

Demography on the European agenda

Strategies for tackling demographic decline

SUMMARY

The EU faces a number of demographic challenges such as ageing, a declining birth rate and depopulation in some of its regions. The EU represents an ever-shrinking proportion of the world population, at just 6.9 % today (down from 13.5 % in 1960), and is projected to fall further to just 4.1 % by the end of this century. This is explained by the low fertility rates as the numbers of children being born has fallen from an EU-28 average of around 2.5 children per woman in 1960, to a little under 1.6 today. This is far below the 2.1 births per woman considered necessary to maintain a stable population in the long term. Ageing is also another population trend in the EU. Due to advances in medicine and quality of life, the average life expectancy the EU has increased considerably and now stands at about 81 years on average.

Demography matters. The economy, labour market, healthcare, pensions, regional development, and election results – all are driven by demography. EU Member States have their own strategies and policies in order to counteract demographic decline. The EU also has an auxiliary role when it comes to tackling demographic challenges. Nevertheless, the EU has limited legal powers when it comes to dealing with issues that are related to demography.

The coronavirus epidemic also has an impact on demography. Covid-19 has caused many deaths of elderly people. Certain EU regions have been affected more than others from the spread of the coronavirus. Studies suggest that coronavirus has a considerable impact on EU population trends (such as number of deaths per country, reduction of life expectancy and family planning).

Both the European Parliament and the European Committee of the Regions are preparing their own reports and opinions on issues that are related to demography.



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This briefing has been drafted at the request of a member of the European Committee of the Regions, under the Cooperation Agreement between Parliament and the Committee.

Introduction

The EU faces a number of demographic challenges, such as a declining birth rate, the ageing of its population overall, and depopulation of some of its regions. These all have an impact on population trends: the proportion of people aged 80 or over in the EU-28¹ population is expected to more than double by 2050, reaching 11.4 %. The share of working age population in the EU (aged 15 to 64) decreased for the first time in 2010 and is expected to decline every year to 2060. Put simply, the EU population is ageing, as life expectancy increases and fertility rates drop compared to the past.² In 2006, there were four people of working age (15-64) for each person aged 65 or over; by 2050, this ratio is projected to be just two people.³ Meanwhile, the numbers of children being born has fallen from an EU-28 average of around 2.5 children per woman in 1960, to 1.59 today. This is far below the 2.1 births per woman considered necessary to maintain a stable population in the long term. Freedom of movement, as well as external migration, can play a role in increasing the population size of the EU. However, current levels of migration are insufficient to overturn population decline.

A number of regional population trends are visible across the EU, which differ according to the type of region in question. Overall, cities and urban areas tend to increase in population whereas certain rural, remote and border regions tend to decline in numbers or even get depopulated. The social and economic consequences associated with depopulation and population ageing are likely to have profound implications both nationally and regionally, with an impact on the capacity of governments to raise tax revenue, balance their own finances, and to provide adequate pensions and healthcare services.⁴

A number of policies have been adopted at European, national and regional levels in order to tackle challenges stemming from ageing, declining birth rates and depopulation. These are often combined into measures to encourage families to have more children. They include a number of measures in the field of pensions, health and education. Although the EU takes actions in areas that are related to demographic challenges, it still has limited legal powers in the area of demography.

EU Member State strategies to tackle demographic challenges

Various EU countries have launched strategies and policies aimed at tackling low birth rates, ageing and depopulation. These strategies include many different measures such as additional allowances for young families, to increase the reproduction rate and to provide better childcare facilities. The reform of pension systems tends to be a priority for EU countries as more people are reaching retirement age whereas – due to the limited growth of the population – fewer young people are entering the labour market. Raising the retirement age as well as promoting more flexible forms of work are part of the policy agendas of many EU Member States. A number of initiatives are deployed in the field of education in order to make better use of the existing human resources (e.g. training of personnel, acquisition of new skills and competencies). In order to attract younger people or to make them stay in (or return to) their regions of origin, a number of incentive schemes have been implemented. In order to tackle the rise in health and care costs, the increasing use of digital technologies is being implemented.

For regions that suffer from depopulation, a number of regional strategies have also been deployed to increase a region's attractiveness through, for instance, economic initiatives and digital connectivity. When it comes to rural desertification a number of initiatives have been implemented aiming to address lack of job opportunities, entrepreneurship incentives, the destruction of city-centre communities; and lack of healthcare provision.

