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Family policies & Europe's demographic future

par

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The EU has a very low fertility rate and a higher number of deaths than births in half its Member States as well as in many regions, so it is increasingly urgent that it address the issue of a 'demographic winter.' An examination of the differences in intensity of this 'demographic winter' in the various European countries will permit an accurate diagnosis of the problem so that solutions can be proposed.

Europe's 'demographic winter'

In a world whose population is continuing to grow, albeit at a slower pace, the demographics of European Union buck the trend, since there is a very low natural increase

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and a higher number of deaths than births in half of its 28 Member States. There are two reasons for this:

Firstly, couples are far less inclined to have children. The total fertility rate¹ in the European Union, which used to be 2.65 children per woman at the beginning of the 1950s, is now - in the 2010s - only 1.6. However, we must remember that, given health standards in Europe, the figure that would allow simple generational replacement, i.e. so that a hundred women in one generation are replaced in the next generation - some thirty years later - by the same number of one hundred women, would be 2.1 children per woman².

Secondly, regarding the number of deaths in the EU, the rise in the number of deaths in the 2010s is certainly not due to a deterioration of living conditions. On the contrary, the chances of continuing to live have increased for all ages and for both genders. However, although the number of deaths is balanced by the increased life expectancy of the elderly, the greater the increase in the number of older people, the greater the number of deaths *potentially*: this increase is due essentially to the increase in the number of persons likely to die, because, in the words of J.M. Keynes, 'in the long run we are all dead'.

At the end of the 1970s, I coined the term 'demographic winter'³ to describe a period of fertility significantly and durably below the level needed for the replacement of generations. However, this is also an apt description of the European Union since the mid-1970s.

Geopolitical consequences

Europe's demographic winter has geopolitical consequences on at least three levels. At the country level, it affects the domestic political situation, for example altering the age composition of the electorate. At EU level, it may create tension, for example, through the distribution of European Parliament seats by country. For, while the wide differences in the intensity of the demographic winter from one country to another have

¹ The sum of age-specific fertility rates for a given year, the total fertility rate provides information on the reproductive behaviour during the reporting period.

² The figure of 0.1 can be explained by the higher rate of boys being born and women's mortality rate to the average age at childbearing.

³ An expression subsequently used for instance in : Dumont, Gérard-François et alii, *La France ridée*, Paris, Hachette, second edition, 1986.

resulted in different demographic trends, the EU Treaties fail to provide a clear demographic criterion, as exists in the United States for the House of Representatives whose membership by State is reviewed in accordance with the Constitution, after each ten-year census. Some EU Member States may well demand to be better represented in the European Parliament through a greater number of MEPs, which would inevitably mean long and delicate negotiations. This source of tension could be further exacerbated by the growing importance of the European Parliament, due to the extension of the co-decision procedure with the European Council. Finally, at world level, Europe's demographic winter means, other things being equal, that Europe's potential influence could decline⁴.

A 'demographic winter' varying in intensity between countries: the political cause

Europe's 'demographic winter', varying very considerably between countries, would have little impact in France or Ireland, but be particularly severe in European countries where fertility is less by a quarter or more than the figure needed simply for generational replacement, such as Germany, Austria, Italy, Spain and Poland.

However, differences in fertility between European countries, due to cultural, economic and social factors specific to each country, also have political causes: those countries that devote more resources to family policy have higher fertility rates; while those with a much more modest family policy report very low fertility⁵.

Improving childcare facilities

It is essential to increase fertility in the European Union if we are to avert the risk of demographic imbalances and the adverse consequences of excessive ageing 'from below', of depopulation or even the desertification of part of the territories of the European Union.

⁴ See also Dumont, Gérard-François, *Démographie politique. Les lois de la géopolitique des populations*, Paris, Ellipses, 2007 ; Dumont, Gérard-François, Verluise, Pierre, *Géopolitique de l'Europe*, Paris, Armand Colin - Sedes, 2014.

⁵ See Dumont, Gérard-François, « Politique familiale et fécondité en Europe », *Population & Avenir*, No 681, January-February 2007. This is also demonstrated in Thomas Fent, Belinda Aparicio Diaz, Alexia Prskawetz « Family policies in the context of low fertility and social structure », which concludes : « Family policies have a positive and significant impact on fertility. [...] Family policies can only succeed if they are planned to take into account the characteristics of the society in which they are implemented », www.demographic-research.org/volumes/vol29/37, 13 November 2013 ; Dumont, Gérard-François, « La fécondité en Europe : quelle influence de la politique familiale ? », *Population & Avenir*, n° 716, January-February 2014.

This requires implementing national and local policies to make it easier for couples to choose freely how many children they want. This in turn means a family housing policy and policies to reconcile work and family life. It is also important to rethink family law and the situation of people living as a couple but without any plans to start a family. It is also important that family policy should be comprehensive, combining diversified responses to family needs: allowances, housing, taxation, services, education, etc. Family policy must also be geared to the long term so that families have confidence that it will endure. Finally, it is important to encourage local authorities to pursue family-friendly policies based on subsidiarity because, for example, meeting families' needs is organised differently in a big city where population density is high and in a rural area.

Under the European Treaties, family policy does not fall within the remit of the European Union. Nevertheless, I would like to put forward three proposals.

Firstly, the European Union could encourage the systematic pooling of experience on these issues between States and between local authorities.

Secondly, as family policy is horizontal in nature, it is important to examine what, in the various decisions taken on the basis of EU regulations and directives, has a harmful (or positive) effect on the family, in particular the free choice of couples to decide how many children they want.

Finally, the EU could take the view that the onset of a severe demographic winter in some parts of the EU and its opposite - demographic dynamism - in others might stymie efforts to achieve territorial cohesion. Regional policy could therefore take into account demographic factors, for example by improving childcare facilities in areas having fewer resources to do so.

Conclusion

Every State has a family policy, whether implicit or explicit, and all political decisions inevitably have an impact on the family. Given the consequences of the 'demographic winter', we should be seeking to bring about a 'demographic spring'⁶. Good family

⁶ Cf. Dumont, Gérard-François, « Les conséquences géopolitiques de 'l'hiver démographique' en Europe », *Géostratégiques*, No 20, July 2008.

policies are therefore essential if the peoples of Europe are to enjoy a better quality of life and if Europe is to have a bright future.

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Résumé

Avec sa très faible fécondité et un nombre de décès supérieur aux naissances dans la moitié des pays comme dans de nombreuses régions, l'Union européenne doit, dès aujourd'hui et plus encore demain, faire face à un « hiver démographique ». L'examen des différences d'intensité de ce dernier selon les pays européens permet de préciser un diagnostic et invite à des solutions.

Abstract

With its very low fertility and a higher number of deaths to births in half of the country as in many areas, the EU needs, today and more tomorrow to face a "demographic winter." Examination of the differences in intensity of that in European countries used to specify a diagnosis and to invite solutions.

Mots-clés

géographie ; démographie ; Europe ; Union européenne ; géopolitique ; politique familiale

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