crucial role in skill development both early on and later in life, and research has consistently revealed that children and adults from lower socio-economic backgrounds face disadvantages in terms of gaining both skills and educational qualifications (Heisig et al. 2020; Heiskala et al. 2021). Thus, while it is well known that returns on investment in human capital tend to be higher at younger rather than older ages (Heckman 2008), it remains crucial to address both aspects: to promote equity and efficiency in skill-acquisition opportunities during the early stages of education and to encourage participation in training later in life.

Policies aiming to reduce inequalities in children's education should prioritise high-quality early childhood education and foster inclusive school systems that customise education to the needs of pupils. When addressing adult training, policies should focus on overcoming barriers to training related to job and company characteristics. As mentioned earlier, policies should aim to enhance collaboration between education and training providers, and encourage greater participation from public agencies and sectoral associations. Additionally, an OECD report highlights that management often acts as a gatekeeper to training opportunities within companies (OECD 2021). When it comes to the latter, promising measures include reducing training costs, for example, through subsidies; providing information on expected productivity returns; and promoting collective agreements in workplaces with limited incentive or infrastructure for training, such as smaller companies (Hornberg et al. 2023).

Lastly, from an economic standpoint, employers should explore ways to alter hiring practices to avoid discrimination in favour of formal qualifications and put greater weight on an individual's actual skills. This approach would, economically speaking, allow the utilisation of the existing skills potential of low-qualified adults and, socially, enhance the employment prospects of this group. This is why it is also important to be precise in terms of language regarding who you are talking about: people with low formal qualifications or people with a low skill level, since the two are not always the same. Being precise in language can help prevent misunderstandings and combat unfair judgements.

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# Labour migration as a solution to an ageing population?

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## Abstract

Labour migration is often mentioned as a way to mitigate the impact of ageing in wealthy societies. This article analyses the impact of labour migration on the welfare level and old-age dependency ratio of a prosperous ageing country, the Netherlands. If labour migrants are considered to be part of the population of the host country, they only contribute to a higher welfare level if their productivity is higher than per capita GDP. If they stay permanently and form a family, their productivity will need to be higher than the average labour productivity of the incumbent workforce. Labour migrants will mitigate the rise of the old-age dependency ratio, but only if they only stay in the host country temporarily. Therefore, only selective and temporary labour migration will relieve the ‘burden’ of an ageing society.

## Keywords

Labour migration, Ageing, Old-age dependency ratio, Welfare, Complementarity, Guest workers

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Recently the World Bank made a plea for migration. Several section titles in its World Development Report 2023, entitled *Migrants, Refugees, and Societies*, leave little room for doubt about the main message: ‘Migration is increasingly necessary for countries at all income levels’ (World Bank 2023, 2) and ‘When the match [between the skills of migrants and the needs of the host country] is strong, the gains are large’ (World Bank

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2023, 7). The World Bank's position on migration is primarily inspired by the diverging demographic trends in (potential) host countries and countries of origin. Whereas most (potential) sending countries have a young and growing population with a classic pyramidal age composition, most host countries have an ageing population and a shrinking, or at best stable, labour force, thus inverting the population pyramid. The migration of young people from the former to the latter group of countries therefore rebalances the age structure in both groups and, consequently, will benefit both the sending and the receiving countries.

Despite being framed as positive by the World Bank, international migration causes a lot of discomfort and discontent among the populations of the many receiving countries. The rise in immigration is considered to be one of the driving forces behind the growing electoral support for populist and radical right-wing parties (Ferrari 2021; Shehaj et al. 2019).

This article scrutinises the argument of the World Bank from the perspective of a prosperous receiving country. The theoretical arguments apply similarly to all ageing high-income host countries, but my numerical examples and calculations will be based on one specific case, the Netherlands.

The World Bank bases its positive assessment of migration primarily on its economic benefits. Therefore, I will limit myself in this article to labour migration, that is, migrants for whom work is the main motive for migrating. Policies regarding refugees, study migrants and family migrants are not primarily (or even at all) based on economic arguments and thus require taking a broader perspective than one that is purely economic. Nevertheless, all migrants are potential workers, so if an asylum seeker or a foreign student enters the labour market of the host country, his or her economic impact is similar to that of a labour migrant.

For individual countries, there is no fundamental difference between the impact of an inflow of migrants from within the EU and that of migrants entering from outside the EU. I will therefore not distinguish between the two groups. However, from a European perspective there is a big difference, since intra-EU migration does not enlarge the total working-age population. I will return to this point at the end of the article.

In line with the analysis of the World Bank, I analyse the effects of labour migration from the perspective of an ageing society. As a result of the ageing population and a low fertility rate (around 1.5 children per woman in the EU; Eurostat 2023), the working-age population of many countries has stopped or will stop growing in the near future, while the population above retirement age will increase sharply. This demographic trend raises questions about the sustainability of welfare and public services. Labour migration is often cited as a means of securing both future prosperity and the provision of public services.

I explore whether and under what conditions this could be the case. I first discuss the contribution of labour migrants to the welfare level and then the effects of labour migration on the sustainability of public provisions.



## The impact of labour migration on the welfare level

From a standard economic perspective, everyone benefits from the arrival of migrant workers (Borjas 2013; Portes 2019). The migrants themselves, of course, benefit from earning more in the host country than in their country of origin. Employers benefit by filling vacancies for which they would otherwise have difficulty finding staff. And the population of the host country also benefits, because, thanks to the labour migrants' work, goods and services become cheaper.

Somewhat more sophisticated economic analyses, however, show that all or most of these welfare gains fall to the migrant worker and the employer. The benefit to the settled population of the host country is less clear-cut and generally small (Borjas 2016).

The effects for the incumbent population depend strongly on the specific characteristics of the migrants and the work they do. A migrant who is recruited for low-paid work enlarges the labour supply at the lower end of the labour market, putting pressure on wages. This may harm incumbent workers who also do low-paid work. Research shows that there is little risk of incumbent workers losing their jobs due to replacement by labour migrants, but that labour migration can negatively affect their wages (Borjas 2016).

Even if migrant workers earn more in the host country than in their country of origin, the average welfare level in the host country may still drop. As is common in economic analyses, I interpret welfare as per capita GDP. Although migrant workers increase GDP and thus contribute to economic growth, per capita GDP does not necessarily grow, since migrants also increase the population. If the contribution to the economy is smaller than the increase in population, per capita GDP falls. This is the case if the (added) value of the migrant's production is lower than the average GDP per capita. In the Netherlands GDP per capita amounted to €54,500 in 2022.

A crucial assumption in this reasoning is that the labour migrant is considered a member of the host country's population. This differs from the assumption in the standard economic analysis which concludes that migration is a win-win situation. For example, Portes (2019, Chapter 3, section: 'Jobs and wage') states: 'GDP—and more importantly, GDP per capita, or income per head, for the *existing* population—will increase' (italics added). But 'existing population' means that the migrants are excluded from this calculation. In the short term this may seem reasonable: we are interested in the effects of labour migration on the current population of the host country. But in the long term, it means that when calculating the prosperity of a country all inhabitants whose ancestors were immigrants would be excluded. This is clearly absurd.

Based on this premise, migrant workers whose work in the host country yields less than the average per capita GDP actually lower the average welfare level. If the number of labour migrants doing low-productivity work steadily increases, this results in a gradual impoverishment of the population of the host country.

The positive side of this is that labour migrants who produce more than the per capita GDP increase the average welfare level. However, there are two caveats to this. First, this is only true as long as they work and do not form families in the host country. From a purely economic perspective, the host country benefits most from labour migrants who stay there only as long as they work and do not form families or bring them over from their country of origin. Effectively, we are therefore talking about temporary or circular migrants who come to the host country to work for months or at the most a few years and then return home. The longer migrants stay, the more likely it is that they or their family members (partner, children) will make use of the public provisions of the host country, such as education, care, pensions or social benefits. Their net contribution to the economy in proportion to their contribution to the population size then diminishes. If the career and family formation paths of labour migrants are similar to those of residents, they will only contribute to a higher level of welfare in the longer term if they are more productive than the average incumbent worker (whose productivity is higher than the per capita GDP since not all inhabitants work). In the Netherlands, this would mean a productivity of more than €94,000 per year in 2022. These migrant workers would therefore most likely be overwhelmingly highly educated.

Labour migrants can also increase welfare in the host country if their knowledge and skills are complementary to those of the incumbent working population. Complementarity means that the migrants' knowledge and skills are in short supply in the host country and by providing them, migrants contribute to the productivity of the incumbent working population. This may, for example, be the case for foreign technicians with specialist knowledge that is lacking in the host country, or for specialist nurses who can increase the (bed or surgical) capacity of hospitals if there are staff shortages. Complementary migrant workers increase welfare by improving the average productivity of the incumbent workers (Borjas 2016).

Migrant workers doing low-productivity work can also complement incumbent workers, for example by providing low-cost personal services, enabling highly skilled workers to devote more time to their work. Examples might be cleaning work, parcel delivery, household chores, catering services and dog-walking services. Whether, on balance, migrants doing these jobs increase average welfare depends on whether the negative effect of the migrant worker's low productivity is sufficiently offset by the higher productivity of the workers using those services. Little can be said about this in general terms.

The second caveat is that, even if labour migrants increase per capita GDP, it still matters who benefits from this. If migrant workers are highly productive but not complementary, the employer and the migrant workers themselves benefit most. If migrant workers have complementary knowledge and/or skills, the incumbent workers whom the migrant workers complement also benefit. After all, their productivity increases, which usually translates into higher pay. In most cases, it will be highly educated workers who cooperate with labour migrants. Lower-skilled workers will often not benefit from such migration, but, equally, will not suffer from it either. Nevertheless, such migration

increases the inequality between those in the incumbent population who are highly educated and those who are less educated.

## Mitigating the rise of the old-age dependency ratio

Due to the ageing of the population, the costs of the public provisions that are mainly used by elderly people, in particular pensions and (health) care, will rise sharply in most countries over the coming decades. The financial sustainability of these provisions can be expressed by the ‘old-age dependency ratio’ (OECD 2023; Eurostat 2018). This is the ratio (expressed as a percentage) of the number of pensioners to the working-age population. Usually, the working-age population is equated with those aged between 20 and 64 (OECD 2023; Eurostat 2018). However, in view of the affordability of public provisions, it is better to use the statutory retirement age as the upper age limit. In the Netherlands, this is currently 67 years (as of 1 January 2024). The old-age dependency ratio using this upper limit is 29%: for every 10 people aged 20 to 66, there are just under 3 pensioners aged 67 and over. According to the latest population forecast from Statistics Netherlands, the old-age dependency ratio will reach its peak in 2041 at 40%. There will then be 4 pensioners for every 10 people of working age. After that, the old-age dependency ratio will largely stabilise. As a consequence, the tax burden needed to finance provisions for the elderly could increase by more than a third (up to 40% from 29%).

Labour migration can slow down the rise in the old-age dependency ratio because it enlarges the working-age population. For the Netherlands, an additional 50,000 labour immigrants per year (about 0.5% of the working-age population) would moderate the old-age dependency ratio by three percentage points in 2040, that is, it would be 37% instead of 40%. Similar calculations could be made for other countries. In general, an inflow of immigrants by a factor of  $m$  of the working-age population will reduce the old-age dependency ratio by a factor of  $m/(1+m)$ .

Stabilising the old-age dependency ratio in the Netherlands at the current level would require more than 3 times as many labour migrants, that is, 150,000 to 180,000 per year, and a total of some 3 million labour migrants by 2040 (17% of the current population). This is not a realistic option. Thus, labour migration will slow down the rise of the old-age dependency ratio, but it will certainly not prevent it from happening.

An important caveat here is that migrant workers only reduce the old-age dependency ratio as long as they do not also retire. If labour migrants settle permanently in the host country, they will actually increase the old-age dependency ratio in the long run when they reach retirement age. Permanent migrants will simply shift the rise of the old-age dependency ratio into the future. From the perspective of financing public services, temporary migrants are therefore most beneficial.

However, one should bear in mind that these temporary labour migrants will have to be replaced by others when they leave. Suppose that we want to increase by 50,000 the annual number of labour migrants, who stay, on average, for three years. After three

years, 100,000 additional labour migrants will need to be recruited, namely 50,000 to increase the labour force and 50,000 to replace the labour migrants who leave. After another three years, this will be 150,000 labour migrants, and so on. To speed up the growth of the labour force through the attraction of temporary labour migrants, ever more labour migrants will have to be recruited. This is not realistic. Therefore, temporary labour migration can only *temporarily* slow down the rise of the old-age dependency ratio.

## **Conclusion: the contribution of selective and temporary labour migration**

Ageing populations will pose major challenges to many prosperous countries in the coming decades. According to some, including the World Bank, (more) labour migration is inevitable to meet these challenges. In this article, I have shown that labour migration will only alleviate the consequences of an ageing population under strict conditions. Moreover, it is certainly not *the* solution to ageing populations. Consequently, the argument of the World Bank should be seriously qualified.

Only selective and temporary labour migration will mitigate the impact of ageing populations. This migration should be selective in the sense that labour migrants are only recruited for highly productive work and/or to complement the incumbent labour force. Only then will they contribute to a higher level of welfare and be relatively unlikely to make (disproportionate) demands on public provisions.

The possibility of selecting labour migrants from within the EU is limited due to the free movement of people. Policies are needed to discourage less-productive and low-paid intra-EU labour migration. These could include improving minimum pay standards (i.e. introducing a minimum wage), working conditions and housing, alongside strict monitoring and enforcement of these by labour inspectorates.

In the long term, temporary or circular labour migration is preferable to permanent migration. This will prevent migrants from becoming a burden on the public purse when they retire or when they or their family members make use of public services. However, the temporariness of labour migration can only be controlled to a limited extent. On top of this, much greater effort is required to recruit migrants for temporary labour migration. Over the past two decades, an almost inexhaustible reservoir of Central and Eastern European workers has seemed willing to come to work in the 'old' EU member states. In the future, however, this is much less likely, since wages in these countries are rapidly rising and their populations are ageing even more quickly than in most Western European countries (European Commission 2019).

Furthermore, countries such as Poland and Romania are themselves increasingly recruiting labour from outside the EU. It is likely that Western European countries

will also have to seek more labour migrants from outside the EU in the future. This does have the advantage that these countries will be better able to select labour migrants for specific jobs and will also be able to issue permits allowing only temporary residence.

Finally, the possible positive effects of selective labour migration on the welfare level and the sustainability of the welfare state must be weighed against the non-economic consequences. Labour migration should be assessed from a broader perspective of welfare than simply per capita GDP. It should include issues such as the social and ecological effects of migration and the availability of housing, not only now, but also in the future. In general, the economic benefits of labour migration will have to be large to sufficiently offset the negative non-economic effects.

## Note

1. This article is based on an exploratory study by The Netherlands, Advisory Council on Migration (2023).

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# Women on the move: Understanding the female face of migration to develop targeted policies

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## Abstract

Women migrants and refugees are playing an increasingly important socio-economic role in our societies. As gender has an impact on their experience and on their integration process, it is necessary to develop a gender-sensitive, targeted approach, which enables their contribution to society to be fully appreciated. Female migrants and refugees may face stronger, and double, discrimination and experience further barriers to integration in their host countries. Yet, the societal inclusion of women is key for their families; has multiplier effects; and can stimulate changes in social norms, gender relations and discriminatory practices. Furthermore, investing in women contributes to economic growth, social cohesion and stability. Therefore, promoting gender mainstreaming in migration policies is both a social and an economic necessity. It must not be overlooked.

## Keywords

Migration, Asylum, Women migrants, Women refugees, Gender-sensitive approach, EU

## Introduction

Trends and numbers suggest that migration plays a significant role in shaping the demographics of the EU and has an impact on the average age of the population. On 1 January 2022, 23.8 million citizens of non-member countries resided in an EU member state, representing 5.3% of the EU population. Their median age was 36.6 years, compared to

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45.4 years among the native population (Eurostat 2023b). In recent years migratory flows to Europe have been consistent; however, in 2023 the EU witnessed a sharp rise in asylum applications, which totalled 1.1 million (European Union Agency for Asylum 2024).

Among those migrants and refugees, women are playing an increasingly important socio-economic role. Researchers are talking about a ‘feminisation’ of migration: every second migrant and third asylum seeker is female. Moreover, while in the past most women were travelling with their partners or joining them, in recent years women have also been migrating on their own for economic or educational reasons. In contrast to past decades, they are often searching for a job and are economically active.

The increasing importance of the migration phenomenon has prompted EU member states to develop forward-looking and long-term policies, paying specific attention to the integration of migrants. As women form almost half of the migrant population, and their gender has an impact on their experience, it is necessary to develop a gender-sensitive, targeted approach which takes into consideration this specificity and allows the host societies to fully value their contribution.

This article sheds light on the gender impact on migration and on the positive contribution of women’s integration, in part by using the specific case of the most recent wave of migrants, Ukrainian refugees. It then reflects on the development of targeted policies, taking the aforementioned impact into account.

## **Why gender matters in the migratory process**

Women represent one of the most vulnerable categories of migrants and refugees. Sexual and gender-based violence has been identified as both a reason why refugees and migrants might leave countries of origin, and a reality along the route or upon arrival. It is also well established that women’s and girls’ lives are disproportionately affected by humanitarian emergencies—and that these crises often exacerbate pre-existing discriminations and inequalities. According to the UN Population Fund, ‘women and children account for more than 75% of the refugees and displaced persons at risk from war, famine, persecution, and natural disaster’ (UNFPA n. d.). Once in Europe they may face stronger discrimination and experience additional barriers to integration in the host countries, with persisting unequal access to resources, education, protection, the labour market and decision-making.