Some EU Member States tend to prioritise incentives to encourage more births, whereas others promote a more 'holistic' approach aiming to raise the attractiveness of certain regions that are losing population. Various regions and cities deploy their own strategies in order to attract qualified personnel. In addition, certain eastern and southern European countries have also started to

implement schemes in order to encourage their exiled highly qualified personnel, who had left during times of economic crisis, to return. Therefore, new benefit schemes are being implemented in order to reverse the brain drain effect.

The following sub-sections provide examples of the strategies and policies in place in a southern EU country (Spain), an eastern one (Poland) and a northern one (Germany), but these are far from an exhaustive description of the measures taken to encourage population growth in Europe. As two of these countries have strong regional devolution (Spain) or federalism (Germany), many regional strategies implemented at the local level are also worth mentioning.

Spain

The national [strategy](#) for tackling demographic challenges addresses a number of challenges and possible actions. Furthermore, a Government Commissioner has been appointed to deal with the demographic challenge under [Royal Decree 40/2017](#).

Spain has various [family-friendly incentives](#) such as tax credits, subsidies for nurseries, and additional support for families with more than two children. A number of measures are deployed in order to support rural and depopulated areas, such as [direct grants of subsidies to local entities](#) for the financing of employment, self-employment and collective entrepreneurship projects with the aim of addressing the demographic challenge in municipalities with a population of less than or equal to 5 000 inhabitants, or between 5 001 and 10 000 inhabitants and with a negative population balance in the past decade. Actions such as co-financing of aid for the installation of young farmers, support for rural women, for innovation and digitalisation of the agri-food chain and forestry are also implemented in order to maintain population levels in rural areas. The [National Rural Development Programme](#) aims to support measures of associative integration of organisations of the agri-food sector, prevention of forest fires and the drafting of 17 regional rural development programmes. The [Outreach programme for new generation broadband](#) and the Support programme for the promotion of fixed broadband demand at 30 Mbps ([Programa Ayudas Banda Ancha Fija 30Mbps](#)) are tools deployed in order to achieve digitally connected rural areas.

Programmes such as the [Master Plan for Decent Work](#) and the [Youth Employment Action Plan 2019-2021](#) aim at facilitating labour integration for the young and to improve precarious working conditions. The programme [Return to Spain](#) aims to facilitate the return and labour-market integration of Spanish residents abroad who wish to return to the country. Programmes such as [Employ yourself through Equality](#) and the [Programa Desafío Mujer Rural](#) aim at improving the quality of life of women in rural areas. Strategies for promoting active aging such as the Health Promotion and Prevention Strategy as well as the [Spanish Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities](#) aim at maintaining a good state of health among the elderly population.

Spain: The regional dimension

Several autonomous regions have created the [Forum of Spanish Regions with Demographic Challenges](#) to address the problems arising from demographic change. Many other local initiatives take place at the local level. For instance, the Autonomous Community of Galicia has prepared a [draft law on demography](#). The Autonomous Region of Asturias has established its own [Commissioner for demographic change](#). In Cantabria a [Regional Strategy to fight demographic challenge for the period 2019-2025](#) was approved. Aragón has been executing various policies against depopulation and has established the [Aragonese Observatory of Demographic and Population Dynamics](#). The region of Castilla y León has approved the [Population Agenda of Castilla y León 2010-2020](#), whereas the region of Castilla-La Mancha has signed a [pact](#) against depopulation. Andalucía is also preparing a [strategy](#) on demographic challenges while the region of Valencia has adopted a number of [measures](#) in order to tackle depopulation. Spanish regions are also active in the pan-European network of Demographic Change Regions Network and the CALRE [Working Group](#) on Depopulation and Ageing. The Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces ([FEMP](#)) has also suggested a number of [measures](#) to tackle demographic challenges.

Germany

The document '[Every Age Counts](#)', published by the federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community in 2016, describes the main fields of the federal Government's demographic strategy which is aimed at creating the necessary conditions to increase prosperity for all generations and further improve the quality of life. The fields are defined in the [2016 policy document](#) for the strategy. The policy aims include: potential for skilled workers at home and abroad (e.g. 'Inclusion Initiative' providing about €140 million to support the labour market participation of skilled workers with a severe disability). Another axis is based on good education as an investment in the future, and strives for increased productivity through innovation and investment (including investments in nationwide broadband infrastructure and in transport infrastructure. Family forms another angle (including a law on reconciling family, career and care for family members). Promoting a youth-friendly society is also part of the strategy, as well as measures for living independently in old age (including a programme for multi-generational housing). Promoting an inclusive society (including amendments of the law on equal opportunities for persons with disabilities) is another theme. Other measures include the promotion of health and sustainable health care, long-term care and care for persons with dementia (including two acts to strengthen long-term care). The economic capacity and the potential for innovation in rural and urban regions (including increased funding for regional support within the joint federal/state programme to improve regional economic structures) is also part of the policy agenda. Promoting infrastructure and facilitating the adaptation of vital services (including the amendment of the Carriage of Passengers Act) is another measure. The strategy also includes measures aimed at promoting sustainable urban development and integrative urban life (including increased funding for urban reconstruction and development assistance programmes plus the social integration programme, 'Socially Minded City' ([Soziale Stadt](#))).

