

**European Expert Meeting:**  
**Demographic and family policy discourses and  
practices in Europe**

**17 November 2025 in Berlin**

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## Summary of key findings

**Demographic developments are more than statistics**

Demographic change is not only a matter of birth rates and age structures, but is closely linked to social inequalities, cultural norms and political decisions.

**Social inequality has a significant impact on demographic trends**

Opportunities to start a family and have the number of children one desires are unevenly distributed. Education, income, gender and origin have a significant influence on demographic decisions. Therefore, family and demographic policy are inseparable linked to social policy.

**The gap between desired and actual family size**

In many European countries, the actual number of children is significantly lower than the number people wish to have. This 'reproductive gap' points to structural barriers to starting a family.

**The timing of starting a family is becoming increasingly important**

The decline in birth rates is largely linked to the postponement of starting a family to later stages of life. Policy strategies therefore must increasingly gear towards enabling people to start families earlier and in a feasible way.

**A combination of structural framework conditions is crucial**

The policy focus should be less on individual financial incentives and more on reliable framework conditions instead: affordable housing, stable employment prospects, access to childcare and social security.

**Convergence of family policy approaches in Europe**

Different political traditions are increasingly converging. Both infrastructural measures (e.g. childcare) and financial benefits are recognised as necessary. However, the specific implementation varies from country to country.

**Exclusionary narratives in demographic discourses**

There are still patterns of argumentation that evaluate or hierarchise family forms or migrant groups according to criteria of usefulness. These tendencies are anti-democratic and problematic from a social policy perspective.

**Risk of the instrumentalisation of demographic arguments**

Demographic developments are sometimes used to legitimise restrictive or exclusionary political positions. Such instrumentalisation undermines an objective and inclusive debate.

**The need for a positive and inclusive narrative**

In addition to structural measures, a positive societal model is important – one that recognises family diversity and supports the decision to have children without imposing narrow norms or moralising.

## Background

Demographic change has long presented societies across Europe with profound and long-term challenges. In almost all Member States of the European Union, there is intense debate about falling birth rates, an ageing population and the consequences for the labour market, social security systems and social cohesion. The focus is often on questions regarding appropriate policy strategies to address these developments. The public debate reflects diverse perceptions of the problems and ideas regarding how society should address the consequences of demographic change.

However, these debates are not merely quantitative in nature but touch upon fundamental normative questions regarding which demographic developments are considered desirable and which societal ideals underpin them. Thus, it is not just a matter of figures and trends, but also of ideas about family, parenthood, paid work and belonging. In this context, implicit or explicit judgements are made about which family forms are to be promoted and which population groups are considered socially desirable.

In recent years, many European countries have developed demographic strategies and family policy measures, that often aim to stabilise or increase birth rates and improve the work-life balance. However, the design of these measures varies considerably – as do the underlying social ideals. Whilst some approaches aim for structural improvements in living conditions, others rely more heavily on financial incentives or appeal-based policies.

At the same time, exclusionary and selective patterns of argumentation recur in demographic and family policy discourses in Europe. For instance, migration and starting a family are frequently discussed in terms of utility or origin ('highly skilled' versus 'low-skilled' immigration, 'desirable' versus 'undesirable' groups and regions of origin). Family policy measures, too, can implicitly favour certain family forms, whilst others – such as single parents, diverse cohabiting couples or migrant families – are given less consideration. Such narrow focuses stand in clear tension with the actual diversity of families in Europe.

Against this backdrop, the European Expert Meeting pursued two central objectives: 1) it aimed to facilitate an exchange on demographic developments and political strategies in European countries, particularly regarding measures to support families in the context of demographic policies. 2) it sought to critically analyse the underlying demographic and family policy discourses – particularly with regard to their normative assumptions and potential exclusionary effects.

Perspectives from academia, politics and civil society across various European countries highlighted similarities and differences in policy approaches, discussed the interplay between demography, family policy and social inequality, and identified ideas for an inclusive, diversity-sensitive and sustainable European family and demographic policy.