One of the biggest challenges is gaining access to the job market. Men and women in the EU do not participate equally in the labour market: the gender employment gap is around 11% (Eurostat 2023a), which causes an economic loss of €370 billion per year (European Commission n.d.; on this, see also EIGE 2017). This disparity is reflected and even amplified in the situation of women migrants and refugees, leading to ‘double discrimination’. Some of the challenges include family constraints and the unequal division of unpaid care work in households, a lack of language skills and social networks, and



gender norms that limit women's mobility. Moreover, female refugees and migrants often tend to work in informal, low-paid and unregulated sectors, such as domestic and care work, and are more affected by the 'de-skilling' process. For instance, in 2019, 40.7% of migrant women of working age were likely to be overqualified for their job, compared to 21.1% among native women (European Parliament 2023, 6). Admission schemes designed by the EU institutions to attract talent and high-skilled migrant workers also prioritise professions characterised by a predominance of men, such as information and communications technology, engineering and finance, without a significant impact on the situation of women migrants.

The European Institute for Gender Equality confirms that 'migrant women are more likely to be unemployed or economically inactive than any other group in the EU labour market' (EIGE 2020, 4). This creates a vicious circle, as it can cause increased responsibilities for women within families, further reducing their employability or their ability to attend courses.

For those who join the EU for family reunification reasons, the situation is particularly complex as their legal status for five years after their arrival is dependent on that of their sponsor (the inviting partner) (Council of the European Union 2003). They not only have lower employment rates than those migrating for work or studies (EIGE 2020, 4), often being socially excluded, but may fear the risk of expulsion and therefore submit to a harmful relationship and/or be fully dependent on their spouse as a result.

Women refugees, in particular, are more exposed to violence (Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and PRIO Centre on Gender, Peace and Security 2023). Despite their increased vulnerability, only a minority of women are granted refugee status, partly because gender-related causes of persecution are rarely accepted as a valid basis for seeking asylum, and partly because women often lack the education and knowledge needed to complete the application process (Caritas International 2012, 13). An important step was made at the beginning of 2024, when the European Court of Justice (2024) ruled that women who suffer from or are at risk of 'physical or mental violence, including sexual violence and domestic violence' on account of their gender in their country of origin could apply for protection and be granted refugee status.

## **Women's agency: migrants as drivers of change**

Looking at women migrants as a vulnerable category, and acknowledging that women experience migration in a different way because of their gender, is essential to designing appropriate and targeted policies. However, it would be a mistake to see women migrants simply as passive victims, thus amplifying their discrimination and isolation, instead of recognising their agency and the positive impact of their integration. The correlation between women's empowerment, gender equality, economic stability, peace and security has been well proven by numerous studies and data (see, e.g. World Bank 2023; UN Department of Peace Operations 2020; Council on Foreign Relations 2019).

Strengthening the participation of women in the labour market and in society should be considered an investment in society and future generations, as women are often on the front lines to face crisis and transfer their experiences directly to their children, and in this way can contribute to social integration. Women can also be drivers of change: the act of migration is in itself an empowering experience and often a way to gain independence. Women's participation can break down stereotypes and stimulate a change in social norms, gender relations and discriminatory practices, starting within the family; and have a multiplier effect on other women, who may be inspired and encouraged to play a more active role in society. As women are increasingly migrating on their own, they assume the role of the main economic provider, leading their household and sending remittances to their families and communities left behind, thus changing the way these groups see women (Caritas International 2012, 10; 2017, 16). In this regard, data show that although the amounts sent as remittances by men and women are very similar, their behaviours are different, as women send a larger part of their usually lower salaries (Caritas International 2012, 10; 2017, 16).

Women also contribute to social integration, influencing the social support networks and the civic participation of migrants. Engaging women and diasporas and consulting them systematically in the design of policy responses and measures to address global migration and refugee crises could result in more sustainable and responsive solutions, as their input would better reflect the diverse reality.

Women migrants and refugees should also be seen as political actors, able to contribute in a positive way to the stability of their countries of origin. Women and girls are often exposed to greater threats during and in the wake of humanitarian emergencies due to the breakdown of social order. This often excludes them from the processes, platforms and discussions surrounding conflict mediation and natural-resource management, and the formulation of global responses. However, policymakers could benefit from the participation of women in these processes in order to reach fairer and more sustainable solutions, as their input would provide greater diversity of perspective. One specific example is related to peace talks: when women are meaningfully involved, peace talks are more likely to address root causes and yield more sustainable results, resulting in the likelihood of a peace agreement lasting at least 15 years increasing by 35% (Coomaraswamy 2015, 41–2).

Women migrants and refugees who are in Europe can also use their voices and their deep knowledge of the cultural context of their countries of origin, together with their access to local communities, to inform political decisions on foreign policy, development and humanitarian aid. As in the case of Afghan women, refugees in Europe might be in a better position to speak out and it is therefore in the interests of stakeholders (i.e. governments and institutions) to unleash this often unseen and unvalued potential.

## **The specific case of Ukrainian refugee women**

The EU has recently experienced an exceptional influx of women refugees from Ukraine. According to data from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2024), currently around six million people fleeing the war in Ukraine have been recorded in Europe,

with more than 90% of these being women and children (Ukraine Response Regional Gender Task Force 2023, 2).

The case of Ukrainian women refugees exemplifies the active role of the diaspora. Since the war erupted, many prominent civil-society activists have become part of a new class of unofficial wartime ambassadors and the voice of the many silenced and hurt women (and men) in their country, dedicating their activities to advocacy and to fostering a better understanding of the situation.

The prolonged solidarity with Ukraine expressed by European governments and citizens, with the activation for the first time of the EU Temporary Protection Directive (Council of the European Union 2001), makes the Ukrainian case quite exceptional. There are many reasons behind the warm welcome from the public and politicians, but the fact that the majority of the influx of refugees is female may also have contributed to them being perceived differently. Women and children tend to be viewed as less of a danger or threat than the young adult males that made up higher proportions of previous migrant flows, and this has led to a greater willingness among Europeans to accept Ukrainian refugees (see e.g. Moise et al. 2024).

Despite numerous challenges, Ukrainian women are better positioned than many other refugee women. From a legal point of view, they benefit from favourable policies—for instance, they have immediate access to employment after registering with the authorities, and a high number of Ukrainians are active in the labour market. They also have relatively high educational levels and can rely on social networks—there are pre-existing expatriate communities—and a sense of widespread solidarity. All ‘these factors are likely to improve their socio-economic integration prospects’ (OECD 2023, 1) compared to those of other refugee women.

Their experiences and the success of their integration could stimulate and pave the way for the formulation of more gender-sensitive and targeted integration measures, as well as contributing to shaping a different narrative on forced migration. This is particularly the case in countries where radical and extremist parties fuel xenophobic sentiments, which are often accompanied by misogyny and a strong opposition to gender equality.

Some studies have already shown that there is a positive spillover from the attitudes toward Ukrainians to attitudes towards other refugee groups (see Moise et al. 2024). We cannot yet predict how long this will last, but we can assume that further support for the successful integration of women could also have a positive impact in terms of narrative and perceptions.

## **Looking forward: towards tailored policies and a gendered approach to integration policies**

A better understanding of the impact of gender on all phases of migration is essential and this means collecting more disaggregated data that clearly shows the drivers of female integration and measures the positive returns on investing in women. This will help to

support the introduction of evidence-based policy measures. To collect this data will entail the setting up of platforms and consultative mechanisms to gather women migrants' perspectives and channel them into the decision-making process. Although gender equality is usually an underfunded policy area (Albrecht et al. 2021, 45), specific and dedicated funds and programmes are essential, and their potential benefits far exceed the initial investments (UN Women and UNFPA 2020).

Along with the right to protection, migrant women also need to be recognised and seen for their agency (including political agency) and positive contribution, and encouraged to be active citizens. A holistic approach is needed, involving coordination of all the actors in the process (in the countries of origin, transit and destination), including the public and the private sectors and the migrants themselves. It should include thoughtful consideration of the gender impact of the measures put in place and long-term investment in mutually reinforcing areas of action. Measures could combine lifting barriers to integration, such as low investment in female education, restricted access to services and low participation in the labour market, with targeted interventions, for instance, providing women with an independent legal status, adopting a women-specific enhanced employment policy, attracting female talent and enhancing women's digital skills. The approach could also prioritise projects led by women and on women's empowerment, such as mentoring or training for migrant women, enabling the recipients themselves to then provide support to other women during the integration process. Furthermore, resources could be made available for networks and civil-society organisations which promote inclusion, provide space for discussion and information-sharing, and raise awareness of gender-related issues.

Women should also be empowered to meaningfully participate in the decision-making, peace-building and political processes in their own countries of origin, for example, through effective implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda adopted by the UN Security Council in 2000. This would enable refugee and migrant women to be recognised as political actors, allowing them to become real drivers for peace and stability, and even alleviate some of the causes of migration.

Although the EU does not have specific competences in integration policy, the EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027 (European Commission 2020a), combined with the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 (European Commission 2020b), would provide a good framework to further develop tailored national policies and encourage the exchange of best practices among member states, recognising the need to mainstream gender issues and ensure the inclusion of all. The New Pact on Migration (European Commission 2020c) also contains specific elements, such as the Talent Partnerships, which could be better exploited and adapted to correct existing disparities; while other suggested measures that would have an impact on migrants and 'vulnerable groups' should be considered and implemented, taking a gender perspective into account.

## Conclusion

A better understanding of the impact of gender on all the phases of the migratory experience is essential to develop tailored, gender-sensitive and gender-responsive policies that address the specific needs and situations of migrant women and girls. This will also allow the host countries to benefit from the contribution of migrant communities, and women in particular, by ensuring that they are supported to reach their full potential.

Starting from an awareness of the development of the migration phenomenon and the new protagonism of women, and by collecting relevant data, member states should invest in targeted measures to encourage women to be active citizens, integrating in the host societies at both the social and the economic level, and acting as drivers of change. The peculiar situation of Ukrainian refugees, who are generally better positioned and better perceived than other women refugees, could pave the way for this.

Normative and political frameworks, as well as some successful policies and programmes, are already in place and should be further leveraged and strengthened. Others, such as the Pact on Migration, the Talent Partnerships and the Directive on Reunification, should be reconsidered and adapted, taking a gender perspective into account. This shift is imperative. It is not only a matter of gender equality for all, but is necessary and advantageous for the whole society, and an opportunity which cannot be missed.

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# Can a rural renaissance be a reality?

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## Abstract

This article explores the factors contributing to and consequences of rural depopulation. The important economic and non-economic contribution of the agricultural sector to rural communities is discussed. It is argued that the role of agriculture is often underappreciated and misrepresented in public discourse, in particular in the climate change debate, leading to a 'recognition gap' which is damaging to the reputation of the sector, especially among potential new entrants. Farmers need to be positioned to avail themselves of the opportunities presented by the green economy and the transition to a low-carbon food system. This transition will be costly in terms of direct, indirect and opportunity costs, which will be mostly borne by farmers. Policy will need to be targeted to address these costs, support farmers in this transition and position rural communities to prosper in the coming generations.

## Keywords

Rural depopulation, Agricultural policy, Generational renewal

## Introduction

Rural depopulation is a growing phenomenon globally and is a major challenge for the EU in particular. In 2011, 40% of European rural regions were experiencing depopulation, and the trend was particularly strong in Eastern Europe and remote parts of Southern Europe. Rural regions currently account for 28% of Europe's population, but this share is projected to decline. By 2050, the population of Europe's urban regions is expected to increase by 24.1 million people, while by contrast, the population of predominantly rural regions is projected to fall by 7.9 million (ESPON 2020, 2). The shrinkage of rural communities is

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inextricably linked with the fortunes of the agricultural sector. The consolidation and intensification of farm holdings has reduced the numbers employed in farming and, as a consequence, the number of rural residents, while challenges associated with the agricultural sector make it less attractive to young people and, as such, contribute to an ageing and declining population in rural areas.

This article explores the factors contributing to rural depopulation. In particular, the role of agriculture is examined and issues around generational renewal and opportunities for economic development are discussed. The article considers the role of public policy in arresting the decline of rural areas and advancing the economic prospects of agriculture.

## **Contributors to and consequences of rural depopulation**

Rural shrinkage, measured as a decline in population, is a demographic, economic and social trend being experienced in many EU member states. Rural shrinkage has serious consequences for both urban and rural areas due to the exacerbation of disparities across regions, leading to a deepening of the rural–urban divide.

A number of factors can explain the growing trend of rural depopulation. First, the long-term industrial restructuring of economies away from agriculture and traditional extraction industries, and the recent globalisation of manufacturing have contributed to a bipolarisation of economic development. This has resulted in the growth of urban areas contiguous with a decline in rural regions. Second, the modernisation of agriculture in developed economies, through increased economies of scale, mechanisation and automation, has led to a decline in the numbers employed in agriculture and its ancillary industries. Third, these demographic trends have contributed to a vicious circle of decreased demand for, and as a consequence supply of, critical services in rural areas, leading to poor connectivity, suboptimal infrastructure and reduced access to essential public services. Together these factors have conspired to lower the appeal of rural areas as places to live and work, leading to selective job-related out-migration from rural to urban regions, particularly among younger and better-educated workers, resulting in persistent slow-leak depopulation, divestment and a negative natural population balance (ESPON 2020).

The out-migration of young, educated people from rural areas has contributed to a growing gap in employment rates and income levels between rural and urban areas. On average, incomes are higher in urban areas than in rural ones, and the rural–urban income gap has increased by approximately 19% over the past decade (Eurofound 2023). Furthermore, there is evidence of a digital divide between rural and urban areas, with rural residents being less likely to have digital skills or own a computer, and more likely to have slower Internet connections than those in urban areas (ESPON 2020).

Rural regions tend to have a higher dependency on smaller enterprises, with the average share of employment by these businesses being about 10% higher in rural areas, at

38% on average (ESPON 2020). The loss of skills and talent from rural regions negatively impacts the innovation capacity of small and medium-sized enterprises and limits their ability to drive economic growth and provide employment.

While a number of factors have contributed to the rural–urban divide, the transformation of agriculture and family farming is one clear contributor. The following section considers the important role of agriculture in supporting prosperous rural communities and economies, and the challenges facing the agricultural sector in remaining economically viable and attractive to young people.

### **The important (but often underestimated) role of agriculture in rural regions**

The agricultural sector makes an important contribution to the EU economy. According to Eurostat (2023), the EU's agricultural industry created an estimated gross value added of €220.7 billion in 2022, accounting for 1.4% of the EU's GDP, and supported some 9.5 million jobs on farms and a further almost 4 million in food production. There were 9.1 million agricultural holdings in the EU in 2020; however, the number of farms in the EU decreased by about 37% in the relatively short period between 2005 and 2020. This corresponded to a loss of 5.3 million farms across the member states (Eurostat 2022), the vast majority of which (about 87%) were small farms of less than five hectares in size.

The contribution of the sector should not only be measured in terms of the output value, but also the inputs purchased by farmers, predominantly in local rural markets, as well as the jobs supported in the ancillary industries. Agriculture is widely understood to have a significant multiplier effect, which is important to rural areas. EU Monitor (2021) estimates that for every euro spent, the agricultural sector creates an additional €0.76 for the EU economy. Hennessy et al. (2018) demonstrated that the economic impact of the Irish beef sector, due to its low import content and indigenously owned businesses, exceeds that of many other sectors in the Irish economy, meaning that an increase in output in the beef sector generates relatively more economic activity than a comparable increase in other industrial sectors.

The unrelenting pressure to produce food at low prices while adhering to high environmental standards has presented economic challenges for the farming sector. Only through farm consolidation and exploitation of the economies of scale has it been possible for farmers to maintain or increase incomes. While the European Commission's (2021) *EU Farm Economics Overview* shows that farm income in the EU grew in the decade to 2018, significant differences were observed across member states and farming systems. Analysing the gap between farm and non-farm incomes is complex and scholars agree that a simple comparison of mean incomes, given the wide heterogeneity in the distributions, is not particularly helpful. A recent review and analysis by Marino et al. (2023), which considered the full distribution of incomes, found that income disparity between farm and non-farm households differs at the two ends of the income-distribution spectrum. Interestingly, they found that farm households in the lowest income quartile

are worse off than non-farm households in the same quartile, whilst farm households in the highest quartile are better off than their non-farm counterparts. In simple terms when farm households are poor they are poorer than non-farm households, but when they are rich, they are richer. Furthermore, in Central and Eastern European countries, such as Poland and Romania, the study found that farm households are worse off across all quartiles of distribution. The complexity of farm income distributions and spatial patterns speaks to the challenges of developing effective and targeted income-support policies.

Beyond the economic impact, the multifunctional role of agriculture is also understood and acknowledged in European policy. In addition to their economic role, farmers contribute to the wider societal sustainability of rural regions, many of which are in decline. Their presence is vital to the social fabric and cultural capital of such regions. Farmers are guardians of public goods, protecting the environment and ecosystem services through the preservation of the landscape and unique heritage features such as stone walls, hedgerows and traditional dwellings, all of which positively contribute to the rural landscape and thus support rural tourism.

Despite the economic and social importance of agriculture, it has become a much maligned sector. In the context of rural shrinkage, Lamont (2018) coined the concept of the ‘recognition gap’, which refers to the subjective experiences of individuals and groups who feel that their cultural identities are not valued or recognised in particular social contexts. Lamont argues that the marginalisation of and the apparent income and social inequalities which affect rural communities have left them with a recognition gap. One can observe that this recognition gap is particularly experienced by farmers: as society and the economy become more urbanised there is less appreciation of the role of farmers, not just as the producers of food but also as the custodians of our natural capital and our traditional heritage. This recognition gap is manifested in the way that farmers are often portrayed in the media as being less educated and less sophisticated than urban dwellers.

One could also argue that this recognition gap has been exacerbated in the context of climate change, as certain sectors of society and the media have engaged in a ‘blame game’, portraying farmers as the culprits responsible for global warming. While the contribution of food production to greenhouse gas emissions is scientifically proven and well understood, the apportionment of blame and shame is unhelpful. This leads to the marginalisation of farmers and a deep feeling of exclusion, as has been evident in the recent and widespread farmer protests across the EU. The reality is that more efficient and lower-carbon food production is required to feed the world’s growing population and, as such, farmers will be important stakeholders who should be supported, financially and socially, rather than ostracised in the transition to a more sustainable food system.