The strategy mentions various economic targets such as the viability of public finances and the dependability of social insurance systems, including the creation of the long-term care insurance fund which has been created to ensure the financial sustainability and intergenerational fairness of the care insurance scheme. More than €1 billion per year will be paid into this fund managed by the Bundesbank. The strategy also states the necessity to create an attractive and modern public service. Furthermore, a new [labour law](#) also aims to make it easier for third-country citizens to live and work in Germany.

Germany: The regional dimension

German regions have been tackling demographic challenges by drafting their own strategies and putting a number of measures into practice. As Germany is a federal state, its regional governments have considerable powers. The cross-departmental demographic [strategy](#) of Hessen comprises the fields of action in regional infrastructure / regional development, children and families, aging society and the world of work. The [Sustainable Population Policy in Sachsen-Anhalt 2017](#) also covers similar themes. Mecklenburg-Vorpommern has drafted its own [strategic report](#). Since 2014, Bayern has drafted its [Heimatstrategie](#) (Homeland Strategy) with a strong focus on issues relevant to demographic change. Hamburg, in its strategy entitled [Demographic Concept Hamburg 2030](#), lists the main challenges for the city and the measures developed to address them. Rheinland Pfalz has adopted a number of [measures](#) in the field of intergenerational solidarity, education, mobility, land planning, labour and economy and social protection. In its [Recommendations of the Future Forum Niedersachsen 2015-2017](#), the region of Niedersachsen lists its action on demographic change.

The demography [portal](#) of the German Federal Republic and its 16 *Länder* (states) brings together activities and initiatives at different government levels on a wide range of topics on demographic change.

Poland

At national level, a number of ministries in Poland are actively engaged in tackling demographic issues. These include Poland's Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, its Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Regional Development and Ministry of the Interior. Poland's Ministry of Labour and Social Policy has introduced several programmes aimed at addressing demographic issues by providing support for families in Poland. For instance, the programme

[Family 500+](#) was launched on 1 April 2016, this programme originally provided for the payment of 500 zlotys for the second child in each family (and for every child born thereafter); however, the scheme was extended on 1 July 2019 to cover all children in Poland aged under 18.

The [Dobry Start \(Good Start\)](#) programme provides for a single payment of 300 zlotys for all pupils at the start of the school year, and all families are eligible to receive this allowance, regardless of their income. The [Maluch+ 2020](#) programme supports the development of care facilities for children aged 3 or under in the form of creches, children's clubs and childcare providers. Beneficiaries of the programme may receive financial support for the creation and operation of care provision facilities. The [Large Families Card](#) provides a system of discounts and extra benefits for families with three or more children. The Large Families Card may be used to purchase goods or services provided by either public institutions or by private businesses. Introduced in 2019, the [Mama 4+](#) allowance is paid to mothers of at least four children when they reach retirement age, if they had to stop working (and thus cease paying contributions) in order to raise their children. This allowance is equal to the minimum old-age pension, which amounted to 1 060 zlotys (€245) per month in 2019. The child tax allowance is another measure aimed at supporting families with children.

Launched in 2015, the multiannual [Senior+ programme](#) is operated by the Ministry of the Family, Labour and Social Policy, and focuses on local authorities (local territorial units), in order to increase the participation of older people in community life and develop a network of daycare facilities and clubs for senior citizens. The Migration Affairs Team at Poland's Ministry of Interior and Administration published [Polityka Migracyjna Polski](#) (Poland's Migration Policy) in 2019, which is a draft strategic document that seeks to respond to the needs of the country's economic policy by attracting skilled foreign workers to plug the labour market shortages arising from the country's demographic situation.

Demography at the EU level

The EU mostly has an auxiliary role when it comes to tackling demographic challenges. For instance, Article 159 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union ([TFEU](#)) states that: 'the Commission shall draw up a report each year on progress in achieving the objectives of Article 151 [social policy], including the demographic situation in the Union'.