## Demographic change in Europe. Between declining birth rates, rising social inequality and the need for political action

Dr. Nicole Hiekel, Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research



Nicole Hiekel emphasised that demographic change affects not only population figures and structures, but is also a matter of societal values, social norms and politics. The diverse demographic trends in Europe are linked to differing conceptions of family life, varying degrees of social inequality, and different approaches to demographic and family policy.

A fundamental European trend, accompanied by national heterogeneity in its progression, is evident in the example of fertility. Between 1970 and 2023, birth rates in Europe fell sharply, from 2.3 to 1.38 children per woman in the EU27. In some EU Member States, the decline began very early, in others rather late. Demographic developments thus responded to institutional, cultural and economic conditions and, consequently, to political changes.

A defining development during recent decades has been the shift in the age of mothers at the time of their first birth. Mothers from younger cohorts in all European countries are having children later than their predecessors. This shift occurred earlier in northern EU countries and later in southern ones. On one hand, this postponement is due to individual preferences, for example driven by higher levels of education. However, on the other hand the shift is also underpinned by external constraints (e.g. fixed-term jobs and a housing shortage). Nevertheless, the postponement of family planning has biological and social limits. It narrows the window of opportunity for births and by this reduces the average number of children.

Another key demographic change is the ageing of the population, which has risen by more than ten years since the 1960s. While longer life expectancy is a success story, particularly in combination with low birth rates and current net migration figures, it also changes the age structure of the population. Assuming stable immigration numbers, the absolute population figure in the EU is therefore still set to fall in the near future.

The population structure is, however, evolving in the same general direction across the EU, albeit with slight differences. According to Eurostat forecasts, the old-age dependency ratio for those aged 85 and over (the ratio of economically dependent people aged 85 and against the working-age population (20–64 years)) is set to rise in the EU by 2070. However, this increase is significantly greater in the south of the EU than in other regions. Unlike with other demographic trends, the EU Member States are not converging in this respect, but are diverging. Conversely, the proportion of the working-age population is falling across the EU. This is happening gradually in the north and west of the EU, but more rapidly in the south and east.

Nicole Hiekel emphasised, that there are also trends such as the rise in educational attainment. Higher education is accompanied by a longer life in better health. This makes it possible for an increasing number of people to remain in the workforce for longer. The participation of the over-50s in the labour market is already rising. In many countries, however, this has also been driven by policy measures such as raising the retirement age. The employment rate of women, particularly mothers and older women, has also risen significantly in Europe. Nevertheless, often times women continue to be employed in temporary or poorly paid jobs.

According to Nicole Hiekel, it is in other respects, too, that demographic developments have to be seen in the context of social inequality. The impact of demographic developments on individuals is

shaped by their class, gender and generational position. For example, opportunities regarding when to start a family are unevenly distributed. Across EU countries, the age at which women give birth to their first child varies by around five years depending on their level of education. Women with higher education apparently have more opportunities to delay the birth of their first child than less privileged women.

Other key issues of social inequality in the family sphere include

- the fertility gap – the gap between the number of children desired and the number actually born – which is greatest for women with higher education, and
- the way in which family work is shared. It is well known that the unequal distribution of unpaid care work in all EU countries falls disproportionately on women.
- Furthermore, in all EU Member States, there is a high risk of poverty being ‘inherited’ or passed on to the next generation among poor families or those at risk of poverty.

In the debate on demographic challenges, it must not be forgotten that these are embedded in structures of social inequality. The ability to start a family, have a fulfilling family life and plan a future with children depends on the resources available and supportive structures. Social inequalities and the

presence or absence of family-supportive structures influence the decision to start a family and the birth rate. For this reason, family and demographic policy cannot be separated from social policy.

In Europe, public demographic discourse is often characterised by a stark dichotomy: either do-omsday scenarios dominate – with references to falling birth rates, smaller families and a shrinking working-age population – or the focus is primarily on progress, such as longer life expectancy, rising educational levels and the diversity of lifestyles and family forms.

In this context, however, an inclusive, diversity-oriented family policy would require a shift in perspective: away from a purely statistical focus on key figures, towards the social conditions under which people can choose to have children and live as a family. The focus would not be on counting births, but on the question of how framework conditions must be shaped so that people – regardless of gender, income or background – are able and willing to have and raise children. This would also involve recognising care work – both paid and unpaid – as a central social infrastructure for demographic sustainability and strengthening it accordingly.