In summary then, the challenges facing rural areas are manifold: first, the trend towards rural depopulation is leading to a deterioration in service provision and connectivity, making rural areas less attractive places to live; second, the race for ‘cheap food’ is squeezing incomes on farms, fuelling consolidation and leading to an economic bipolarisation in the sector; and third, the portrayal of farmers as the culprits in the

climate-change crisis is damaging to the sector. Together these issues are negatively impacting young people's perception of farming as an occupation and inhibiting new entrants to the sector.

## **Young farmers**

Clearly, a sustainable future for farming requires an inflow of young farmers. Demographic trends, however, reveal an ageing pattern among the European farming population: according to a European Commission report (2017, 1) just 5.6% of farmers are younger than 35 years of age, while almost one-third are older than 65. The 'greying' of the farming population presents grave concerns for the long-term sustainability of farms and has generated great interest among the academic community, with many studies produced on farm succession.

For example, Coopmans et al. (2021) conducted an in-depth analysis of generational renewal on farms across 11 European regions. They observed that the conceptual phases of the generational renewal process were identification of a successor, the succession process and farm development. They found that many policy interventions target the latter two phases and, as such, may be too late in their interventions. They argue that creating more positive attitudes towards farming, and appreciation for farmers, could encourage young people to consider farming, thus supporting the first phase, that of successor identification. The study also found that the Young Farmer Payment was not considered a significant motivator in succession decisions as it is paid too late in the process—rather it provides financial support to a farmer after the entry decision has been made. In another interesting study, Conway et al. (2019) argue that generational renewal policy often only focuses on young farmers getting into the sector and overlooks the need to support older farmers as they leave. They argue that support is also required for exiting farmers, many of whom defer retirement not for economic reasons but due to the fear of a loss of identity.

In summary then, policymakers face many challenges and opportunities in revising agricultural and rural policy to ensure long-term sustainability and to position the sector and community to best exploit the opportunities that may arise in the years ahead.

## **Choices for policymakers**

There are a number of emerging opportunities which rural regions and farmers in particular may be able to exploit if targeted and effective policy supports are implemented. First, the emergence of the green economy presents a growth opportunity for both rural areas suffering from depopulation and the agricultural sector. Rural regions offer a natural advantage and can support the overall transition of the wider economy to a 'greener' future. These areas and farmers can become the economic centres for environmental initiatives such as the management of ecosystem services, the application of circular-economy principles to recycling agricultural waste, the generation of renewable energy and biomass, the provision of carbon sinks and the promotion of locally produced products (ESPON 2020).

In parallel to the emergence of the green economy, the digital economy also presents opportunities for rural regions. The digital transition and the prevalence of remote working have the potential to turn back the tide of rural depopulation, making rural areas more attractive places to work and, in turn, making farming more attractive to young people. To fully exploit the opportunities presented by the digital economy, policy development should support better deployment of broadband networks in all European regions, as well as boosting digital literacy and the accessibility and inclusiveness of digital tools.

Climate change may also present an opportunity. Farmers want to be, and can be, solution providers to the climate crisis, but they need to be supported to achieve this. Turning the current public narrative from blame to saviour would do much to improve the position of farmers in society and the perceptions of prospective young farmers. Policymakers need to help shape the public discourse to empower farmers to present a more positive position on climate change.

The demands for a low-carbon, more sustainable food system are well articulated and widely accepted. While this presents an opportunity for European farmers, the transition to such a system will be costly. Farmers will have to invest in new technologies and practices and change their farm systems from intensive to low input or organic. These transitions will incur direct, indirect and opportunity costs for farmers. The question many are asking, and which I posed in my presentation to the European People's Party conference on the European Farmers' Deal in September 2023, is who will pay?

While it is widely accepted that EU citizens want more environmentally friendly food, recent experiences of a high food price environment following the Ukraine war suggest that there is very little 'appetite' for higher food prices. In 2022–3 politicians came under extreme pressure from consumer groups to challenge the high prices charged by food retailers, which in some member states led to state intervention in food pricing. This suggests that consumers are not willing and/or able to pay for more costly low-carbon food. The analysis of farm incomes presented above suggests that only a few farmers, those in the highest income quartile, can afford to absorb the higher costs of production. As such, publicly funded support is essential for a 'just transition'.

The funding model for a just transition will have to take centre stage in the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) during the next programming period. More targeted payments linked to the transition to a low-carbon food system are essential. The funding of a just transition for farmers will likely require a new and more generous funding model. However, some reallocation of existing CAP funds should also be considered. The analysis of farm incomes presented above, and the apparent bipolarisation therein, suggests that farmers depend on direct payments to varying degrees. Poorly targeted direct payments, which are not linked to total or relative income levels, are ineffective and a poor use of scarce financial resources. Directing such limited resources to environmental outputs would be justified—indeed the 'repurposing' of CAP payments was also a recommendation in the recent Institute for European Environmental Policy report (Baldock and Bradley 2023).

## Final thoughts

Through decades of industrialisation, consolidation and automation, rural areas and the agricultural sector have continued to lose their populations and, in particular, their young people. However, the emergence of sustainability awareness, the green economy and the need for reconnection with natural capital may present new opportunities, or a renaissance, for rural areas. In order to be in the best position to take advantage of these opportunities and to turn the public narrative on farming from negative to positive, policy interventions are required. While the complexity of the problems and the variety of the issues across member states mean that there is no silver bullet solution, this article has presented some ideas for consideration and future discussion.

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# Navigating brain drain in the Western Balkans

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## Abstract

This article analyses the European Commission's attitude vis-à-vis labour migration and brain drain in the Western Balkans. It uses Croatia's post-EU accession experience as a focal point. Grappling with elevated migration rates and a decline in natality, the Western Balkan countries are an interesting region in terms of demographic change. Examining how much attention the Commission pays to brain drain, the article notes an increase since 2019; yet this focus appears disproportionately limited considering the potential repercussions for economic growth and social welfare in the countries experiencing it. The Commission's predominantly negative view of brain drain emphasises that it is the nations affected that are responsible for avoiding it, thereby confirming that it is caused by a skills mismatch. The article recommends integrating brain-drain prevention measures into the enlargement process, and encourages the Commission to improve its focus on the matter in its annual candidate and potential candidate country progress reports.

## Keywords

Western Balkans, Brain drain, European Commission, Enlargement, Demography, Skills

## Introduction

Labour migration and brain drain have been an issue in the Western Balkans for many years. Since Croatia became an official EU member state in 2013, the country has experienced an exodus of people, which in turn has caused a demographic shift (Taylor 2021). Croatia's accession made it easier for Croatians to make their way to other EU member states, and the country has since been struggling with high migration rates and a sliding natality (Ströhm 2023, 14). It is estimated that 10% of Croatia's population has emigrated over the past decade (AP 2022; Ströhm 2023, 14–15), making it the

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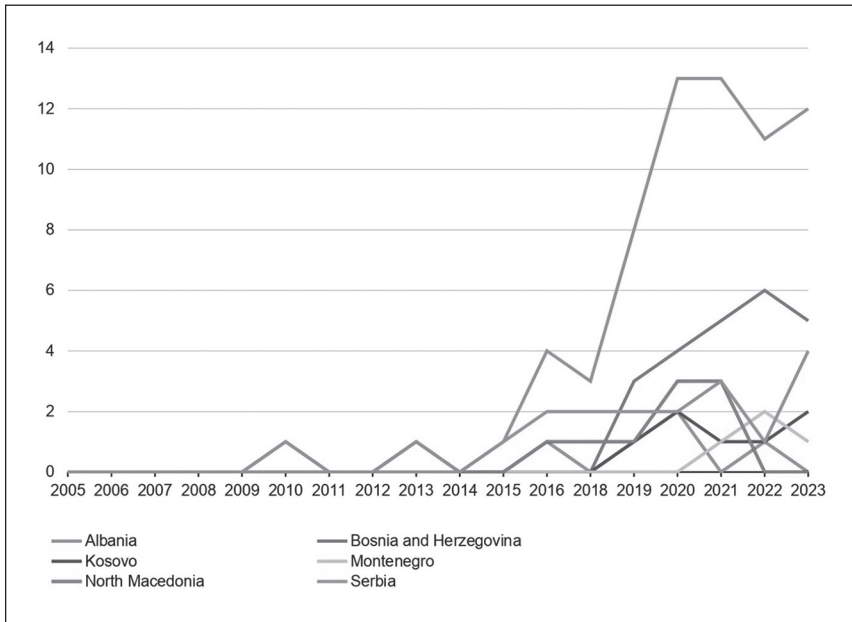


country experiencing the most significant brain drain within the EU (*The Global Economy* 2023). Taking this into account, it seems likely that the current (potential) candidate member states of the Western Balkans (hereafter 'WB6': Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) could face similar effects after their accession. The Western Balkans have already experienced mass displacements since the end of the Communist/socialist era and the break-up of Yugoslavia, and despite the fact that this massive migration from the region is still taking place and familiar to politicians, it remains under investigated by migration scholars (King and Oruc 2019, 2).

What causes brain drain to happen and how it can best be solved are up for debate. According to Hasselbach (2019), who has researched the causes of intra-European brain drain in the existing member states, there are two narratives within the EU. The first is the solidarity narrative: brain drain occurs from the periphery to the core of the EU because of structural and macroeconomic differences between richer and poorer countries. By making direct investments in the periphery and ensuring workers' rights are secured at the EU level, this form of brain drain can be reduced. The second is the skills narrative, where skills mismatches are seen as the root cause of brain drain. Countries that have good vocational and educational training systems also have low levels of unemployment. To reduce high unemployment in certain countries, these systems need to be fixed, and workers should be encouraged to train or retrain to gain the skills needed by employers. Hasselbach's research shows that, in European thinking today, including within the European Commission, the latter narrative predominates.

The Commission (2023b) continues to promote ambitious and sustainable policy on legal migration to the EU. Through the Students and Researchers Directive, the recast Blue Card Directive and Talent Partnerships, the EU aims to attract high-skilled workers from non-EU countries through simplified procedures. Marjan Icoski (2022, 15), a researcher for the German Marshall Fund, acknowledges that the prime responsibility for tackling brain drain lies with the WB6. However, he argues that the EU's current migration policy lacks an acknowledgment of the Union's pull factors, and that the growing migration to the EU should also be managed by the destination countries. Allison Carragher (2021), a former visiting scholar at Carnegie Europe, even goes as far as calling the EU a dishonest broker, and argues that there is a need to share the burden of finding a solution. Since the EU and certain member states are further liberalising their labour markets, their accountability for the brain drain problem should also increase (Icoski 2022, 15).

As the Commission is the sole EU body capable of proposing new legislation, this article aims to analyse the relationship between EU enlargement and brain drain from the perspective of the Commission, and how this differs for each Western Balkan state.<sup>1</sup> It therefore builds on the country-specific progress reports published by the Commission's Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations to illustrate the Commission's stance on the subject. For each country, the starting point for document



**Figure I.** Brain drain mentions *sensu lato*,<sup>3</sup> excluding the year 2017.<sup>4</sup>

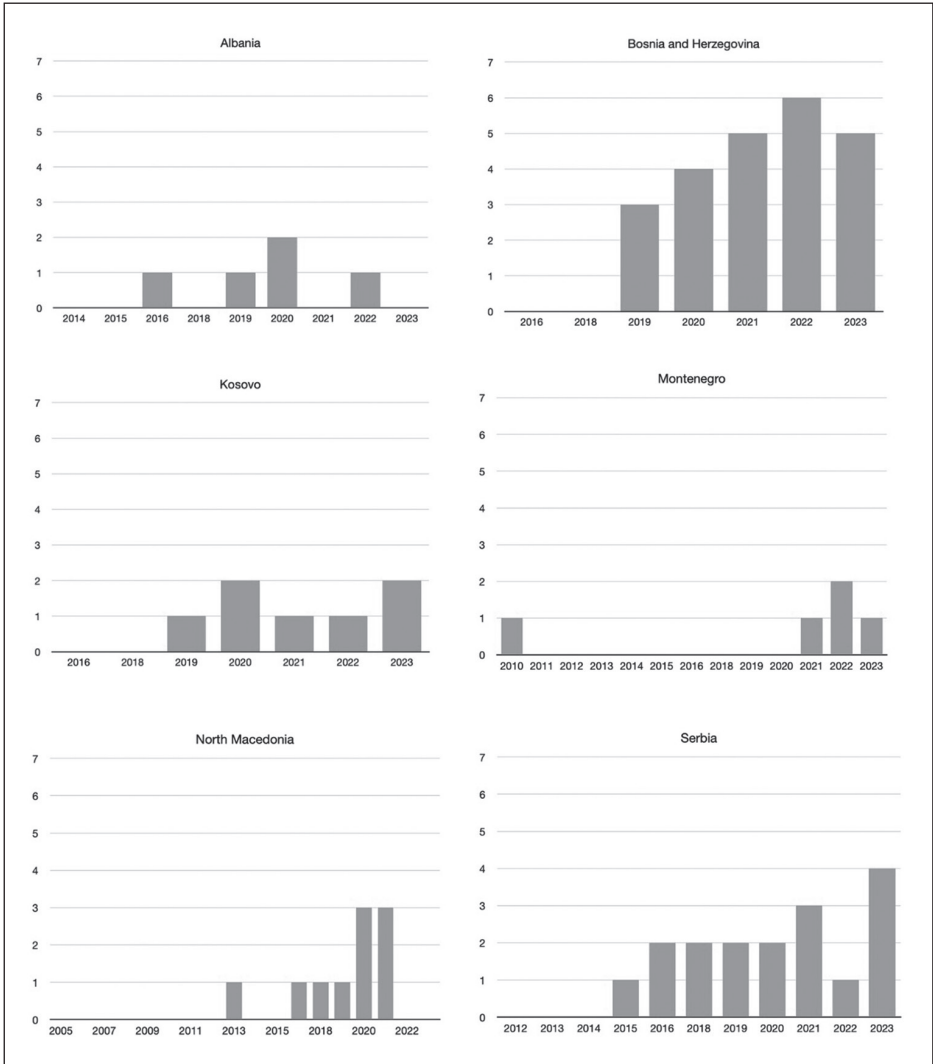
Sources: Sixty-five country-specific progress reports published by the Commission between 2005 and 2023 (see the Introduction, above).

selection is the year that its application was approved.<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that these progress reports can best be understood as summaries of the negotiation talks. Analysing these documents may mean that discussions during the accession talks or in other official correspondence is overlooked. Nevertheless, they provide a good indication of the Commission's attitude towards brain drain in the region.

### Brain drain as an overlooked challenge?

The Commission considers the issue of brain drain in discussions with all the WB6 countries, albeit to differing degrees. At first glance, it is noticeable that the amount of attention paid to this matter overall has increased since 2019. However, considering the pressing consequences brain drain could have for the region in terms of economic growth and social welfare (as indicated by the Commission in its reports), the attention paid to it thus far still seems to be inadequate.

Contrary to expectations, the amount of attention paid by the Commission to the issue of brain drain does not necessarily increase as countries progress further through the enlargement process. In fact, the opposite can even be observed, as the greatest consideration of the matter can be found in the reports for Bosnia and Herzegovina, even though the country has only very recently received official candidate status. Instead, the amount of attention paid seems to be influenced by other factors, such as the continuous increase



**Figure 2.** Brain drain mentions *sensu lato* per Western Balkan state.

Sources: Sixty-five country-specific progress reports published by the Commission between 2005 and 2023 (see the Introduction, above).

in the length of the progress reports and possibly even evolving discussions among scholars about the Western Balkans (Jansen 2022). Another factor that might have provided an incentive for the increase in attention paid to the subject starting in 2020 is the Covid-19 pandemic, especially with regard to shortages of qualified health care workers. Interestingly, it seems that Croatia’s accession in 2013 did not directly spark a debate about skilled emigration in the progress reports.

## National versus European solutions

While there are slight variations across the WB6 with regard to the amount of attention paid to brain drain, the sectors most affected by it and its underlying causes, it can be concluded that, overall, the Commission has a negative attitude to the issue. Despite EU countries largely being the ones to profit from the emigration flows out of the Western Balkans, the Commission refers to brain drain as a challenge and an issue that the Western Balkan states suffer from. There have been occasional acknowledgments of its positive effects in the cases of Albania and Kosovo, particularly relating to the diaspora's financial inflows and human capital. However, since these mentions remain limited, they do not significantly revise the Commission's overall perspective. It is worth noting that the Commission takes a relatively passive role, largely by staying aloof from the issue. Rather, the Commission expects the (potential) candidate member states themselves to tackle brain drain and find appropriate solutions.

Moreover, it can even be established that the Commission sees high-skilled emigration predominantly as an outcome of national push factors, and discounts European rapprochement, or pull factors, as being a primary influence. This is perhaps best illustrated in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where it was explicitly mentioned that a majority of the Bosnians that had emigrated had done so on their own initiative and not because of bilateral agreements with specific member states. This statement is particularly indicative of the Commission's perspective: it directly implies national responsibility for brain drain, while rejecting the idea that its member states should be held in any way accountable. The Commission's primary concern with high-skilled emigration is that it hinders potential growth and delays the structural transformation of the economy in these countries, which in turn is seen as negatively affecting labour productivity and competitiveness. The emigration of the highly educated is thus ultimately seen as a threat to meeting the accession criteria, while further anticipation of the effects beyond enlargement are not seen as a priority within the progress reports. So far the Commission's initial focus has revolved around misalignments between educational outcomes and labour market needs. These contribute to high levels of (youth) unemployment, which is seen as an incentive for emigration. These findings confirm Hasselbach's (2019) skills narrative.

## What needs to be done?

Much like national approaches to the prevention of high-skilled emigration, brain drain in the Commission's progress reports is not seen as a separate issue, but rather as a factor that coexists alongside high rates of (youth) unemployment, and as an element that affects research capacities and exacerbates skills shortages in certain sectors. Only once has the Commission called for an integrated approach (European Commission 2020, 55), touching upon multiple policy fields, to prevent high-skilled emigration. Keeping the national policy recommendations made by Icoski (2022, 14–15) and Hornstein Tomić and Taylor (2018) in mind, the Commission could consider incorporating brain-drain prevention as a key aspect of the enlargement process. High-skilled emigration from the

WB6 has increased especially since Croatia's accession in 2013. By paying more attention to brain drain in its progress reports, the Commission could encourage the (potential) candidate member states in the Western Balkans to prioritise the issue in their national policies. This could be particularly helpful as brain circulation policies could then be advocated.