However, social policy is primarily the responsibility of EU countries. Employment promotion, improvement of living and working conditions, fair social protection, social dialogue, the development of human resources with a view to achieving a high and sustainable level of employment, the fight against exclusion and the strengthening of Europe's social dimension are objectives shared by the European Union and the Member States. Legislative instruments lay down minimum EU standards on working conditions, health and safety at work, the free movement of workers, and social security coordination. The EU has a number of funds and tools such as the European Social Fund ([ESF](#)), the Employment and Social Innovation Programme ([EaSI](#)), the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund ([EGF](#)), the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived ([FEAD](#)), and the Youth Employment Initiative ([YEI](#)). An EPRS [briefing](#) provides an overview of EU achievements and limitations in the field of social policy.

[Article 6](#) TFEU establishes the duty of the Union to support, coordinate or supplement the actions of Member States in the area of youth, as well as in education, vocational training, sport and culture. [Erasmus+](#) is the EU's funding programme for education, training youth and sport for the 2014-2020 period.

When it comes to health, the EU Member States are responsible for defining their health policy and for organising and delivering health services, which includes the management of health services and medical care as well as the allocation of the resources assigned to them. EU health policy actions focus, among other things, on prevention – especially through promoting healthier lifestyles – and on keeping people healthy into old age. An EPRS [study](#) (2017) analyses the EU supporting competences in the field of health ([Article 168](#) of the TFEU).

Furthermore, the EU has limited competence with regard to the Member States' pension systems, as these are largely determined by the Member States themselves. As highlighted in an [EPRS briefing](#), the EU's role is essentially limited to ensuring that people exercising their right to free movement do not lose out, and to adopting some anti-discrimination rules. There are also EU-level initiatives aimed at encouraging the voluntary sharing of best practices and developing common objectives and indicators.

Last but not least, [Article 174](#) TFEU states that: '...the Union shall aim at reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions. Among the regions concerned, particular attention shall be paid to rural areas, areas affected by industrial transition, and regions which suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps such as the northernmost regions with very low population density and island, cross-border and mountain regions'.

The above mentioned aims are supported by the regional policy of the EU which currently accounts for one third of the EU budget and supports all areas of the EU, including those suffering from demographic handicaps. Support for EU regions is promoted as part of a broader EU investment strategy by the European structural and investment funds ([ESI funds](#)): the Cohesion Fund ([CF](#)), the European Regional Development Fund ([ERDF](#)), the European Social Fund ([ESF](#)), the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development ([EAFRD](#)) and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund ([EMFF](#)). The common agricultural policy ([CAP](#)) also provides support to farmers throughout the EU through direct payments. All these funds may help to empower EU regions, thus ensuring better living conditions for their inhabitants. Furthermore, the EU disposes of a number of [funds and instruments](#) aimed at easing issues stemming from migration and promoting integration.

Priorities of the current European Commission

Dubravka Šuica was appointed as Vice-President for Democracy and Demography in the European Commission presided over by Ursula von der Leyen. Her [mission letter](#) provides an idea of the Commission's initial plans in the field of demography. It states that the Vice-President will work closely with Member States and regions to undertake an extensive mapping exercise and look at how best to support those regions most in need of targeted reforms or investment, notably to improve infrastructure and access to services and to coordinate the work on a long-term vision for rural areas. As part her tasks, the Vice-President will look at ways to support areas most affected by 'brain drain', including through the Youth Guarantee. A green paper on ageing will launch a broad debate on long term impacts, notably on care and pensions, and on how to foster active ageing. The Vice-President will coordinate on better reconciling work and family and supporting people throughout their careers. One of her tasks will be to suggest ways to invest more in the future of children. The work on the future Child Guarantee is also part of her portfolio, ensuring that children have access to the services they need and are supported through to their adult lives. Furthermore, a comprehensive strategy on the rights of the child is to be prepared. The Commission is also expected to publish a report on the impact of demographic change in late 2020 and also a long-term [vision](#) for the development of rural areas in 2021.

EU regions: A population overview

According to an [ESPON](#) briefing (2017), by 2050, the population of Europe's urban regions is projected to increase by 24.1 million persons and to be home to almost half of the EU's population. By contrast, the population of predominantly rural regions is projected to fall by 7.9 million. Demographic decline is likely to continue for certain EU regions as, according to a [European Parliament study](#), one in three EU regions is projected to experience a population decline over the 2008-2030 period. Ageing will affect all EU regions. Certain rural, border and remote regions will suffer from both ageing and depopulation.