Demographic change would then not be interpreted primarily as a decline, but as an expression of profound social transformations and as a reflection of changing social structures, gender relations and life courses.

## Converging patterns of demographic policies and demographic discourse in Europe?

**Prof. Dr. Anna Rotkirch, Population Research Institute, Family Federation of Finland**



According to Anna Rotkirch, until a few years ago, the question 'Are low birth rates a cause for concern?' elicited very different responses in demographic discourse: for a long time, the prevailing answer was that social ageing was a good thing, that there were more choices in reproductive matters and that only a few adjustments to the new population structure were needed to be made. However, the problem with this discourse was that the requirements for adjustment were always formulated from the perspective of the economy and the labour market. If women worked more and longer, all problems would be solved.

She explained, that in a later phase of the debate, alarm bells began to ring due to the decline in birth rates. The emphasis then was mainly on the threats and risks of demographic change for societies and the economy.

Today, she observes an increasing convergence in the discourse: both sides recognise that long-term low birth rates are not sustainable neither from a social nor an economic perspective. It is clear that something must be done and that joint and constructive solutions are needed.

The convergence between previously opposing positions is also evident in the reports of the United Nations Population Programme (UNFPA). Whereas these previously focused primarily on access to contraceptives and birth control, the understanding is now shifting to the fact that almost 20% of families

worldwide have fewer children than they would like to have. The real fertility crisis should therefore be understood primarily as a failure to fulfil reproductive rights and desires, according to the report by UNFPA. She also referred to two publications that illustrate the different approaches: Berger Skilbeck's book 'Decline and Prosper' and Dean Spears' book 'The Risks of Global De-population and the Case for People'. Overall, despite differing assessments of the consequences of population decline, there is now broad consensus among scientists that a birth rate of between 1.5 and 1.9 would have a stabilising effect. However, the current trend is well below this level.

The main causes of the decline are delayed or absent family formation, combined with a 'relationship recession' characterised by later marriages and more unstable partnerships, which often leads to a closure of the biological window of opportunity for starting a family. This also leads to social inequality, as people with more resources are more likely to achieve their desired family size. However, among highly educated women in particular, the ideal age for motherhood tends to be lower than the actual age at which they have their first child. Motherhood is not consciously postponed out of personal desire, but rather they have their first child later than they actually wanted to for structural reasons.

There is also a convergence between formerly opposing political sides in regards to policy measures. While social democratic positions have traditionally emphasised state supported childcare to promote women's employment, and conservative approaches have tended to focus on private responsibility and cash benefits, there is now a consensus on the need for state support. Even in conservatively governed countries, such as the United Kingdom and Italy, the importance of public childcare and state intervention to reduce housing and living costs for families is now recognised. On the other hand, cash benefits for families are becoming increasingly accepted. A key reason for these converging trends is that there is now much more high-quality research available.

This research shows that formal childcare, parental leave and universal cash transfers can increase fertility. Interestingly, however, there seems no link between higher birth rates and paternity leave, general gender equality or the increased use of artificial insemination; the latter may even contribute to unwanted childlessness by fostering unrealistic expectations regarding the desire to have children later in life.

Anna Rotkirch emphasised that the main reason for the decline in the birth rate today is the postponement of having children. Family policy must therefore have two pillars: 1. The adult pillar: traditional family policy, including family benefits, childcare, etc. (as is done in Germany and the Nordic countries). 2. The family formation pillar: support for starting a family earlier in life. In Scandinavia, for example, there are financial incentives for parents under the age of 30 and better compatibility between studying and parenthood in order to make reproduction more attractive in biologically favourable phases of life.

## Discussion on the first Panel

Given the long-standing debate on the fertility crisis, it was suggested to consider the historical perspective. For instance, some trends currently interpreted as unsustainable were originally seen as positive developments. The postponement of the first birth was often initially interpreted as giving women greater freedom of choice in their lives. However, the postponement of childbirth encompasses both a dimension of opportunity and a dimension of constraint. Between these, there are varying degrees of scope and restriction, which are defined, amongst other things, by socio-economic status.