It seems, however, that there is an increasing focus on brain drain within the EU. This can be seen, for instance, in the report by Commission Vice-President Dubravka Šuica that was presented in autumn 2023 (European Commission 2023a). As the Commission currently does not seem to be anticipating the effects of skilled emigration after enlargement, it remains to be seen what the EU will do in the future. Academic research could certainly play a role in putting this crucial aspect of demographic change closer to the top of the European agenda.

## Notes

1. This article is based on a study completed in June 2023 (Bernstein 2023) and has been updated using the November 2023 candidate and potential candidate country progress reports.
2. As Bosnia and Herzegovina has only recently been granted candidate country status, the year that the country's application was submitted (2016) will be used as the starting point for the analysis. Furthermore, since Kosovo submitted its application only in 2022 and has not yet received official candidate status, the starting point for the analysis of this country will be the year that the Stabilisation and Association Agreement entered into force (also 2016).
3. At first glance, there are only 29 hits for the term 'brain drain' (in *sensu stricto*). However, looking at the documents more extensively and including terms such as the 'outflow of skilled workers', 'emigration of the highly educated', 'drain of skilled workers' and 'outflow of qualified staff', the total increases to 67 mentions (*sensu lato*).
4. Since no reports were published in 2017, Figure 1 excludes the year 2017, allowing for a more accurate perception of the amount of attention paid to the subject.

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# Seeking attention, provoking reactance: Radical climate activism after Covid-19

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## Abstract

In Western Europe the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 marked the close of a period of climate activism that had until then been dominated by the Fridays for Future movement, with its youth-driven protests and pleas to *listen to the science*. But now that its political star has faded more radical groups have taken the reins—many of which are less interested in organising mass rallies than in staging acts of civil disobedience. This article charts some of the fault lines created by this activist changing of the guard, takes a critical look at the now prevalent logic of *attention at all costs* and outlines how and why it may give rise to feelings of reactance. It concludes that the zeal of this new generation of activists must be curbed if the acceptance of climate protection measures is to be ensured.

## Keywords

Climate movement, Activism, Protest tactics, Backlash, Attention, Reactance, Radicalism

## Introduction

Writing about social movements can be a difficult and tedious endeavour. By the time research on them has made it through the peer review process, they have often already slipped (back) into irrelevance—either because their main concern has been successfully addressed or, as is far more often the case, because it has been replaced by others that are now seen as more relevant. To cite just one prominent example, consider how excited many observers were by the meteoric rise of anti-capitalist and anti-austerity movements in the wake of the 2007–9 Great Recession. From Occupy Wall Street to the Indignados in Spain, these new players on the stage of public opinion promised nothing less than the dawn of a new era, sparking a wild and intoxicating mix of dreams, hopes, longings and

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expectations. Yet by the time the first scholarly articles about them went to print, they had either ceased to exist or become so dysfunctional that they could no longer be attributed political significance: other crises had appeared on the horizon, and other actors (e.g. the German PEGIDA movement) had pushed their way into the limelight.<sup>1</sup> Later, in the 2010s, it seemed for a while that the fight against climate change would become a new fulcrum of the social movement cosmos, especially after Greta Thunberg and Fridays for Future had come on to the scene. Within a few months they had built a strong movement brand, held mass rallies around the globe and won the support of celebrities and politicians alike. Presidents, prime ministers, business executives and even the pope showed themselves eager to meet the young activists and listen to their sharply honed message.

But fate can be harsh and bring down even influential and powerful movements in a matter of weeks. In the case of those that Buzogány and Scherhauser (2023) view as emblematic of contemporary climate activism in Europe (Fridays for Future as well as Ende Gelände and Extinction Rebellion), it was the Covid-19 pandemic that caused Fortuna's wheel to turn. Even if one is usually well-advised not to overestimate the effects of this or any other crisis (which often seem smaller with some distance), it is evident that the implementation of *lockdowns* destroyed the political momentum that climate activists had previously built up, made mass protests impossible and diverted society's focus to something that simply appeared more pressing at that moment. Things may have returned to normal since then, but the aforementioned groups are still severely weakened and have lost their hegemonic position. In most countries where they played a crucial role before the pandemic, they are now no longer seen as those who determine the course of the climate movement as such, but rather as actors who *missed their chance* and whose post-Covid decline has created space for new voices both more determined and less compromising. Perhaps best known among them is the German Last Generation (Letzte Generation), which first rose to fame with a hunger strike right before the 2021 federal election and has since grown into a kind of poster child for radical climate action between the Alps and the North Sea. Groups with the same name and ideals have also been founded in Austria and Italy, while others (such as Just Stop Oil and Renovate Switzerland) at least employ the same tactical repertoire. To increase their political impact, they have formed a transnational alliance called the A22 Network<sup>2</sup> and published a joint declaration in which they style themselves as a band of climate warriors who are here 'to say we will create a new world. . . . While there remains breath in our bodies, we will not stop' (A22 Network 2022).

## The false idol of attention

While it is not uncommon for activists of all stripes to clothe their *raison d'être* in bombastic language, the members of the A22 Network do so with such fervent emotionalism that the stylistic difference from more established actors could hardly be clearer: they not only see the world from a Manichaeian vantage point but base their activism on narratives of doom and sacrifice. Apocalyptic rhetoric is just as common among them as an almost messianic belief in their own righteousness and a disdain for political compromise. And while Greta Thunberg and her supporters admitted that they were not experts themselves

(but were only asking their governments to *listen to the science*), the prevailing view here seems to be that the problem is already well understood and that it is now just a matter of drawing the correct—radical—conclusions (Bitschnau 2023b). The point is not that this logic as such is inconsistent: if one is entirely convinced that climate change will spell the end of human civilisation, advocating a radical approach might be the only reasonable reaction. Yet the scenarios conjured up in activist circles usually contradict the more nuanced assessments of most experts and rest on shaky teleological premises. In conjunction with the ambition to *create a new world* (which to some ears sounds more like a scarcely veiled threat than a promise), blind faith in these and similar doomsaying scenarios harbours a potential for political escalation unprecedented among modern ecological movements.

In operational terms this ideological determination is complemented by a greater degree of agility than one is used to from other groups, with protests often carried out in the style of a guerrilla force. Whereas the idea of Fridays for Future is to dedicate one day a week to its mass rallies and Ende Gelände plans its interventions long in advance, the tactical approach of ‘the new kids on the climate block’ is more dynamic and their ability to react, better developed. What sets them apart most significantly, however, is the extent to which they privilege disruption as their primary *modus operandi*. Rather than convincing others of the need for radical action, their protests aim to attract as much attention as possible, which (it is assumed) will result in political pressure and ultimately trigger policy changes. In other words, they extend the adage that there is *no such thing as bad publicity* to mean that there is also no such thing as a bad protest, for every protest creates at least some publicity and thus helps the cause.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, this method has not really proven itself in practice, and one could argue that it has at least three weaknesses that make it appear to be a strategic miscalculation.

First, there is the obvious fact that attention has always been a volatile currency: one day the entire world proclaims its solidarity with a cause, and the next day that same cause is relegated to the margins or forgotten altogether. With news cycles getting ever shorter in the age of social media and protests more *episodised* (Poell 2020), the attention span for most forms of climate activism is barely a full day—and even those that stay in the public eye a little longer rarely leave a lasting impression or prompt others to change their views. At best they evoke declarations that while one may sympathise with the protesters’ cause, they have *gone too far* this time; at worst, any attempt at nuance is instantly swept away by a wave of furious backlash. This problematic constellation is complicated further if one considers that radical protest tactics are by their nature depreciating assets: the longer they are held on to, the lower their novelty value and the less media attention they receive. For example, spilling soup on famous paintings (a prominent form of climate protest; see Kinyon et al. 2023) may shock people the first and perhaps also the second time. But by the tenth time, it becomes a side note, and the most common reaction to be expected will be a more or less indifferent shrug.<sup>4</sup> The same applies to the blocking of roads, an action that will continue to infuriate those stuck in traffic jams but which the general public finds worthy of its attention only in special

circumstances. The more it turns into *business as usual*, the more it loses its radical character and immediate relevance.<sup>5</sup>

Second, there is not much reason to believe that the biggest problem with climate change is a lack of political attention.<sup>6</sup> At least since the signing of the Paris Agreement, the issue has gained great visibility—the rallies of Fridays for Future, the extensive coverage of the COPs,<sup>7</sup> the popularisation of climate journalism and the adoption of initiatives such as the European Green New Deal all testify to this, as does the newfound electoral strength of ecological parties in many European countries. In Germany, probably the most striking example of this, the salience of climate issues not only helped Alliance 90/The Greens (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen) achieve a historic result in the 2021 federal election<sup>8</sup> but also enabled its lead candidate Annalena Baerbock to present herself on an equal footing with her Christian Democratic and Social Democratic competitors. As mentioned before, it is of course true that in recent years Covid-19 has been a more dominant crisis, as has the Russo-Ukrainian War. But neither has cast doubt on the consensus that climate change is a major threat and needs to be addressed. The only issues that remain unclear are what this *addressing* means in practice and whether a majority is willing to pay the price it will cost to prioritise climate protection efforts. In this sense the problem for most people seems to be less that they are unaware of what is happening now (and may happen in the future) but rather that their awareness does not have much bearing on their behaviour. Searching for ways to change the latter is clearly a more fruitful approach than carrying out mostly futile exercises in communicative redundancy.<sup>9</sup>

Third (and this is arguably the most important point), the attention given to the protests is in most instances immediately absorbed by their appearance and hardly ever touches on strategies to save the planet. In a sense one could say that the activists are drinking from a chalice that they themselves have poisoned: since their central objective is to generate attention through disruptive and spectacular actions, they risk having everyone focus on precisely these actions and not on the message they want to convey. People then discuss *whether it was really necessary* to block this road or vandalise that object, but they neither link these discussions to concrete policy demands nor suddenly begin to back the latter. For instance, the debate after the Last Generation's paint attack on the Brandenburg Gate centred primarily on legal and technical matters, prompting Berlin's Governing Mayor Kai Wegner to declare that the whole action had done nothing but impair the 'free discourse about the important issues of our time' (cited in Mishra 2023). And Joshua Garland only generalises this criticism when he notes that although such actions can generate 'saliency and shock, [they usually fall] short of engaging audiences with the key climate arguments' and as a result detract from the 'message that the activists intended' to deliver (2023, 8).

### More harmful than helpful

In addition to the difficulties arising from this overly narrow focus on public attention, there are also concerns about the tactics used. In particular, it seems possible that they cause *reactance* (i.e. resistance to positions that one feels pressured to adopt), a reaction

typical of situations in which individuals are made to feel that ‘their free behaviors [are] eliminated or threatened with elimination’ (Miron and Brehm 2006, 4). As research indicates, this can even be the case when people are confronted with the message that there is a scientific consensus on climate change—for they might interpret this to mean that their own opinion is irrelevant or suspect that they are being manipulated (e.g. Bolsen and Druckman 2018; Chinn and Hart 2023). There are still more reasons to expect that people react in this way when faced with street blockades and paint attacks. Perhaps most crucial among them is the gulf between the preferences of the majority, which are in most cases geared towards expanding and protecting personal freedoms, and attempts to restrict these freedoms in the name of climate protection. Such advances almost automatically provoke reactance, especially when they result in what many view as a circumvention of democratic decision-making.<sup>10</sup> Added to this is the immediacy of the protests and the fact that they are already restricting certain freedoms in a way widely considered inappropriate. It is not that difficult, after all, to empathise with those who spend hours stuck in traffic jams just because some activists felt it necessary to glue their hands to the asphalt.

Still, it could be argued that the biggest source of reactance is not so much *what* precisely the activists advocate or *how* they advocate it, but the public identity they assume. Young, academically educated and adhering to a decidedly post-materialist lifestyle, they give to many the impression of being out of touch with reality (i.e. the lives of most people) and provoke forms of rejection that are affective rather than rational. In fact, there is probably no image more detrimental to their cause than that of some middle-class student activists lecturing a working-class delivery driver on the perils of global warming. Watching such a scene, one is strangely reminded of the Marxists of past decades, who always sought to stir up the masses and never understood why those they thought they were representing showed so little interest in their beliefs and jargon. It is true, of course, that not all activists fit this mould, but it is also not far-fetched to claim that many present themselves in a way that makes it easy to portray them as misguided idealists who enjoy telling others what to do.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, this contrasts sharply with Fridays for Future, which from the outset conveyed a far more positive image. Partly because most of its participants were children and partly because it aimed to appeal to the mainstream, it even managed to be viewed as a collective conscience. Radical groups like Just Stop Oil and the Last Generation, on the other hand, appear to most people as unnecessary nuisances at best.

## Conclusion

Whatever the reasons, there is little doubt that this latest form of climate activism is fraught with difficulties. Instead of bringing about change, its one-dimensional (and desperate) quest for attention has become an end in itself and is increasingly opposed even by those who agree that more needs to be done to fight global warming.<sup>12</sup> This, of course, also has implications for the climate movement as a whole, which sooner or later must take a stand on the approach of the A22 Network and its members. It might not be amiss for it to take some inspiration from Juvenal’s famous question about who watches the watchmen<sup>13</sup> and ask itself whether it should protest against protesters who jeopardise the

acceptance of climate protection measures, whether it should take action against activists who harm the work of many years, and how it can respond best to voices calling for even more radical solutions (e.g. Malm 2021) and an end to the ‘consensus around non-violence as the only path’ (Anfinson 2022, 151). Viewed from the outside, it seems clear that one should dread the day when proposals of this kind become reality and collide with the sensibilities of a public that has little tolerance for protests flirting with violence (Simpson et al. 2018). At worst, they could weaken efforts to mitigate climate change for years to come—even such that are undeniably democratic.

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## Notes

1. In this context, one could speak of the emergence of a different *crisis cycle* (Bitschnau 2023a).
2. The name is derived from the fact that it was initiated in April 2022.
3. This is true for non-violent protests. As of January 2024 the members of the A22 Network reject all forms of violence (although the concept is interpreted narrowly and does not include acts of sabotage).
4. Especially since there is no real damage here. The paintings in question are all protected by glass panels.
5. To keep the public interested, activists who depend on media attention must therefore continually come up not only with something new but also with something shocking and provocative.
6. Poortinga et al. (2018) find that between 88.7% (Lithuania) and 97.7% (Iceland) of Europeans believe that the climate is changing and that this change is at least partly caused by human activity.
7. Conferences of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.
8. They received 14.8% of the vote, up 5.9 percentage points from the 2017 federal election.
9. But it is also considerably more difficult, and there may be no perfect (or even good) solution at all.
10. Even supporters of climate protection may reconsider their initial position if there are relevant policy trade-offs (Rettig et al. 2023).
11. There is no doubt that activists should have the right to demand more climate action. What many dispute, however, is their right to impose particular policies that have not been the subject of democratic deliberation.
12. A German survey from June 2023 found that 85% of respondents were opposed to road blockades and 56% were in favour of harsher penalties for protesters who resort to such means (Kolvenbach et al. 2023).
13. *Satire VI*, 347–8 (*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes*). The same aphorism is often misattributed to Plato.

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# Regulating artificial intelligence: A technology-independent approach

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## Abstract

Successful applications of artificial intelligence (AI), such as ChatGPT, have been prompting regulators to speed up the related regulation processes. China and the EU have been particularly ambitious in this regard. The EU AI Act has been swiftly progressing through the institutions and is expected to be officially adopted in spring 2024. This article argues that its overall approach is wrong, that it extends EU regulation into policy areas which come under national competences and that it will hurt European AI innovation in particular and society in general. Instead of regulating AI per se, the EU or the member states should regulate the use of AI in specific sectors or, better still, regulate it in technologically independent ways—by specifying what is allowed or prohibited, regardless of the technology used.

## Keywords

Artificial intelligence, AI Act, Regulation, Subsidiarity, Internet policy, Innovation policy

## Introduction

In 2023 artificial intelligence (AI) made it into the consciousness of the general public. First ChatGPT and then a few other tools gave the impression that there was an intelligent being behind the screen. The answers to factual questions, summaries of articles, draft essays, colourful paintings and so on looked like the results of an intelligent human author. Even the AI scientific community was caught by surprise by how well these systems work (Hassenfeld 2023).

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This hype and success also gave rise to all kinds of speculation and fears. Stephen Hawking, Elon Musk and Yuval Harari, to name just a few, have long been warning about the existential threat that AI could pose to the human race (Taylor 2023). In the public perception, this evoked memories of Hollywood science-fiction films in which computers and robots take over the world and humans fight them for survival.

Meanwhile, the EU has been observing how China is using digital technology to monitor its citizens, how advertisers are using God knows what to serve up well-targeted ads on the Internet and how public opinion can be swayed by social media channels such as X, Facebook, Instagram and Tik Tok.

EU lawmakers have also been remembering how the Internet developed below their radar, and how it dramatically changed the media landscape, the consumption of news and, some believe, the results of referenda and elections (Rose 2017). The disinformation panic of the late 2010s was seen by some lawmakers as a reminder that one should regulate new technology before it is too late, before it outgrows politics. This mistake was not to be repeated with AI.

It would seem, then, that European politicians were responding to an urgent public need when, on 9 December, the Parliament and the Council agreed on a ‘historic deal’ on ‘the first rules for AI in the world’ (Council of the EU 2023). The EU might not have any competitors in the global AI race—all the main players are American or Chinese—but the EU’s global relevance in this field is in regulating it.

These were not, however, the first rules for AI in the world. In 2022, 37 countries passed regulations related to AI, and more followed in 2023 (Lynch 2023). In August 2023 China adopted a comprehensive generative AI regulation. It imposes restrictions on the training data used and on the outputs produced by tools that offer generative AI services to consumers (Roberts and Hine 2023).

Given all this innovation activity, on the one hand, and regulatory ambition, on the other, consideration should be given as to whether the EU’s approach to AI regulation is appropriate. And if not, what is the alternative?