Concentration of population in urban areas

Demographic trends affect EU regions in a variety of ways. While there is no 'one size fits all' description of these trends, a few basic generalisations can be made. According to [Eurostat](#) data from 2015, 28 % of the EU's population lives in rural areas, with a somewhat higher share living in towns and suburbs (31.6 %). The biggest share of the EU-28 population lives in cities (40.4 %). From 2010 to 2015, there was a gradual increase in the number of people living in rural areas across the EU-28, with their relative share of the total number of inhabitants rising by 1.7 percentage points. The increase in the share of the population living in towns and suburbs was even greater (rising by 4.7 percentage points), while the share of people living in cities declined (especially in inner cities).

Significant demographic differences can be observed between the core and the periphery, both in the EU and within EU Member States. In the EU, considerable population growth has been recorded in eastern Ireland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria and in various metropolitan centres. Parts of western Germany also seem to have benefited from population growth, as have northern Italy and Nordic countries. Overall, [trends](#) show that there is an increasing concentration of population in certain urban areas (especially capital cities, and their suburbs) and a concurrent depopulation of some rural, sparsely populated areas. In addition, (mostly southern European) coastal areas have also seen a population increase.

Overall, the EU has become more urban over the past 50 years, although the speed of urbanisation has slowed down.⁵ Nevertheless, an increasing share of the EU population lives and works in urban areas. It is widely expected that people will continue to move to urban areas, as these account for a greater share of activity.

Across the EU, there is a diverse mix of cities: at one end of the scale is the global metropolis of Paris followed by other cities such as Madrid, Milan, Barcelona, Berlin, Rome, Naples and Athens. However, approximately half of the cities in the EU have a relatively small urban centre of between 50 000 and 100 000 inhabitants. Therefore, a feature of European cities is their relatively smaller size. Although population numbers are falling in some cities that could be characterised as former industrial heartlands, most of the rest (when measured with their surrounding suburbs) are expanding.

According to Eurostat's 2016 [State of European Cities](#) report, the high – and very high – income cities in Europe have generated the highest GDP and employment growth, which has led to higher population growth. Low-income cities are catching up, registering the highest GDP-per-capita growth, but so far, they have experienced very little population growth. Economic growth in medium-income cities is lower than the EU average, which raises concerns that some of these cities may be caught in a 'middle income trap' problem, with stiff competition from lower-cost locations in other parts of the world.

Rural regions and peripheral areas at risk of depopulation

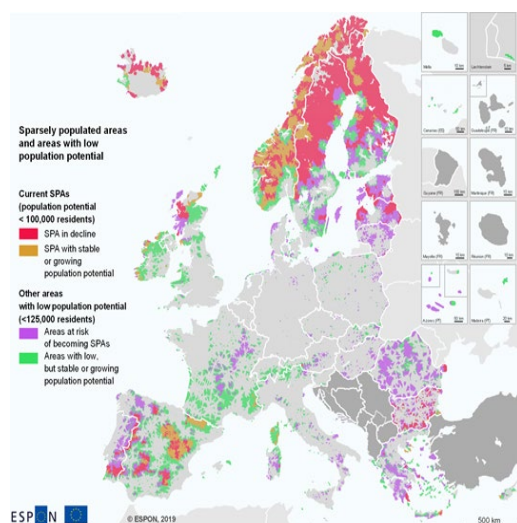
Peripheral and rural areas, as well as industrial areas in decline, tend to be more at risk of depopulation. Towns, cities and conurbations in EU regions that are lagging behind economically, tend to lose parts of their population too. However, rural areas that are close to dynamic urban centres, as well as areas that are within commuting distance of such centres or enjoy good transport connections with them, can experience a positive population development. Regions with high unemployment may also experience declining and ageing populations, as their highly skilled professionals are often attracted to regions of considerable economic growth. Map 1 shows the areas of Sparsely Populated Areas and areas with low population potential. A number of areas with very low population density can be observed in various EU countries (e.g. Spain, Greece, Bulgaria, Portugal, Romania and the Nordic countries).

A number of issues may force rural inhabitants to leave their area or discourage others from moving into such areas. These issues include: fewer local education and/or job opportunities/choices, difficulties in accessing public services or transport services, inadequate health coverage or a lack of

cultural venues/leisure activities. These drawbacks affect the long-term prospects of certain regions, as economic and social development requires adequate infrastructure, including fast broadband services and a modern transport network – things that are often lacking in them.

Certain mountainous, insular, coastal [and sparsely populated](#) areas may also face depopulation

Map 1 – Sparsely populated areas and areas with low population potential



Source: [ESPON](#) 2020.

challenges. Map 1 shows these sparsely populated areas (SPA) in decline (red colour) or with a stable or growing population potential (brown colour). [Areas with geographic specificities](#) (mountainous areas, islands and sparsely populated areas) with risk of becoming SPAs are in purple colour whereas those with a stable or growing population potential in green.

Demographic decline severely affects the social, economic and territorial cohesion of the EU. As highlighted above, some regions, especially rural and peripheral ones, are experiencing a considerable decline in population numbers. This situation may further exacerbate the economic decline regions are already facing, and thereby widen the gap between wealthy and poor ones. On the other hand, the heavy concentration of population in urban centres also creates certain negative consequences, such as pollution and lack of affordable housing.

Migration

There are two types of migratory movements within the EU: migratory flows of EU citizens to a different country from that of their own origin, and migratory flows from non-EU countries. According to [Eurostat](#), a total of 4.7 million people migrated to one of the 28 EU Member States in 2015. This figure includes both migration from outside the EU and movements of EU citizens to another EU country. Of these migrants, half (2.4 million or 50 %) were citizens of non-EU countries, 1.4 million (30 %) had citizenship of a different EU Member State from the one to which they migrated, 0.9 million (19 %) migrated to an EU Member State of which they had citizenship (for example, returning nationals), and some 19 000 (less than 1 %) were stateless.

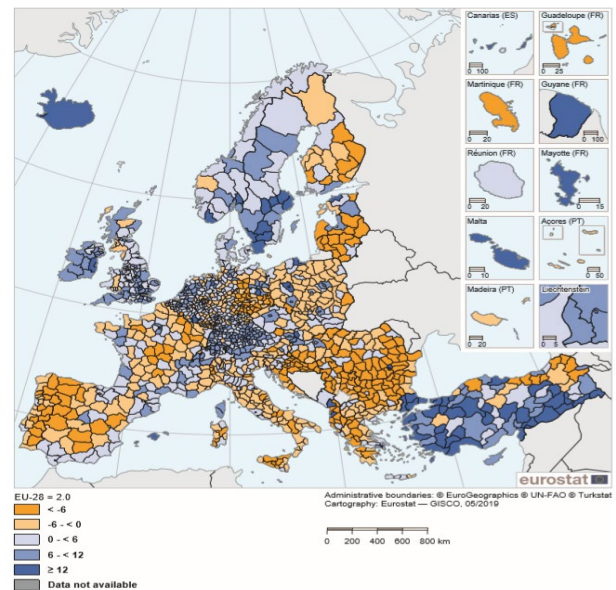
Overall, people tend to move to wherever there are jobs, career opportunities and favourable economic prospects. For instance, within Europe, movements of young educated professionals from southern Europe to north-western Europe have been recorded since the beginning of the economic crisis. In addition, the preferred destinations of migrants from outside the EU also tend to be the wealthiest European regions, in particular the urban centres. According to [Eurostat](#), about 3.1 million first residence permits were issued to non-EU citizens in the EU in 2017. One out of five first residence permits was issued in Poland (or 22 % of total permits issued in the EU, mainly due to migration from Ukraine), followed by Germany (17 %), the United Kingdom (16 %), France (8 %), Spain (7 %), Italy (6 %) and Sweden (4 %). Nevertheless, there is also an important number of immigrants working in rural areas.⁶ However, according to a JRC [report](#) migrants who move to rural areas face additional difficulties (e.g. poverty, unemployment and isolation) to people who choose to migrate to the EU and settle in towns and cities.

The migration trend is uneven and is primarily directed towards certain EU Member States. Map 2 presents the crude rate of total population change for 2017 and is composed of two different effects: natural population change and net migration plus adjustment.

The areas that enjoy a population increase are marked in lighter to dark blue, and those affected by a population decrease are marked in lighter to dark yellow. Recent migration trends have improved the demographic balance in various EU regions; that said, migration affects EU regions in an uneven manner: recent migration trends stemming from non-EU countries have altered the demographic balance in various EU regions (e.g. an increase in the population of certain German and Swedish regions). Nevertheless, the arrival of migrants in the EU may only temporarily ease the problem of ageing in certain regions, as in the long term these migrants themselves will gradually age.

In the light of increasing migration, integration policies are becoming of vital importance. A European Foundation for Democracy [study](#) on review of integration practices and policies in a sample of EU states claims that investing in policies that facilitate access to the labour market, housing and values-based training will lay the groundwork for a more equal, diverse and safer Europe. It also provides country suggestions and general instructions on how to improve integration policies.

Map 2 – Crude rate of total population change, 2017



Source: Eurostat, [European Regional Yearbook 2019](#).