## **Artificial intelligence**

There is a lot of confusion about AI. To put it simply, AI is a computer program that, like any other computer program, given some input, provides some output. The particular branch of AI that has been making waves recently is very good at two kinds of tasks. It can find patterns in the data given as input, and it can generate patterns similar to those it has been trained with, given a prompt. The first feature makes it very efficient, for example, at diagnosing illnesses, finding potential criminals or sifting through job applicants. The second feature allows it to write summaries, reports and essays; generate pictures; and compose music.



Patterns are everywhere. Intelligent human behaviour is about recognising and creating patterns. When someone says ‘hi’, and we respond with ‘hello’, this is a pattern. When a glass breaks when it hits the floor, this is a pattern. That day follows night is a pattern. That this article has an abstract, introduction, a couple of sections, conclusions and references is a pattern. That a human face has two eyes, two ears, a nose and a mouth is a pattern. Humans know some patterns from experience—for example, how to recognise faces or animals. And they have reduced other patterns to abstractions and mathematical formulae. The velocity of that glass hitting the floor is governed by a formula that takes the square root of twice the height from the floor multiplied by the acceleration of gravity. Current AI is very good at learning from experiences but not good at all at reducing specific problems to general theories and creating abstractions (Wolfram 2023).

Because patterns are everywhere and because language and pictures are the means by which we communicate, the AI under discussion here is generic technology. It can be applied to any issue that can be explored through language or pictures. The generation of content is protected by freedom of expression, and humans should not be limited in terms of how AI helps them to be creative. Recognising patterns should not be prohibited either, because it is the essence of rational, scientific work. It is therefore questionable whether regulating AI—as a generic technology—makes sense at all, because this would mean regulating what humans are allowed to discover and what they are allowed to create.

## The EU’s approach to AI regulation

The areas in which AI has the potential to be used are huge, and the need to somehow partition these into manageable pieces is understandable. The EU approach is to classify AI applications into four categories according to the risk they pose (Whyman 2023):

- *Unacceptable risk.* Here belong AI systems that are prohibited due to clear threats to safety, livelihoods and rights. Examples include social scoring by governments and real-time biometric identification for law enforcement in public spaces.
- *High risk.* AI applications falling under this category are subject to strict pre- and post-market regulations. These include applications used in critical infrastructure, education, employment, law enforcement and judicial systems.
- *Limited risk.* This concerns AI systems that require transparency to ensure that users know they are interacting with AI. An example is AI chatbots.
- *Minimal or no risk.* Most AI systems can be freely used without legal obligations but its providers are encouraged to follow codes of conduct. Examples include AI for video games and spam filters.

The EU AI Act expects that all AI ‘services’ would be registered and stipulates prohibitive fines for businesses that use AI in breach of the Regulation. While at first glance this

seems reasonable, one wonders what a similar list would have looked like for two just-as-revolutionary technologies from the past—the printing press and the Internet.

## Earlier approaches to regulating generic technologies

Early printing-press regulations included ad hoc censorship of some materials, as exemplified by the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, first published by the Catholic Church in 1559. The Licensing of the Press Act 1662 in England required printers to obtain a licence, effectively enabling the government to control what could be published. The late eighteenth century saw a liberalisation of the rules and the introduction of the first ‘freedom of expression’ acts, most notably the American First Amendment (1791) and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789). Subsequent legal instruments, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), further internationalised the idea of freedom of expression (Barendt 2005).

Thus, press regulation matured into limitations on how the state could use its power to interfere with the press and, more generally, with communication. The state was allowed to intervene and limit speech in just a short list of situations including matters of national security, the incitement of violence, Holocaust denial and child pornography. Otherwise, it was told to stay out of the way. The founding fathers of modern democracies did not elaborate on or categorise the ways in which the technology of the printing press could hurt citizens.

Another general-purpose technology is the Internet. In the early 1990s it was at a stage of development and public awareness similar to that of AI today. There were also ideas to regulate it in a general way, modelled on telecoms regulations. However, in the end, only a few targeted regulations emerged, and these actually protected the Internet from being governed by laws more suited to the era of the printing press. Most notable was the Telecommunications Act of 1996, Section 230 of which provided immunity to Internet service providers and platforms from liability for content posted by their users.

Neither with the printing press nor with the Internet did lawmakers try to come up with a list of possible uses and then classify them as ranging them from ‘unacceptable risk’ to ‘minimal or no risk’. The exceptions to this were the Church in the sixteenth century and some twentieth-century dictatorships, which classified quite a few books as being of ‘unacceptable risk’ to their potential readers.

## Regulation to do good

Two patterns of AI regulation are emerging globally. The *ex ante* kind is trying to foresee all possible evils and potential for wrongdoing. China and the EU are in this lawmaking camp. Not only are they trying to protect their citizens from all kinds of real and perceived dangers, but they are also explicitly stating the noble goals that AI should be expected to pursue.

The OECD (2022) recommends that AI should contribute to inclusive growth and sustainable development, that it should enhance the well-being of people, and that the

design and deployment of AI systems should respect human-centred values and fairness, including privacy, dignity and diversity. Furthermore, it notes that AI systems should operate transparently and that their workings should be understandable and explainable.

These are all nice-sounding goals, but they quickly become restrictive. What if an AI discovers a pattern that, for example, shows that the presence of the Y chromosome is by far the best predictor of someone's gender? How will that work with people who believe that gender is a choice? That results should be explainable is a particularly high-order expectation because the mathematics behind some branches of AI are simply too complex for us to understand why one answer is given rather than another.

Technology is values-neutral. It is the use of technology, from a stone knife to nuclear energy, that can be good or bad, moral or immoral, not technology per se.

## **Other approaches to AI regulation**

Those countries which have their legal basis in common law are counting on case law to set precedents once specific disputes come to court. The US, Canada, India and Switzerland are all taking a more *laissez-faire* approach. Rather than creating a separate law for AI regulation, Switzerland plans to adapt existing laws to regulate the use of AI systems in areas including data protection, equal treatment, competition, product liability and civil law (Kohn and Pieper 2023).

This approach seems reasonable. AI is a general-purpose technology. Patterns can be discovered anywhere. Patterns can be created about anything. Regulating technology as such limits what the tool can actually do. It limits the kind of innovation that takes place. This is why sweeping AI regulation is bound to slow down AI research and development.

Even French President Macron is critical of the EU's approach to AI regulation, stating that it is 'not a good idea' and that it is a risk to innovation, potentially putting EU technology companies at a disadvantage compared to their counterparts in the US and the UK (Caddle 2023). Macron has also emphasised that regulation should be controlling and not punitive. His focus here is on ensuring that the new laws facilitate innovation rather than penalising or overly constraining AI development.

The general European regulation of AI also hides the danger of a further reduction of subsidiarity within the Union. It regulates the use of a technology that is applicable in many different policy areas, including internal security, justice, education, healthcare and culture. These are not European but member state competences. Thus, Brussels has found yet another way to extend its powers and create an even closer Union.

The alternative to regulating AI as such is to regulate where, how and by whom AI can be used. For old-fashioned liberals, it would make sense to introduce regulation that limits the use of AI systems by governments, thus preventing the creation of a Big

Brother-style dystopia. Alternatively, regulation could be introduced, along the lines of that introduced for the printed press, that limits governments' ability to restrict businesses and individuals from using AI.

As for where and how AI can and cannot be used, two approaches can be taken: a technology-specific approach and a technology-independent approach. A technology-specific approach would prescribe how a specific technology—that is, AI—can or cannot be used in this or that area. It would, for example, amend health care regulations to include provisions on how AI can or cannot be used. In the same way, regulations on public safety, taxation and equality before the law would be amended. The law on policing would state, for example, that AI cannot be used for face recognition in public spaces. A social security law would prohibit (or not prohibit) social scoring. Work and employment legislation would prohibit (or not prohibit) the use of AI in job-application screening.

In contrast, a technology-independent approach would specify which behaviours are prohibited, regardless of which technology is used. For example, it would prohibit the impersonation of people, be it by a human actor or by an AI-generated avatar. It would prohibit the discovery of patterns in crime and predictive policing, regardless of whether the patterns were discovered by AI, Excel or just by an old cop's experience.

## Conclusion

The author believes that the most reasonable approach is a technology-independent one that regulates the specifics of particular issues. In addition, case law should be derived from real-world disputes. By taking the alternative approach, the EU is likely to end up even further behind the US, the UK and China, for two reasons: (1) its AI development would not be as ambitious as that of the competition and (2) AI users in all areas of life and work would be deprived of the best tools available globally.

AI is just a tool—a complex and powerful tool, but in the end, just a tool. Regulation should not be concerned with what kinds of tools are built, but how and where such tools may or may not be used. Or to be more precise, regulation should continue to define what governments are allowed to do and what citizens and businesses are not allowed to do—whether with AI tools, other tools or manually, it does not matter.

'Thou shalt not kill' is not concerned with the tool used for killing. It applies to stones, knives, guns, AI or any other tool or weapon.

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# Politically Correct 4.0: Historical causes and cultural evaluation

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## Abstract

The current form of political correctness has many cultural roots; these explain why its underlying quest for social justice has become a dangerous ideology. This article addresses the political, religious and philosophical roots of this phenomenon. It also sets forth ways of avoiding dangerous extremism while holding onto the demands for justice often associated with political correctness.

## Keywords

Political correctness, Individualism, Constructivism, Calvinism, Realism, Nominalism

## Introduction

There are many ways of talking about political correctness. Often the discourse about this issue tends to confound linguistic and social attitudes with political issues so that any debate ends up by talking about left and right politics, losing sight of the linguistic side. However, it is this linguistic approach that many people embrace, hoping to change politics through changing words or cancelling texts. This kind of approach relies on a constructivist paradigm, according to which communication creates reality. This paradigm opposes a more realist one that considers communication to be the result of real social change. In this article I will limit the discussion of political correctness to its linguistic sense while exploring the cultural history that led to the relevance of the issue to the contemporary political and social debate.<sup>1</sup>

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Linguistic Political Correctness 4.0<sup>2</sup> is the current extreme ideology that has resulted from the understandable attention paid to social justice that emerged in the post-war period in the US and spread worldwide. The root of any disruptive ideology is a deranged, unbalanced, isolated truth that is violently propagated. Human beings tend to be ideological, as Vasilij Grossman explained well (Maddalena 2023), and they always have been, but twentieth-century mass society and the current technology based on social networks and artificial intelligence have certainly increased this tendency in both breadth and depth, making it plausible to envisage a world divided into small ideological tribes, segregated and self-referential.<sup>3</sup>

A discussion about the new form of linguistic political correctness requires the elaboration of many details, especially to identify its understandable demands for social justice, mostly generated from the social and political situation of the US. However, to simplify, it may be worth using a list that arises out of legitimate requests for justice that can be grouped and listed as follows: it is right (1) to rebel against physical and psychological abuse; (2) that one's identity be respected; (3) to avoid the physical or moral lionisation of those who do wrong, as can be seen in the fact that we do not approve of statues of Hitler or Stalin; (4) to take a stand when one believes in something and to try to persuade others; and (5) that someone speaks only when that person is truly competent in a particular field. These demands of justice determine various kinds of behaviours, all manifested in language, that form the galaxy of the new political correctness. A parallel set of these behaviours can be listed as follows: (1) extreme sensitivity to the uses of language and to the formulae that comprise it; (2) attention to misgendering—the error of attributing gender and the countermeasures that are taken (the use of schwa and asterisks in Italian, plural pronouns in English, neutral -e and -es in Spanish, etc.); (3) the habit of discarding texts and artworks exhibiting a 'wrong' message ('cancel culture'); (4) the tendency to reprimand those who do not participate in an ideological campaign; and (5) the stigmatisation of cultural appropriation, meaning that only someone belonging to a minority can speak about that minority.<sup>4</sup>

None of these habits or points of view is unreasonable per se, but they become so when they generate a univocal mentality that forbids the right to suspend judgements or to be neutral on certain topics, hindering freedom of thought and speech, rejecting scientific and moral doubts or even ironic scepticism and the approval of new forms of discrimination. A balanced approach to the topic requires scientific study. The purpose of this article is to begin delving into the historical-cultural factors that created the ideological version of linguistic political correctness and to suggest paths that resist these extremisms without abandoning the righteous intentions behind them.

## **Three cultural roots: political philosophy, religion and epistemology**

### *The political root*

The first hint of linguistic political correctness dates back to the 1930s,<sup>5</sup> identified in the work of the linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf (1940). Later on, in the 1970s, the attention of

linguists was drawn to social concerns arising from the social justice battles of the 1960s. This origin has determined the ongoing reliance of liberals on racial issues as they are experienced in the US in discussing these issues. The complex linguistic-behavioural attitude encompassed by the expression 'politically correct' became widely discussed in the US during the 1980s and the 1990s in connection with the end of the Soviet system and the formation of a globalised capitalist world.<sup>6</sup> However, the political root of this form of challenge and protest may have a deeper history that we can relate to an individualist approach to politics.<sup>7</sup>

The American philosopher Michael Sandel attributed the radicalisation of this individualist approach to the isolation of persons from a power that becomes more and more technocratic. He traced it back to the breakdown of the genuinely social character of politics that occurred with Roosevelt's New Deal. According to Sandel, Roosevelt had to decide whether to accept the social-democratic reforms proposed by the left of his party or the libertarian impulses of Republican capitalism. In the end, he found a third way: relying on an interpretation of economics as a mathematical science, following Keynes, thus separating the 'technical' truth of economics from ethics (a discipline that economics was previously considered to be part of) and political choices (Sandel 1996). The idea of neutrality was born. When the major economic and social issues are removed from the political domain, what remains is the important but necessarily partial battle over ethical and linguistic issues detached from the possibility of more systematic reform. In another cultural area, the Italian philosopher Augusto Del Noce related the growing liberal landscape of the 1970s to the philosophical roots of freedom conceived as part of an individualist framework. According to Del Noce, the long story of materialism inevitably ended with the embracing of capitalist hedonism, transforming social battles into a radicalisation of individual autonomy, leaving individuals alone against the power of the state and supra-state formations. The reasoning is that once deprived of a transcendent reference and of the possibility of changing the necessary path of history, humans tend to radicalise the principle of autonomy more and more, fighting not for social but for individual rights. In this sense, Del Noce foresaw the transformation of left-wing parties into radical mass parties—libertarian, individualistic and narcissistic (Del Noce 1978).

Following these suggestions, we can say that political correctness becomes problematic when decisions about the proper structure of society are removed from the possibility of criticism because of the extreme disintermediation of our societies: everyone counts on himself or herself as social relationships weaken. In this social climate, individual vulnerabilities and defences risk becoming insurmountable walls that prevent the flourishing of human relations.

### *The religious root*

All forms of moral radicalisation also depend on the nature of religious culture. It is no coincidence that, in its most extreme forms, political correctness arises in countries with a strong Calvinist tradition. It is impossible to understand the US, and not only regarding this issue, without being fully aware of the power of the Calvinism that was imported by the Pilgrim Fathers. Calvinism has the potential to become a kind of moral radicalisation



that is unknown to most other Reformed Churches and impossible in the Catholic context. Moral uprightness in general, and ethical coherence in particular, are decisive features of Calvinist theology because they reflect a personal relationship with a severe God, whose choices remain utterly mysterious and whose decrees must be precisely and literally executed at all costs, as salvation depends on them. Unlike in countries with a Catholic heritage, politics remains tied to religion because divine decrees must find a practical and civil embodiment that is conceived with equal consistency. It may seem strange to be discussing these issues in the first half of the twenty-first century, but the history of secularisation in the US is very different from that of Europe. Even in the first half of the nineteenth century, all of the universities in the US were firmly religious, and to this day, religiosity remains a significant dimension of the American cultural environment (Kuklich 2002). This means that even those who now live far from religious dictates tend to experience ethical–civil battles passionately, motivated by religious attachment, which provides political radicalisation with an ethical and emotional impetus that would otherwise be impossible.<sup>8</sup>

### *The philosophical root*

A more properly philosophical root of Politically Correct 4.0 (PC 4.0) is found in nominalism, which underlies much of postmodern culture. Nominalism has a long history dating back to medieval thought and has existed in several variations. It can be summarised by stating that it believes in a separation of things from the words used to name and describe them, as well as from the meaning of the things themselves. Depending on the version of nominalism, meaning can be judged to be non-existent or constructed solely from the experience of things, or, as in the current cultural climate, generated by the names we invent for or attribute to them. In contrast, realism believes in a close and consequential connection between meanings, things and names, so that names depend on things, which in turn depend on their meanings. The nominalist division between meanings, things and names that runs through the entirety of philosophy from the end of the classical era manifests itself in PC 4.0 as a belief that changing or contesting names and attitudes can change the meanings of things. By using more feminine words in Latin-based languages, we will reach a better gender balance. By avoiding certain words referring to minorities, we will be more fair, equal and inclusive towards them. The bad social attitudes (things) with their bad ideological roots, such as discrimination and racism (meaning), will change if we criticise and change our ways of naming them. This is a philosophical attitude known as deconstruction in its critical version, which was often borrowed from French philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century, and as social or radical constructivism in its positive version, especially in sociological contexts (Maddalena and Gili 2017, 2021; Ferraris 2017; Lo Russo 2018). The philosophical reaction to the Holodomor, the two wars (increasingly seen as a unified phenomenon), the Holocaust and the twentieth-century totalitarianisms was a rejection of the close connection between reality and truth, in search of forms of knowledge and language that prevented violence perpetrated in the name of absolute ‘truths’ and of what is presumed to be a truthful representation of reality. This unexpectedly led to a radical critique and suspicion of reason and of its

ability to achieve shared and universal truths. We had several decades of following this postmodernist cultural fashion, which held that reason cannot grasp reality because there are no facts to which we can refer, but only narratives and interpretations. This has led to a serious questioning of the possibility of any objective meaning, even to the point of suggesting that all interpretations can be equally valid. From the extreme relativism with nihilistic tendencies that was typical of the late twentieth century, we have now shifted to a stiffening of nominalist constructions, leading to a paradoxically opposite result. Because of the heterogenesis of ends, the ‘anything goes’ of the late twentieth century has transformed into the current dictates of political correctness that prohibit any deviation from the only stylistic and behavioural norms accepted by the intellectual majority of Western society. The paradox is that those who continued to define themselves as realists first found themselves defending the solidity of references to reality and its meanings against the Nietzschean-derived nominalist mantra that ‘there are no facts, only interpretations’ and now find themselves defending the possibility that there are different interpretations of reality against the nominalist mantra that prohibits names or attitudes not deemed inclusive by the majority of society.