The impact of coronavirus on EU demography

The EU's regions have been severely affected by the pandemic, and their health systems overburdened by a dramatic increase in patient numbers. Certain regions are more affected than others such as the northern Italian regions, the regions of Madrid, Castilla La Mancha, Castilla y Leon and Catalonia in Spain as well as the metropolitan area of Paris and the North East of France. Dutch and Belgian regions have also been hard hit. Certain EU border regions have registered a high number of Covid-19 cases (e.g. Grand Est in France, Nordrhein-Westfalen, Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria in Germany).

Certain types of regions have been worse affected than others: the virus first seemed to hit metropolitan areas hardest, but the virus has also been spreading in rural areas, which often have fewer health facilities to monitor and tackle the virus. As coronavirus-related deaths are higher among older people, regions with ageing populations such as remote and depopulated rural areas, islands and mountainous areas can also be particularly vulnerable.

Although it is still very early to predict the overall impact of the coronavirus epidemic on the EU population, a few emerging studies provide some interesting findings on how it could affect EU populations trends. A comparative [paper](#) on Italy, France, Germany, Spain and the UK suggests that fertility prospects have been negatively revised in all countries, with many people postponing or even abandoning their plans to conceive a child during 2020. A Spanish newspaper [article](#) quotes preliminary research that shows that certain EU countries are expected to lose in terms of life expectancy (Belgium, Spain, Italy, France, the Netherlands). A [study](#) from the UCLouvain amongst others also mentions that a reduction in immigration also occurred as a result of the closed borders policy to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

The view of the European Parliament on regional issues related to demography

The Parliament's 2018 [resolution](#) on strengthening economic, social and territorial cohesion in the European Union calls for greater attention to be paid to peri-urban and rural problems. It stresses the importance of supporting rural areas in all their diversity, by valuing their potential and encouraging investment in projects that support local economies, while also ensuring better transport connectivity, accessibility and very high-speed broadband. It insists on assisting those areas in meeting the challenges they face, namely rural desertification; social exclusion; lack of job opportunities, entrepreneurship incentives and affordable housing; population loss; the destruction of city-centre communities; and lack of healthcare provision in certain areas. It highlights the importance of the second pillar of the CAP in promoting sustainable rural development. It considers that the introduction of integrated strategies for sustainable urban development has been a success and should therefore be strengthened.

The resolution calls for the ESI funds to be used to address demographic challenges (ageing, population loss, demographic pressure, inability to attract or retain adequate human capital) in a sustainable manner, and underlines in particular the need to provide adequate support to territories such as certain outermost regions. It considers that cohesion policy can help to meet new challenges, such as the security and integration of refugees under international protection, but stresses that cohesion policy cannot be the solution to all crises.

In its 2017 [resolution](#) on the deployment of cohesion policy instruments by regions to address demographic change, Parliament stresses the need to promote small and medium-sized mountain and rural farms, and calls for the gender dimension of demographic change to be taken into account. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of universal access to high-quality and affordable public services (including digital ones) and infrastructure. It also stresses the importance of providing new opportunities for paid employment, particularly in areas at risk of depopulation, and considers that the EU should support migration and inclusion policies in the Member States. It underscores the significant role of family-creating and family-supporting policies, and supports the role that local/regional authorities should play to address demographic challenges. It stresses that cohesion policy should promote employability and inclusion of women, and that particular attention should be paid to rural areas facing demographic problems.

The resolution calls for the effective use and greater coordination of EU funds to ensure a more comprehensive approach to demographic change; it also calls for a review of existing EU policies. It welcomes the efforts made to maximise synergies amongst different EU funds, and calls on the Commission to propose a strategy on demographic change. It provides ideas for effective use of the ERDF, the ESF and the Cohesion Fund in order to tackle problems related to depopulation. It states that the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI) should benefit regions with the most unfavourable demographic dynamics. It takes the view that consideration of a special status for demographically disadvantaged regions should be discussed in view of post-2020 cohesion policy and highlights that it is important for the EU to incorporate demographic considerations throughout its policy spectrum. It states that cohesion policy should play a more prominent role in supporting regions that face demographic challenges, and also that the future multiannual financial framework (MFF, for 2021-2027) should also give an impetus to efforts addressing demographic change.

In 2020, the European Parliament's Committee on Regional Development is expected to work on an own-initiative [report](#) on reversing demographic trends in EU regions using cohesion policy instruments.