## How to handle the new cultural wave without rejecting its insights

Escaping the ideology of PC 4.0 does not mean denying its demands for justice. A mere rejection of these demands is just as ideological and useless as PC 4.0, and would result in an internal conflict within Western civilisation. Instead, is crucial to rediscover appropriate cures for each of the identified roots. Therefore, in reverse order with respect to the previous discussion, it is necessary to rediscover anti-nominalist realism, a sense of fallibilism and the need to sustain intermediate institutions. Each of these responses must be elaborated on their merit and not just declared by fiat.

The proper philosophical response is thus a rich and relational realism that considers the changes that occur in reality and to meanings, accepting an actual deepening of these changes and rejecting whatever lacks real reference to reality (Maddalena and Gili 2022). For example, in the linguistic field, the declaration of the Italian Academy of the Crusca, the referee of all linguistic issues in Italy, was of great help (Accademia della Crusca 2023). When questioned about the linguistic changes requested by PC 4.0, it responded by delving into the specific terms. In doing so, it was able to reject as contrary to proper Italian the addition of an asterisk or schwa as a neutral plural ending (*car\* collegh\**; *Carə colleghə*) because Italian needs every letter to be read. It also rejected the repetition of terms in the feminine plural (*candidati* and *candidate*), recalling that in Italian the neutral plural coincides with the masculine (*candidati*) without implying any gender judgement. It accepted the feminisation of terms ending in *-o* and *-a* (*sindaca, ministra*, etc.). The attitude of the Italian Academy should also be applied to other issues, including the construction of statues and the propriety of historical actions, by examining case by case, within the hermeneutics of their eras, which historical events are worthy of revision. In the West, for example, we believe that Hitler and Mussolini should not be honoured with statues because they are reprehensible even within an understanding of the

meanings of the time, while in-depth historical discussion would allow the recovery of statues of Christopher Columbus and of the texts of the 'sexist' Homer. The suggestion is that we engage specific topics, studying reality in all its dimensions.

The proper response to the religious aspect of this culture of political correctness cannot be a lack of interest or of civic and political passion, or an ode to indifference. The cure is to recall, and educate ourselves about, our intrinsic fallibility. In the strands of Christian religion in all of its versions, as well as in Judaism, we find the memory of original sin. Moreover, contemporary philosophy of science has long embraced the idea of the intrinsic fallibilism of our knowledge, as highlighted by Charles S. Peirce (CP 8, 5–5.1; CP 1, 13–14) and later, with a different emphasis, by Karl Popper (1959). Science itself, following Heisenberg, has long understood that it cannot be entirely deterministic. Therefore, there are good reasons to educate ourselves to understand that humans are always fallible; this does not demonstrate an absence of truth—by which we measure error—but confirms the inevitable approximation of every human achievement. Educating ourselves about this fallibilism allows us to temper Calvinist moralism and the rigidity of youth that sustain PC 4.0.

Finally, from a political perspective, it is crucial to emphasise the importance of a world where politics is again part of a comprehensive human project and not simply entrusted to technicians. Practical solutions that arise from this concern mainly involve projects of new intermediation capable of removing the individualistic and disintermediated aspect of present-day politics, which condemns citizens to face technical choices powerless and alone, seemingly without the possibility of reply. Creating and favouring intermediate institutions such as parties, associations, consortia, groups, committees and unions allows the re-creation of a social network that confronts technical power in a cooperative manner, providing alternative solutions or showing the impossibility or effectiveness of certain measures taken. It is in defence of these institutions that the profound ideas of subsidiarity would be implemented, ideas that must apply to every society and especially to the interstate dynamics of Europe. Only in this resurgence of associative and community life can realism live in a rich and relational way, listening to and supporting demands for greater social justice without falling into the moral Jacobinism that transforms justice into terror.

## Notes

1. The ambiguity of an overly broad use of the expression 'political correctness' is evident in the Munk debate on the topic reported in Fry et al. 2018.
2. I use this label to distinguish today's debate, which is related to the Internet 4.0—the Internet of Things—from the initial versions of political correctness that developed after the Second World War, the one that emerged during the 1970s, and its revival in the 1980s and 1990s.
3. For the pioneering studies on this phenomenon, see Dalton 1987, and for a review of contemporary studies of the influence of social media on it see Kubin and von Sikorski 2021.
4. For a similar, but more critical, classification, see Mastrocola and Ricolfi 2023 and Friedman 2019. See also Soncini 2021. If we could escape the linguistic realm, we would find at least one other need and critically responsive attitude: (6) the acknowledgement that the majority

is not always right, countered by (6) positive actions taken to balance the injustices suffered by minorities.

5. ‘One of the earliest uses of the term “politically correct” in the sense in which we currently understand it – dogmatic language boundaries aimed at conforming to a political belief – is found in a New York Times article from 1934. The title of the article makes its subject obvious: “Personal liberty vanishes in Reich”’ (Bump 2015).
6. For a brief but detailed account of this story, especially of the use of the expression in the US media, see Bump (2015).
7. See again the Munk debate reported in Fry et al. 2018. Both defendants and critics of political correctness play on an individualist rhetoric.
8. The relevance of Calvinism to American society was classically outlined by Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 1930). Recent studies on this subject are Bratt 2009 and Hart 2013.

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# Protecting fundamental EU values: In search of a balanced approach

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## Abstract

This article reflects on the increasingly contentious nature of EU fundamental values under Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union. It argues that a ‘double encroachment’ is taking place in this field. Under the convenient veneer of defending ‘conservative’ values, the governments of some EU member states have taken measures that undermine basic rights, checks and balances. But at the same time, EU institutions have increasingly embraced an expansive and progressive interpretation of EU fundamental values that restricts member states’ ability to pursue conservative policies on such matters as family, gender and education. A restrained approach is advocated to strike the correct balance between the EU’s necessary responsibility to protect the core dimensions of the rule of law and fundamental rights across the member states and those states’ legitimate desires to filter their interpretations through the specific lenses of their societies’ histories, values and democratic preferences. Some recommendations to that effect are put forward.

## Keywords

EU fundamental values, Rule of law, Article 2 Treaty on European Union, EU subsidiarity, Federalism, National identities, Moral disagreements, Depoliticisation

## Introduction

The EU’s fundamental values, as defined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), have been part of the official discourse and legal system of European integration for some time. But until recently they have not represented a significant bone of contention, either among the member states or between them and the supranational institutions.

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For various reasons, that is no longer the case. The last decade has witnessed a growing number of disputes about the correct interpretation and most effective enforcement of EU values, such as fundamental human rights and the rule of law.

In the second half of 2020, for example, a Polish and Hungarian veto over a proposed mechanism to suspend the disbursement of EU funds in cases of generalised rule of law deficiencies in any member state temporarily stalled negotiations on the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework and the attendant NextGenerationEU funding. Commotions about this matter have continued, including both a legal action against the mechanism and constant frictions between the EU institutions and affected governments (Makszimov 2021). More recently, a Hungarian law banning, among other things, any portrayal to minors of homosexuality or gender reassignment (Kovács 2022) caused uproar across the EU, including a letter of condemnation signed by 16 governments (Bayer 2023) and a damning European Parliament resolution (Rankin 2021). In short, the EU is increasingly being marred by what we might call an identity politics of fundamental rights.

This article is not concerned with existing or potential new mechanisms for protecting fundamental EU values. It only offers some thoughts on the historic–political background to the current disputes and puts forward some general recommendations that should be considered when implementing existing mechanisms or designing new ones.

## **From limited objectives to a Union of values**

While European integration has had clearly political goals from the start, in its first decades the European (Economic) Community was only active in very precise fields for the pursuit of very specific goals, and ‘values’ did not play much of a role. There were two main drivers on the path from a community of interests to a community of law, and finally to one of values. The first was the growing strength and scope of European law. The supremacy of European law over national constitutional law, established by the European Court of Justice (ECJ) in the 1960s, coupled with the gradual expansion of EU competences to new fields, created a fear that the basic values protected in member states’ constitutions could be flouted by the European institutions. In other words, the discourse on ‘values’ first entered European law to make sure that the basic principles protected in national constitutions—the common constitutional heritage of the member states—would not be undermined by European initiatives, rather than to empower the EU to guard individual rights from the actions of member states. The second driver was the enlargement to the younger democracies of Southern, Central and Eastern Europe, which made it necessary to define more precisely the basic values that all candidate countries and member states had to respect. This is how, after complex development, the fundamental values of the EU, as defined in Article 2 TEU, emerged. For our purposes, they can be summarised simply as democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law.

By placing EU values (art. 2) before EU goals (art. 3), the Lisbon Treaty emphasised the former’s precedence over the latter and accelerated the EU’s transition from a Union

of limited objectives to one of general values. The Treaty also encouraged EU institutions to interpretatively broaden the scope of fundamental EU values and incorporate their defence and promotion in EU policies (Amato and Verola 2018, 57–88). This trend was strengthened by the attribution of ‘the same legal value as the treaties’ to the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, as well as by the legal obligation—as yet unfulfilled—for the EU to accede to the European Convention on Fundamental Rights (Schütze 2021, Chapter 12). All this justified a much more activist posture from EU institutions in the (mine)field of fundamental values and rights.

### **Fundamental values in today’s EU: a double encroachment?**

Aside from the constitutional transformation of the EU after the entering into force of the Lisbon Treaty, another crucial change—this one more cultural and political—must be kept in mind when studying the multiplication of clashes over fundamental EU values: the rise of identity politics. Traditional politics in Western democracies was animated by a universal notion of human dignity and the desire to protect a sphere of individual autonomy from arbitrary government interference. Contemporary politics, by contrast, is increasingly hijacked by loud and resentful demands for the recognition of one’s identity, variously defined based on nation, religion, sect, race, ethnicity or gender. This includes both phenomena that are usually considered progressive and left-wing—such as ‘political correctness’, radical feminism or the various ‘pride’ movements of sexual minorities—and trends more typically treated as regressive and right-wing—such as the populist nationalism that has arisen in many Western countries since the Great Recession (Fukuyama 2018). As in the US, where this destructive ideological polarisation first took hold, in the EU culture wars are increasingly extending beyond the borders of single states, spilling over into the shared space guaranteed by the Union. These wars not only divide national societies, but reach directly into EU politics, pitting country against country and emboldening EU institutions to take a stance on explosive identity issues never previously considered to have been within their purview.

Over the last decade, EU identity politics has also become entangled with the rise of ‘illiberal democracy’ in several member states. EU institutions seem to have partly compensated for their inability to act directly against these authoritarian tendencies by adopting an increasingly militant progressive identity politics that delegitimises conservative interpretations of EU fundamental values. European Parliament initiatives championing the most progressive understanding of EU values have multiplied. The 2021 Matic report, for example, clearly aimed to include an unqualified right to ‘services providing safe and legal abortions’ under Article 2 TEU’s definition of EU fundamental rights, despite the EU having no competence on such matters (European Parliament 2021). Moreover, in its reports and resolutions, genuine rule of law issues—such as the independence of the judiciary, civil society organisations and the media—are routinely conflated with more controversial matters, such as those affecting gender relations or LGBTQI+ people.<sup>1</sup>

Nor has the European Commission shown much restraint when it comes to embracing progressive identity politics, which underpin many of its measures adopted or planned



for a ‘Union of equality’. For example, when the Commission champions ‘the mutual recognition of parenthood’ for ‘rainbow families’ across the Union, it prepares the ground for restricting or voiding member states’ rights to adopt more conservative definitions of the family, again despite the EU having no direct competence on such matters (European Commission 2020). This increasingly associates EU policies with progressive ideological causes, unnecessarily discrediting the Union in the eyes of conservatives.

In today’s EU, therefore, there is a risk of double encroachment: on the one hand, some member states are encroaching upon basic rights, such as those ensuring an independent judiciary and free media. On the other, EU institutions are increasingly embracing a progressive interpretation of EU fundamental values that de-legitimises, when not outlawing, the possibility of more conservative approaches in some member states. These twin manifestations of identity politics feed upon each other, creating a climate of ideological civil war within and, increasingly, between states.

### **In search of balance: some recommendations**

If a double encroachment is occurring in today’s EU, or at least if there are risks of it, the EU institutions must become aware of the problem and take countermeasures to establish a more restrained and balanced enforcement of fundamental values. This need not mean weaker enforcement, but rather the opposite. By adopting a more ideologically neutral approach and standing above the demands of both progressive and conservative identity politics, EU institutions would be more credibly able to enforce the essential core of fundamental values, which also happens to include those which are the least ideologically charged. This essential core primarily refers to what classical liberals have long called ‘negative rights’, that is, the necessary legal infrastructure of all free societies: civil and political rights such as freedom of speech, life, private property and religion; as well as fair trial provisions; free and fair elections; and basic checks and balances. There is no doubt that fundamental values, if defined in this narrow and prudent manner, are a necessary prerequisite for a decentralised federal union, such as the EU, to survive and thrive, if only because its good functioning and single market rest on national administrations and judicial bodies loyally implementing its rules. If given a more ambitious and intrusive definition, however, fundamental values can become a cause of division.

Recommendation 1: moral disagreements cannot always be resolved in federal unions. Keep the EU out of ‘morality policy’ as much as possible.

Europeans disagree profoundly on questions of moral principle and their legal consequences. Naturally, then, issues such as family structure, gender relations, LGBTQI+ rights, social rights, the relationship between the state and church(es), and the role of religious symbols in public life are still highly sensitive and divisive, both between and within EU countries. Such radical moral disagreements are far from unusual in big and diverse federal unions, which have often foundered on their inability to manage them.

The desire to protect the free expression of local moral preferences from the risk of encroachment by central government is, after all, the most salient basis for federal and decentralised, as opposed to unitary, institutions. American federalism, for example, is largely a product of the individual states' desires to protect and maintain their profound differences in morals, values and cultures, while enjoying the benefits of a large economic and military union. In the last century, the moral disagreements accommodated by American federalism have included such explosive issues as capital punishment, abortion, racial segregation, alcohol prohibition, pornography, gambling, sex education, same-sex marriage and the right to die (Calabresi and Fish 2016). The much-discussed 2022 *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision of the US Supreme Court, which overruled the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision and reassigned to the individual states the right to regulate access to abortion, is essentially a return to this more traditional and decentralised approach to handling moral disagreements.

In federal unions, morality policy is best dealt with by agreeing to disagree, by accepting decentralised policymaking and policy heterogeneity under a rigorous principle of subsidiarity. When the federal level usurps state authority on morality policy in pursuit of a more uniform protection of 'fundamental values', it encourages unnecessary polarisation and risks jeopardising its own legitimacy (Mooney 2000). The federal spirit is demanding: its essence lies in the ability of all actors to exercise self-restraint and to tolerate, within the same compound polity, values that they might find abhorrent and contrary to their first principles.

Recommendation 2: supranational institutions should behave as impartial guardians of rules interpreted as consensually as possible.

In a complex and highly integrated federal union, however, there are bound to be instances when supranational institutions cannot remain completely aloof from morally contentious values. In such cases, it is essential that they behave as impartial guardians of rules interpreted as consensually as possible, not as promoters of a progressive agenda. This applies first and foremost to the two supranational courts of Europe—the ECJ and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR)—which both perform essential constitutional roles but obviously have no political mandate.

The ECHR famously treats the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms as a 'living instrument', seeing human rights as ever-expanding and gradually being locked into ever stronger supranational safeguards (Pin 2019). This was not always so and need not always be so. In tune with its forgotten conservative origins (Duranti 2017), for many years the Strasbourg court ensured the protection of core human rights while granting states the latitude necessary to interpret them in light of their differing preferences and traditions. This attitude has recently been shed in favour of a doctrine that more aggressively advances the prevailing progressive values, restricting the freedom of more conservative states (Clarke 2017). The same can be said of the ECJ (Grimm 2016, 295–312). Over the last 20 years, both courts have adopted ambitious

and progressive definitions of democracy, the rule of law and human rights. For example, under their rulings the principle of equality has been transformed from a limited one focused on the neutral arbitration of conflicts among market operators to a much more intrusive concept of equality as non-discrimination (Pin 2019, 237–40). The same can be said, as explained above, of the two supranational political institutions of the EU, the Commission and the Parliament. The ‘progress-bound’ judicial doctrines of the ECJ and ECHR and political agendas of the Parliament and Commission have certainly been contributing factors to the rise of Eurosceptic populism that purports to protect threatened traditions and cultural identities. Abandoning these doctrines and agendas in favour of, respectively, judicial and political restraint would therefore seem wise.

The position taken by centre–right forces in European Parliament votes on morally contentious issues also deserves to be mentioned here. Based on the current political composition of the Parliament, centre–right support is indispensable to approve any of the legislative proposals and resolutions that promote divisive interpretations of fundamental rights. Centre–right forces could therefore act more resolutely as the guardians of a robust notion of subsidiarity in the field of fundamental rights. They should reject initiatives that promote expansive and divisive interpretations of Article 2 TEU on strictly constitutional grounds, as opposed to being dragged into a discussion of the substantive issues involved, on which positions can, and do, differ. This would likely widen the legitimacy of the European project by showing that a united Europe is not necessarily inimical to conservative values, and that conservatism and Europeanism can be perfectly compatible. It would also take away any residual justification from governments pursuing an authoritarian agenda under the convenient veneer of defending ‘conservative’ values against the ‘progressive’ agenda of the EU.

Recommendation 3: fundamental values should always be interpreted in light of a concern for subsidiarity and national identities.

Rights never exist in a historical, political and cultural vacuum. And yet the very mechanisms that normally trigger the proceedings of the ECHR and ECJ—the ‘pilot judgement’ and ‘preliminary ruling’ respectively—‘always posit . . . an individual vindicating a personal, private interest’ against the public good as perceived in the community to which he belongs, thus ultimately placing him ‘at odds with his or her thicker national political space’ (Joseph Weiler, in Pin 2019, 241). This is less destabilising for national cultures and democracies when it is rights of access to the market that are at stake. However, when supranational institutions act to enforce ‘progressive’ values on issues characterised by fundamental moral disagreements, the risk increases that this both encourages polarisation and restricts the scope for national democratic deliberations, thereby fomenting Euroscepticism.

Partial remedies to counterbalance such tendencies have been made available and gradually strengthened since the Maastricht Treaty, chief among them the protection of national cultural and constitutional identities and the principle of subsidiarity, currently provided for in Articles 4(2) and 5 TEU respectively. In some cases, the invocation of national identity by some member states has appeared to mask the desire to pursue

undisturbed an authoritarian transformation of national legal and political systems. Against that, it has been rightly observed that the treaties should be read as a whole: the constitutional identities of the member states are to be respected only as long as they are compatible with the founding values of the Union listed in Article 2 TEU and the commitment to guaranteeing fundamental rights (Fraguna 2017). However, the injunction to read the treaties as a whole is not only valid for member states which hide their authoritarianism behind the concept of constitutional identity. It is equally valid for supranational institutions which promote the most progressive interpretation of fundamental EU values based on a reading of Article 2 that neglects the need to respect cultural diversity and subsidiarity. After all, as the noted jurist Joseph Weiler argues, the ‘political and cultural specificity of one’s own unique national identity’ is an extension of one’s dignity as a unique and irreplaceable human being. By undermining it, we risk compromising, at least to an extent, this very dignity (Weiler 2020, 98).

Recommendation 4: resist the ‘culture of rights’, which undermines subsidiarity and democracy.

More generally, when dealing with the defence of fundamental values, policymakers—especially those with conservative and Christian Democratic leanings—should resist the abstract conception of rights that often seems to underpin them in EU discourse.<sup>2</sup> Such a conception seems particularly ill-suited to a supranational federal union based on subsidiarity, such as the EU. By mandating the organic construction of political order from the bottom up and demanding that higher and bigger entities be at the service of the lower and smaller ones, the philosophy underpinning the principle of subsidiarity is incompatible both with any notion of abstract rights and with the progressive fiction of totally free and self-determining individuals. On the contrary, its starting point is the natural embeddedness of responsible persons in multiple concentric communities from the family up to the EU. Therefore, ‘subsidiarity implies a relativisation of rights: a permanent questioning, not of their necessity, but of their content.’ Subsidiarity is incompatible ‘with petrified and sacralised rights’ (Million-Delsol 1993, 76–9; author’s translation). And how can one define the rights constantly brandished in the political discourse of today’s EU, if not as ‘petrified’ and ‘sacralised’?

Relatedly, constitutionalising at the supranational level an ever-expanding list of rights whose exact content is still contested in many member states also means reducing the scope for legitimate democratic debate and disagreement at the national level. This ‘depoliticisation’ of debates that go straight to the heart of national cultures and identities encourages the rise of right-wing Eurosceptic populism (Pin 2019, 241–2). A flawed and ultimately anti-pluralist conception of European integration is to blame for this, as are the equally flawed and anti-pluralist notions of ‘illiberal democracy’.

## Conclusion

The interpretation and enforcement of fundamental values in the EU are becoming increasingly contentious. This is not surprising. The experience of other federal unions in history,

from the US to Switzerland, confirms that such matters are among the most intractable and disruptive challenges these kinds of polities are confronted with. Wisdom and restraint are needed from all sides to strike the correct balance between the EU's necessary responsibility to protect the core dimensions of the rule of law across the member states and those states' legitimate desires to at least partly filter their interpretations through the specific lenses of their societies' histories, values and democratic preferences.

It is essential to avoid the polarisation of the EU into two opposing camps separated by an unbridgeable distrust. In one camp there is concern that in some member states a systematic and conscious attempt to subvert basic checks and balances is ongoing, and that respect for the EU principle of loyal cooperation can no longer be assumed. In the other there is fear that the EU institutions have come to embrace and promote an expansive and progressive definition of fundamental values that could restrict the member states' ability to pursue conservative policies on such matters as family, gender and education.

For the long-term sustainability of the European project, all sides must accept that the Union ought to be able to protect the rule of law and basic freedoms if there is clear and indisputable evidence that they have become imperilled in some member states. However, it must also be understood that the Union's definition of rule of law and fundamental rights ought to be broad and flexible enough to allow a degree of internal constitutional differentiation that reflects the specificities of the 27 different member states. Only this approach has any chance of restoring trust, which is the most invaluable commodity for the survival of a supranational union such as the EU.

## Notes

1. See, for example, European Parliament (2018). Breaches listed in the report include failing to adapt working conditions for pregnant or breastfeeding workers, discriminating against the LGBTIQ+ community and gender stereotypes in new school textbooks.
2. For a general discussion of the problem, see Biggar (2022).

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# How to make EU enlargement work? A grass-roots approach to strategic preparations

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## Abstract

Enlargement is back on the EU agenda. Leaders have broken long-established foreign policy taboos by green-lighting accession talks with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, and by awarding EU candidate country status to Georgia. This bold step has elevated the expectations of the existing candidate countries, instilling renewed optimism in the Western Balkans Six. At the same time, the EU has recognised the need to carry out its own reforms to be prepared to integrate potentially 10 new member states.

However, given the complexities of EU institutional reform, coupled with the uncertain political context, expectations of EU enlargement may lead to disillusionment. This article argues that the EU should not tie its progress on institutional reform too closely to its enlargement policy and that it needs to take a grass-roots approach to enlargement. It should focus on strengthening horizontal cooperation, enhancing efficiency and increasing public involvement in the EU enlargement process.

## Keywords

EU enlargement, Institutional reform, Grass-roots approach

## The return of EU enlargement

There is a new permissive consensus emerging among EU policymakers and scholars that the EU's enlargement policy has been reborn with a geopolitical focus. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU has begun to regard potential enlargement not

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merely as a facet of foreign policy but as a strategic tool to assert its role by expanding into regions of geopolitical significance. This foreign policy shift has led most member states to view enlargement as a way to address geopolitical challenges and reinforce the EU's position in its immediate neighbourhood.

Leaders of countries that had previously shown little enthusiasm for enlargement have visibly changed their stance. Speaking in Bratislava in May 2023, French President Emmanuel Macron, who in 2019 blocked the opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, stated that the question is not whether the EU should enlarge but how it should do so, adding that the EU should admit new countries 'as swiftly as possible' (Macron 2023). German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, addressing the European Parliament, advocated for a geopolitically stronger and redefined EU, emphasising that the initiative is not about altruism but about securing a lasting peace in Europe in the wake of Russia's war of aggression (European Parliament 2023). Meanwhile, the European Commission president has boldly asserted that completing the Union is a 'call of history' and the 'natural horizon' for the EU (European Commission 2023d).

Clear evidence of the EU's geopolitical rationale in its enlargement doctrine was demonstrated at a historic summit in December, when EU leaders endorsed the opening of accession negotiations with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, and the granting of candidate status to Georgia (European Council 2023). The decision—made in the shadow of Russia's brutal war—heralds a new era in EU enlargement policy, one which will redefine the EU's geography and political destiny.

Two years ago, the countries of the Eastern Trio (Ukraine, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova) could hardly dream of the prospect of EU enlargement that they acquired in June 2022, much less of EU membership itself. Over the past decade, the trio had been constantly reminded that neither the Eastern Partnership policy nor the Association Agreements, despite the latter's advanced economic and political incentives, included the prospect of membership. Now, these nations find themselves grouped together with the six Western Balkan countries in the same enlargement cohort.

This U-turn has created the impression that enlargement fatigue is over, elevating the expectations of the Western Balkan countries, which have been waiting in the EU's antechamber for the past two decades. However, the fast-track advancement of the Eastern Trio has also created a sense of competition and doubt. Some Western Balkan leaders are growing increasingly frustrated that Ukraine is 'leapfrogging' their countries in the EU accession process, adding further delays to their decades-long efforts to join the bloc (Dunai and Johnston 2023). This sentiment introduces an additional level of pressure on EU leaders to handle the enlargement process for both the Western Balkans and the Eastern Trio with the same political and technical rigour. It is within this context of heightened pressure that the EU has opted to launch a €6 billion growth plan for the Western Balkans, which will also pave the way for their gradual integration. The growth plan offers an incentive for opening up the Western Balkans' markets, leading to integration in the single market, contingent upon their alignment with single market regulations (European Commission 2023c).



The heightened geopolitical rationale for enlargement has intensified the level of politicisation and shifted the decision-making process further into the realm of political bargaining. Up until the last moments of the December EU summit, the Council's decision to green-light accession talks with Ukraine had stalled. The deadlock was resolved when Hungary was allocated €10.2 billion of previously frozen funds (European Commission 2023a), setting the precedent that future decisions on EU enlargement negotiations are likely to involve a process whereby countries increasingly leverage the EU through coercive means. This pattern, while not unknown to the EU, underscores the risk that the 'vetocracy' may become more pronounced with the addition of 10 new members.

Indeed, with the potential addition of 10 new countries, the enlargement of the EU is set to profoundly influence its balance of power, voting rights, decision-making processes and key policies, raising legitimate questions about EU governability. Yet, when discussing institutional reforms as a potential remedy, a closer examination is needed to see whether institutional solutions can address problems that are inherently political.

## **Is the EU's governance ready for EU enlargement?**

Institutional considerations: impacts on the European Parliament, Commission and Council

There is currently no defined concept of 'EU absorption capacity', nor criteria for measuring its readiness for enlargement. Despite this, external and internal pressures, including the quest for strategic autonomy, the capacity to act and react to the 'permacrisis', and grass-roots demand from citizens, as evidenced by the Conference on the Future of Europe, highlight the urgent need for EU institutional reforms to make enlargement feasible.

Institutionally, integrating new member states will alter the European Parliament's composition, expand the Commission's size and modify the Council's decision-making process. Budget-wise, it is expected to affect crucial policies such as the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), the Common Agricultural Policy and cohesion funds.

Among the debates on EU institutional reforms, the most advanced proposal is the 'Franco-German' paper, which recommends a set of reforms to prepare EU institutions for enlargement. These include increasing the EU budget, strictly tying EU disbursements to rule-of-law compliance, transitioning from unanimity to majority voting in the Council and creating a new watchdog to safeguard the financial integrity of EU institutional personnel (Costa et al. 2023).

However, it is highly likely that the critical determinant for these institutional reforms is the political will of the member states. For example, the accession of new countries would increase the number of Members of the European Parliament, yet the Franco-German paper suggests capping their number at 751. This move, achievable without treaty amendments, would, however, necessitate unanimous European Council consent. Politically, this presents a challenge, because it suggests a reduction in representation for

certain countries, which goes against the overall political incentive for the member states (and future member states) to increase national representation.

The EU's enlargement also prompts considerations regarding the operational efficiency of the European Commission. Adhering to the principle of one commissioner per member state could lead to an inflated Commission, creating an imbalance between significant and minor portfolios and challenging the principle of collegiality. The paper suggests relying on Article 17(5) of the Treaty on European Union, which allows the European Council to decide to adopt the system outlined in the Lisbon Treaty, thereby reducing the college's size to a figure corresponding to that of two-thirds of the member states. However, garnering the political will for such a change seems less certain, especially given the Commission's increasingly political and geopolitical role on the one hand, and the member states' attachment to their representatives at the European Commission on the other (Lehne 2023, 4).

The most sensitive area to be impacted by accession is the Council's decision-making process. Each new member introduces potential veto powers, complicating the achievement of unanimity. Although most legislative proposals are made under the Ordinary Legislative Procedure, requiring a qualified-majority vote, areas such as taxation, justice and home affairs, and the MFF still depend on unanimity. The report suggests broadening the scope of qualified-majority voting (QMV), and introducing a 'sovereignty safety net' to allow member states to declare their vital national interests in the few decisions within the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) that already utilise QMV. In new QMV areas, if a member state deems its vital national interests at stake, it could formally declare this, requesting that the issue is transferred to the Council in order to voice its concerns and seek consensus at the highest political level. This clause could lead to ongoing disagreements about the essence of legitimate concern, which might result in a return to the Luxembourg Compromise (Cloos 2023, 5). Even if such measures were theoretically accepted by some member states, concerns linger over the legitimacy of foreign-policy decisions made by QMV. The challenge lies in ensuring that the use of QMV does not result in polarisation and politicisation, while also advocating for negotiation and fostering a voting culture that allows a transition from a consensus-based approach to a majority voting culture.

### *Budgetary considerations*

The discussions around the financial implications of EU enlargement are steadily gaining traction, sparked by a study from the Council's General Secretariat which estimates that Ukraine's accession could cost approximately €186 billion over seven years. The study suggests that Ukraine could qualify for €96.5 billion in Common Agricultural Policy funds over a seven-year EU budget period, potentially leading to a reduction of about 20% in farm subsidies for current EU member states (Foy 2023).

Furthermore, on the subject of potentially including economically weaker countries such as Ukraine or Moldova in the Union, concerns are rising about the potential reduction

of cohesion funds for the wealthier regions. This has led regional leaders to voice their concerns and, in response, the European Committee of the Regions has requested a comprehensive evaluation by the European Commission before new regulations for post-2027 cohesion policy are introduced (Committee of the Regions 2023).

Critics of the study argue that, in reality, the financial impact of enlargement could be less significant due to the inherent adaptation mechanisms within the EU's MFF that are designed to mitigate significant fluctuations (Lindner et al. 2023). Accession is not expected to take place within the current MFF, and for the next MFF, spanning 2028–34, detailed discussion is required on specific aspects of the framework and the strategies that could be used to mitigate costs.

Overall, there is a lack of clarity about the financial impact of EU enlargement. The discussions and estimations regarding the financial implications of expanding the EU should intensify to accurately assess the economic effects of this expansion. These debates should also help distinguish between the accession processes for Ukraine and those for the Western Balkan countries, Moldova and Georgia. Unlike Ukraine and Turkey, the majority of the current EU candidate countries possess relatively small agricultural sectors. The integration of nations with smaller economies and populations is expected to have a lesser budgetary impact compared to that of Ukraine.

The debates are currently in the preliminary stages, with the European Commission expected to present a Communication on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews by Spring 2024 (European Commission 2023b). These reviews will examine the potential impacts of an expanded Union on both various policies and the functionality of European institutions, including budgetary policy. It is likely that these reports will be predominantly qualitative. However, considering that political negotiations will influence budgetary negotiations, the political context, which will be significantly affected by the upcoming European Parliament elections, should be factored in.

## **European Parliament elections and EU enlargement**

The progress of EU institutional and policy reforms will be shaped by the political landscape that emerges from the European Parliament elections. While it is widely anticipated that centrist pro-European parties (i.e. the European People's Party, the Socialists and Democrats, Renew, the Greens) will secure a majority in the forthcoming European Parliament (2024–9), albeit with a reduced margin compared to 2019, an improved performance by populist factions could jeopardise the transition to the new EU institutional leadership (Borges de Castro et al. 2024, 10). Such a scenario could precipitate a governance crisis within the Union, adversely affecting the trajectory of EU enlargement.

Election forecasts suggest a shift towards a more right-leaning Parliament after the June 2024 elections, indicative of the wider political realignment across Europe. Current opinion polls, in comparison to the 2019 election results, show increased support for populist and anti-EU parties (Cunningham et al. 2024, 1–19). These parties often view

further enlargement sceptically and their growing influence could make the enlargement process more challenging, especially with regard to supporting Ukraine. For instance, the electoral victory of the Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid) in the Netherlands poses questions about Dutch financial and military support for Ukraine, given that the party's leader Geert Wilders, like Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, is against stronger EU sanctions on Russia and hesitant to support Kyiv politically or militarily.

Public opinion on EU enlargement is polarised, exhibiting a clear division between the older and the newer EU member states. A recent Eurobarometer survey indicates that while 53% of respondents are in favour of EU expansion (European Union 2023), the level of support significantly diverges across member states. Poland, for instance, demonstrates robust backing (67%) for enlargement, in stark contrast to the more sceptical stance observed in longstanding members such as France (35%) and Germany (42%). Yet, support should not be taken for granted, due to the possibility of electoral volatility. The prominence of the EU's future and its possible enlargement in electoral campaigns remains uncertain. Both populist and mainstream political parties may exploit public concerns over identity, cost, migration and security to critically examine the direction of EU enlargement.

## **How to prepare strategically: towards a grass-roots approach**

The trajectory of EU enlargement will unfold within a geopolitical context, shaped by political decisions and institutional reforms. Although the geopolitics of enlargement has elevated the policy on the EU agenda, further progress seems to depend on there being a strong political will in favour of it, which may prove uncertain. Therefore, to ensure the success of EU enlargement, progress should not be exclusively linked to EU institutional reforms. To prevent the enlargement process from being sidelined by geopolitical bargaining and to avoid risking the overstretching of the Union's capabilities, the EU should adopt a grass-roots approach. This would maintain the EU's normative role in guiding the enlargement process while simultaneously managing expectations.

This approach should focus on three principal areas: enhancing horizontal cooperation among EU institutions, improving the operational efficiency of enlargement processes and increasing public engagement with EU enlargement.

First, to enhance horizontal cooperation, the EU needs to consolidate and coordinate the external representation of enlargement messaging and narratives across its institutions. The current external perception of the EU's enlargement stance as fragmented leads to confusion among the candidate countries, which often have more centralised approaches to foreign policy. Establishing a strategic consensus on coherent external representation will also require a clear definition of roles and responsibilities within the EU's intricate governance framework and a reduction of institutional rivalry in foreign policy representation. The organisation of an inter-institutional conference by the new

leadership could be a strategic step towards achieving these goals. Moreover, the European Political Community could further enhance the EU's external representation by offering a platform on which to develop and reinforce its unified stance.

The second pillar should prioritise the operational efficiency of EU enlargement methodology. The inclusion of new countries with varying levels of readiness in the enlargement framework calls for a dynamic and responsive methodology that combines geopolitical imperatives with a merit-based approach. Mechanisms should also be devised that would prevent the candidate countries from backsliding in the area of the rule of law. In this respect, including the candidate countries in a rule-of-law review is the first step forward. Furthermore, their alignment with the EU's CFSP will become increasingly important amid geopolitical shifts. A new methodology should prioritise CFSP alignment as a fundamental element of the enlargement process, ensuring that candidate countries are integrated into the EU's broader geopolitical framework.