MEPs have also launched an Intergroup on Rural, Mountainous and Remote Areas ([RUMRA & Smart Villages](#)) building on the achievements of the RUMRA Intergroup (2014-2019) which aims to promote solutions for the challenges that affect these types of areas. Another Parliamentary

intergroup, the [Urban Intergroup](#) (working since 2005), monitors progress on the Urban Agenda for the EU and is actively engaged in addressing various issues related to the development of urban areas.

Views of the EU's advisory bodies

The European Committee of the Regions ([CoR](#)) has been preparing a new [opinion](#) on 'demographic change: proposals on measuring and tackling its negative effects on EU regions' which is expected to be voted in plenary during 2020.

Furthermore, in its 2016 [opinion](#) on the EU response to the demographic challenge, the Committee indicates that cohesion policy should play a more critical role in addressing demographic problems. It suggests that the EU should seek to mainstream demographic considerations across all policy areas and include budget headings with a view to enabling the further development of these considerations. More use could be made of the ERDF, the ESF and the ESI funds in general to tackle demographic challenges. The opinion calls for measures to fight transport isolation and the digital backwardness of rural, peripheral and remote areas.

In 2017, the Committee adopted an [opinion](#) on the revitalisation of rural areas through the Smart Villages initiative. Other opinions, such as those on [active ageing: innovation – smart health – better lives](#) and on [boosting broadband connectivity](#) in Europe, also touch upon demographic issues.

In its 2017 [opinion](#) on villages and small towns as catalysts for rural development, the European Economic and Social Committee ([EESC](#)) highlights the best initiatives to re-energise communities through rural development measures and other support initiatives. The EESC also highlights its rural development priorities in its [opinion](#) dedicated to translating the decisions under the Cork 2.0 Declaration into concrete actions.

In 2016, the CoR published a [study](#) on the impact of demographic change on European regions, underlining the challenges and opportunities for regions that are expected to face demographic problems.

Outlook

The population of the EU is expected to become older overall, and its total size is to decrease in the future. Although both national and EU instruments have been deployed to tackle demographic challenges, they have not managed to reverse issues of population decline, depopulation and ageing. Population ageing is expected to affect all EU regions although some may 'age' less than others due to the influx of young people and immigrants. The coronavirus epidemic is also expected to have an impact on various demographic trends. Nevertheless, there is still not enough data to access its full impact.

In addition, demographic trends point to a territorial population imbalance that is likely to continue: growth of population will mostly happen in urban areas whereas certain rural remote areas are expected to become more depopulated. This trend may further destabilise the vision of an EU of economic, social and territorial cohesion as set out in the Treaties.

The EU has deployed a number of initiatives in the field of social policy, education, pensions and health which also contribute to ease the demographic challenges that the EU faces. With its regional policy, the EU has been supportive of all EU regions including those suffering from demographic decline. Nevertheless, the role of the EU in the field of demography is more of an auxiliary nature. Competencies in social policy, education, pensions and health mostly lie under the remit of its Member States.

As issues of demography gain increasing importance in the policy agenda of the EU, the European Commission is expected to present a report on the impact of demographic change by the end of 2020. Activity in the theme of demography is also taking place in other EU institutions and advisory

bodies, not least in the European Parliament's Committee on Regional Development, but also in the Committee of the Regions.

It remains to be seen whether the ongoing discussion on demography will spur a new set of measures in order to tackle demographic challenges.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Although the United Kingdom has now left the European Union, for the sake of consistency of Eurostat data, particularly historic data, EU-28 data are used throughout this briefing.
- ² See: [Eurostat Regional Yearbook 2019](#), p.26.
- ³ See [Demographic Outlook for the European Union](#), EPRS, 2017.
- ⁴ See: [Eurostat Regional Yearbook 2019](#), p.33.
- ⁵ Between 1961 and 1991, the population share of urban areas (cities, towns and suburbs) in the EU-28 countries increased from 65 % to 71 %. However, this share only grew by one percentage point over the past two decades. Cities accounted for 37 % of the population in 1961, growing to 40 % in 1981 and staying at that level. Towns and suburbs, on the other hand, consistently increased their population share over these five decades due to population shifts from cities into suburbs and from rural areas into towns (see the [State of European Cities Report](#), 2016, p. 36).
- ⁶ According to a European Parliament [study](#) (2019, p.22): 'Between 2011 and 2017, more than 1.3 million national agricultural workers left the sector. This outflow was partially compensated by inflows of both intra-and extra-EU migrant workers (JRC, 2019). During that same period, the number of intra-EU migrants working in the EU agricultural sector increased by 26 % and the extra-EU agricultural workers by 31 % (a total of 585 000 and 837 000 workers, respectively.'

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