Finally, a grass-roots strategy should prioritise enhancing strategic communication about EU enlargement in the candidate countries and increasing public engagement in the process. To address the varied perceptions of EU membership, including its costs and benefits, a direct and inclusive dialogue with citizens is necessary, alongside mechanisms to incorporate public input into the enlargement process. Leveraging the untapped potential of the European political parties as conduits between the EU's political sphere and the public in the candidate countries should be explored.

## **Conclusion**

The EU's enlargement policy, widely regarded as one of its most successful initiatives, has received renewed geopolitical momentum. EU policymakers are determined to ensure that the enlargement process exemplifies a model of success, recognising it as a strategic investment in peace, security, stability and economic prosperity. However, despite the current momentum, the process is vulnerable to delays stemming from the potential for excessive politicisation. The advancement of EU enlargement risks becoming overly entangled with the debates surrounding EU institutional reforms, which are subject to the variable political will of the EU member states. The feasibility of these reforms is contingent upon several factors, including the steadfast political commitment of member states, the outcomes of the European Parliament elections and the preparedness of the candidate countries.

In light of these factors, the EU must recognise the critical importance of leveraging the current momentum to realise substantial progress. This requires the adoption of a grass-roots strategy, involving more profound engagement with societal stakeholders and political entities to cultivate a more inclusive and participatory approach to enlargement. Such engagement will also strengthen the understanding of and support for the EU integration process among citizens.

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**Teona Lavrelashvili** is a policy professional specialising in EU affairs with a decade of experience, including roles in European Institutions and think tanks. She holds a Ph.D. in political science from KU Leuven. Actively engaged in civic life, she serves as the president of the College of Europe Alumni Association.



# 2024: the year of the groundhog election

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In the classic 1993 comedy *Groundhog Day*, cynical TV weatherman Phil Connors, played by Bill Murray, is sent to Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania to cover the early February Groundhog Day festivities. Phil wishes to spend as little time in Punxsutawney as possible and makes no effort to hide his disdain for the small town, its inhabitants or the yearly festival revolving around whether a rodent sees its shadow, which determines how much more winter to expect.

In a form of cosmic justice, Phil is blocked from leaving town by a blizzard and forced to stay an extra night. The next morning, however, he finds that everything is exactly as it was 24 hours earlier; his interactions with people all unfold in exactly the same manner, the festivities are still in full swing and the blizzard has yet to hit the town. He eventually realises what is happening to him and settles into a new life where an incalculable number of days (director Harold Ramis put the figure at around 30 to 40 years) all start the same way: the radio alarm clock going off at 6 a.m. to Sonny and Cher's 'I Got You Babe'. How very retro.

Fast forward to 2024, and American voters find themselves in a not dissimilar situation. Joe Biden and Donald Trump have both secured the nominations for their respective parties, ensuring a repeat of the 2020 election. Together, the two men have now run for president eight times. Suffice to say, voters are familiar with the pair. If Biden wins, he will be 82 years old upon inauguration, by far the oldest president in US history. If Trump wins, he will become the first president to serve two non-consecutive terms since Grover Cleveland, who was first elected in 1885. How very retro.

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If we dig a bit deeper than the presidential race, the unchanging nature of American politics becomes even more obvious. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell has been the boss of Senate Republicans since 2007. Until she retired in 2023, Nancy Pelosi had been leading House Democrats since 2003. Political leaders are not the only ones with stellar job security: in the 2022 mid-term elections, the re-election rate in the House of Representatives was 94.5%. In the Senate, it was a clean 100%. An unaware observer might deduce that Washington politicians are re-elected simply because they are excellent at their jobs. But at the time of writing, Gallup reports that only 12% of Americans approve of the job Congress is doing (GALLUP 2024).

This striking statistical dichotomy is a manifestation of America's poorly constructed election and primary system. Of the House seats, 83% are considered safe for one party or the other (Unite America 2024), meaning that candidates only need to win their party primary to virtually secure the seat. Primaries are massively to the advantage of incumbents, with 98% of House members running for re-election being renominated by their own parties since 1945 (Kondik et al. 2020). Why would politicians bother adapting their political offer to specific needs and concerns when toeing the party line is all that is expected?

At the presidential level, the dynamics of 'same old, same old' are a similar manifestation of the safe seat, but expanded to the 'safe state'; in the four presidential elections since 2008, 40 of the 50 states have always gone to the same party. Seven have tended to favour one party over the other, and only 3 states (Iowa, Ohio and Florida) have been split 50–50. And here enters every political analyst's favourite term come election season: the swing voter. As long as a candidate satisfies the party's base, as Trump and Biden do, they can run. Securing the presidency thus becomes an exercise of convincing a small percentage of voters in states such as Georgia or Pennsylvania.

Trump will run on the same Make America Great Again platform as in his past two campaigns, with the added message that Biden is solely responsible for runaway inflation (never mind the Federal Reserve's massive quantitative easing due to Covid when Trump was president). It's the economy, stupid. Biden will deliver the same message of appeal to the Democratic base about his progressive politics, with the added mention of his vast infrastructure and manufacturing programmes, aimed at wooing Rust Belt voters. Both candidates will label the other an existential threat to democracy and the American way. On this last point, one has a slightly more credible case to make than the other.

Perhaps the most striking parallel between *Groundhog Day* and today's American voters comes from a scene about 30 minutes into the film. Phil is sitting at a bar with two local men, feeling helpless, and rhetorically asks, 'What would you do if you were stuck in one place, and every day was exactly the same, and nothing that you did mattered?' To which one of his working-class drinking buddies dejectedly replies in a stereotypical redneck accent, 'That about sums it up for me' (Ramis 1993).

I suspect a good number of American voters are beginning to feel like the man in the bar. No matter how many times they go out to vote, hoping for change and a brighter tomorrow, the people getting sworn into office never seem to change much. Anyone hoping for change the day after an election will always be disappointed: Biden's ambition for an American manufacturing boom may take years to fully materialise. But unless American voters start seeing some dynamism at the top, they risk becoming as disinterested in their democracy as Phil becomes in his own life after one too many days in Punxsutawney.

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**Theo Larue** grew up in Paris, holding dual French and American citizenship. He is a graduate of Royal Holloway, University of London, from which he holds a BA in History and International Relations, and an M.Sc. in Political Science. His political research interests revolve around domestic French and American politics, EU economic policy and all aspects of international relations. In addition to his native English and French, Theo speaks Spanish.



# The 7Ds for Sustainability – Defence in Depth

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**Michael Benhamou, Steven Blockmans,  
Mihai Chihai, Ionela Maria Ciolan,  
Daniel Fiott, Alessandro Marrone,  
Christian Mölling, Paola Tessari,  
Adérito Vicente and Klaus Welle**

When an idea like the defence community re-emerges regularly over the course of 70 years but is never realised, what does this tell us? The message is, first, that the idea is backed by a strong rationale that does not allow us simply to shelve it and move on; but also, that the preconditions for its implementation have been absent.

This document is the fruit of a collective effort, bringing together insights from prominent European security and defence experts. It presents comprehensive strategies aimed at strengthening the EU's security and defence policy in complementarity with NATO. Consisting of 81 concrete proposals, the publication serves as a comprehensive guide to European defence, covering several critical dimensions such as the defence industry, arms production, military mobility, defence innovation, strategic capability gaps, EU military operations, the institutional framework and the European Civil Protection Service. It also looks at the exploration of a European military model and the development of European nuclear deterrence.

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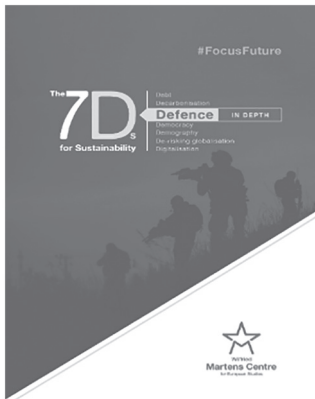
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# Did Secularisation Kill God? Changes in Religiosity and Values Among Natives and Migrants in Europe

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**Tommaso Virgili and Benedetta Panchetti**

This study provides an assessment of the disparities in secularisation between the migrant and native populations in the EU. Although religion is a force that continues to shape societal culture, secularisation—the progressive autonomisation of societal sectors from religious meaning and institutions—is gaining strength across the bloc.

The study, which relies on scholarly works and quantitative data from survey institutes, explores variations across different member countries and societal groups. It finds that north-western, mainly Protestant, EU countries are the most secularised, while eastern, mainly Orthodox, ones exhibit higher levels of religiosity and more conservative values. Overall across the EU, immigrant populations exhibit higher levels of religiosity and conservatism compared to native populations. Muslims prove more resistant than any other religious group to secularisation and acculturation processes, even across generations. Ukrainian nationals manifest a unique pattern of increased religiosity alongside increased acceptance of secular values.

The study advocates for policies that promote secularism and socio-cultural assimilation in order to foster societal cohesion while celebrating diversity. The centre-right in the EU should work towards a common framework of secularism, while respecting national differences. It should balance the legal and moral duties towards immigrants on the one hand, and the protection of state law and respect for individual rights on the other hand.

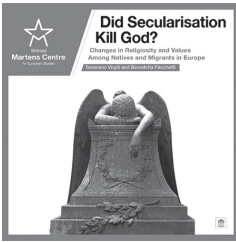
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# Transatlantic Trade and Technology: Partners or Rivals?

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After years of mounting trade tensions and a tumultuous Trump presidency, new administrations came to power in both Brussels and Washington determined to work together. In 2021, they launched the EU-US Trade and Technology Council (TTC), promising to boost bilateral trade and strengthen cooperation on pressing technological challenges. since the TTC was launched with fanfare in Pittsburgh, the forum has helped foster the revival of transatlantic purpose, first by combatting Russia's invasion of Ukraine and second by agreeing on the need to 'derisk' rather than 'decouple' from China.

Entering 2024, however, challenges are mounting. The two sides are sparring over clean technology subsidies and moving at different speeds on tech regulation. Europe pursues a 'digital sovereignty' agenda that discriminates against leading US tech companies. The US invests in a new industrial policy, offering billions of subsidies to bring home high-tech manufacturing. Elections scheduled before the year-end on both sides of the Atlantic could prove divisive, particularly if isolationist leaders come to power in Washington.

The TTC can help reduce the risks—if reformed and strengthened. The forum must be streamlined and tasked with a few realistic yet ambitious goals. It should engage a broad

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range of stakeholders, with the participation of the European Parliament, the US Congress, and high-level business leaders.

On substance, the TTC must align the two powers on tough issues, not shy away from disagreement. It represents an ideal platform to forge a common position on how to ‘derisk’ from China, create a new transatlantic green tech alliance that limits domestic subsidies to clean technologies, and construct a common semiconductor supply chain. Despite their divergent domestic approaches to regulating artificial intelligence, the US and the EU still can construct guardrails ensuring safe use of the breakthrough technology.

This paper is based on a careful review of official documents and more than a dozen interviews with officials, analysts, and business representatives in both Brussels and Washington. The interviews were conducted on Chatham House background rules, to allow for honest discussion. By bringing together the Brussels-based Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies and the Washington-based Center for European Policy Analysis, our goal was to understand, synthesize, encourage, and improve this promising joint endeavor.

### Author biographies



**Dimitar Lilkov** is a senior research officer at the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, focusing on energy and climate, as well as digital policy.

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# Brexit: Navigating the Politics of Discord

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The narrow victory for the Brexit campaign in the 2016 referendum campaign promised to reverse the slippage in British economic performance and global influence by quitting the ‘failed’ EU project. Yet barely two years after what Brexiteers celebrated as ‘Independence Day’, the bold promises made by the ‘Leave’ side in the referendum campaign have not—or have not yet—materialised. The national mood now, as evidenced in public opinion surveys, is increasingly unconvinced that Brexit is the answer to the UK’s current problems or impending challenges.

The paper examines how the Brexit that was promised was always unrealisable because it naively overlooked the marked asymmetry of power between the EU27 and its former member state. The issues raised by the UK government’s preferred ‘hard Brexit’ were bound to face serious challenges that could not be wished away by simplistic ‘cherry-picking’ solutions. During the withdrawal negotiations the three British prime ministers (in just five years) preferred hubris to pragmatism and fantasy over fact, with the eventual outcome being one that was far removed from what was promised in the referendum. Indeed, Brexit has brought the UK serious challenges and unanticipated consequences, both domestically and in terms of its external policy.

These were harsh lessons that successive British governments needed to face and that they avoided by defying the realities of hard power. The latest incumbent in Downing Street has finally begun to confront these unpalatable truths, acknowledging momentous challenges in the near and far abroad that point to the need to reset UK–EU relations. The time is not quite right for this though, as Brexit was a seismic, even a

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traumatic event for both sides. For that very reason the recent improvement in relations by no means ensures a prompt return to the status quo ante. It does however point to a more constructive relationship.

### Author biography

*Michael O'Neill is a Reader in Politics and holder of the Jean Monnet Chair in EU Politics at Nottingham Trent University. He is also a research associate of the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies.*

**Brexit: Navigating the Politics of Discord**  
Michael O'Neill

**Summary**  
March 2019

The recent victory for the Brexit campaign in the 2016 referendum campaign prompted by voters in England in British national politics was a pivotal referendum by the United Kingdom. The result was a surprise and a landmark event in the history of the United Kingdom. The result was a landmark event in the history of the United Kingdom. The result was a landmark event in the history of the United Kingdom.

The paper examines how the Brexit vote was a landmark event in the history of the United Kingdom. The paper examines how the Brexit vote was a landmark event in the history of the United Kingdom. The paper examines how the Brexit vote was a landmark event in the history of the United Kingdom.

There were many reasons for the Brexit vote. The paper examines how the Brexit vote was a landmark event in the history of the United Kingdom. The paper examines how the Brexit vote was a landmark event in the history of the United Kingdom.

**Keywords:** Brexit, Nationalism, Referendum, EU, UK



# Ukraine as a Locus of Identity: Why History and Culture Matter

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War between Russia and Ukraine broke out on 24 February 2022. Since then, most of the commentary has focused primarily on geopolitical and economic issues. This paper seeks to bring to the debate the dimensions of history, culture and identity. It argues that these remain crucial to understanding this war and central to the EU as it formulates a way forward.

The Russian narrative, as espoused by President Vladimir Putin, seeks to depict Ukrainians, Russians and Belarusians as one people—‘the largest state in Europe’—whose origin can be traced to Ancient Rus, with Kyiv as the ‘mother of all Russian cities’. Ukraine’s narrative, on the other hand, has been one of gradually trying to distance itself from the Russian domain. In an attempt to reshape public discourse and perception, the country has been implementing laws promoting ‘de-Stalinisation’ and ‘de-Communisation’.

While issues of a political, economic and defensive nature remain fundamental, these debates point to the ever-growing presence of issues concerning history, culture and identity. As the war in Ukraine shows, engaging with such debates need not be considered a death knell for the EU, but an opportunity to forge a more realistic and rounded Union.

Thus, this paper recommends that the EU continues to recognise that historical debates can lie at the base of contemporary crises. Furthermore, it argues that the EU needs to show coherence, that it can exploit its soft-power potential better, that greater civic consciousness should be encouraged and that the complementarity between the nation and Europe should be emphasised.

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# Finland in the European Union—What next?

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**Alexander Stubb, Kimmo Elo,  
Henna Virkkunen, Timo Vuori,  
Elina Koskela, Pekka Väisänen,  
Henri Vanhanen and Tomi Huhtanen**

EU membership was the most significant foreign and security policy decision in Finland's history, facilitating NATO accession and seating Finland at the table with major Western powers. Current and future governments ought to recognise the significance of European integration and present a more tangible political vision for the future of the EU.

The world system is changing, and the EU needs to adapt externally but also internally. In the debate on possible reforms, Finland should not shy away from integration but needs to also look after its interests. Due to the war in Ukraine, the questions related to the American commitment to Europe's security as was the case previously, and global developments in security and defence will play a stronger role.

Finland has joined NATO, which gives it new perspectives, possibilities, and responsibilities. While NATO will be a major platform for security and defence cooperation, the EU will have increasing importance. Finland, as a country on Russia's border, has a crucial role in leading that debate and is also a driver of EU defence cooperation within the NATO framework.

Security in all its dimensions will play a more important role in the future, and not least due to the cloud that US domestic politics are casting over transatlantic defence cooperation, there is a strong interest to develop the EU as a security provider. As the

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articles in this publication point out, Finland's border with Russia is not only a border of two states but a border of two global systems and views which are challenging one another. As a result, increasingly, what comes next for the European Union is no longer for Finland to find out but for Finland to define.

### Author biographies



**Alexander Stubb** is serving as President of Finland since March 2024. Previously, he has worked as director of the European University Institute's School of Transnational Governance, Member of the European Parliament, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of European Affairs and Foreign Trade, Minister of Finance and Prime minister of Finland.

**Kimmo Elo** is a Senior Researcher in the Centre for Parliamentary Studies at the University of Turku. His research areas include, among others, German and European politics and history, computational social sciences and data analytics.

**Henna Virkkunen** has worked as a Member of the European Parliament since 2014. She is a full member of the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE) and the Committee on Transport and Tourism (TRAN).

**Timo Vuori** has worked since 2020 at the Finnish Confederation of Business and Industry as a Director responsible for trade policy and international trade.

**Elina Koskela** works at the Barona as Director of International Labour. For over 15 years, she has followed the development of the availability and mobility of labour.

**Pekka Väisänen** is a Doctor of social sciences, a freelance journalist, and a teacher. He wrote his doctoral thesis on the political thinking of the French President Emmanuel Macron in 2022.

**Henri Vanhanen** is currently a Research Fellow at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, where he focuses on Finland's foreign, security and defence policy, transatlantic relations and Northern European security.

**Tomi Huhtanen** is the Executive Director of the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies and the Editor-in-Chief of the European View policy journal.