Despite the trends of convergence, assessments of democratic change remained divergent in the discussion. On the one hand, it was emphasised that this change could lead to economic and welfare

state upheavals. Furthermore, there would be negative effects regarding the political representation of young people's interests. These aspects had been neglected in recent years because the focus had primarily been on the high adaptability of European societies and potentially positive aspects.

At the same time, there should not be a narrative of panic, as this could quickly lead to unduly moralising debates. When initiating a discussion on demographic change, the aim should be to open up a constructive space for debate and to acknowledge that many demographic developments have, in the first place, arisen from an expansion of opportunities for individual action.

For example, it was mentioned that it is necessary to improve the framework conditions for early motherhood whilst still at university. Additionally, children shouldn't be seen as a private problem, and therefore options for early parenthood should be improved. Moral appeals are of little help.

It was pointed out on several occasions that the German Federal Institute for Population Research estimates the intended number of children among women aged 18 to 25 at 1.9 per woman. The actual number of children born is significantly lower. In other European societies, too, it can be observed that ideals are higher than intentions, and intentions are higher than the actual number of children. It was mentioned that a non-ideological approach would be needed that both respects women who do not wish to have children and enables support for women who require medical assistance to fulfil their desire to have children. However, society must in any case enable young people to achieve the individual prerequisites for starting a family, such as housing, education and a better work-life balance.

The impact of parental allowance on the birth rate was also discussed. There is a debate on this in Germany because some economic experts had described parental allowance as a budget item with potential for savings.

## The European Union and its strategy for dealing with demographic change

### Marco La Marca, Member of Cabinet of Ms. Dubravka Šuica – Commissioner for the Mediterranean and responsible for Demography, EU Commission



Marco La Marca emphasised that the European Commission under the presidency of Ursula von der Leyen considers demography to be a horizontal policy task. There is a Commissioner for Demography, a Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness and the Commissioner for Health whose remit also includes healthy ageing.

The mandate of Commissioner Dubravka Šuica, whose cabinet he himself belongs to, includes initiatives to increase labour force participation and investment in skills in order to counteract the decline in the working population. This has been highlighted in the Draghi Report as a threat to the competitiveness of the EU.

Another task is to consolidate the adequacy and sustainability of social security, as demographic change has an enormous impact on our social model and our pension systems. This poses a number of economic and social challenges, as the systems need to be adapted accordingly. An open discussion on the necessary measures and consequences is needed here.

It is important for the European Commission to find approaches that address the interplay between demographics and other issues. This is particularly true in light of the reasons for the low birth rate. The Commission has identified 'housing' as a key issue, where it has identified four important aspects

that require political action: available space for family growth, affordable housing for students, age-neutral housing design and non-discriminatory access to rental markets.

In addition, the Commission is planning a strategy for intergenerational fairness. This is currently being developed and is due to be published at the beginning of next year. The aim is to strengthen communication between the generations. It should also work towards ensuring that the interests of both current and future generations are respected in political decision-making. This should serve as an interdepartmental platform to align all policy areas towards fair participation. Details on the practical implementation are still pending, but will be closely linked to the upcoming poverty reduction strategy.

The Commission has also produced two demographic reports and is currently preparing a third for 2026. It has also published a Green Paper on ageing, which was followed by the European Care Strategy. Care work plays a central role. Measuring prosperity primarily through GDP means that unpaid care work and the associated disadvantages (mostly for women) remain invisible. A future 'European Care Deal' should address this issue.

However, the core of the work in this area is the Demography Toolbox, which understands demographic change as a multidimensional problem. As the priorities of the Member States vary greatly – from pension sustainability (Italy) to rural depopulation (Spain) to housing shortages (Netherlands) – the toolbox provides a flexible framework based on four pillars. For each of these pillars, the Commission proposes a series of measures at EU level that would need to be combined with national measures, as the EU cannot act alone in this area:

- Families (support for work-life balance)
- Young people (talent development and combating brain drain in structurally weak regions)

- Older generations (promoting healthy ageing and combating loneliness)
- Legal migration (management through talent partnerships to facilitate integration).

Marco La Marca emphasised that demographic resilience includes, among other things, a stronger focus on children's resources. This is therefore also addressed in the European Child Guarantee, for example. The Commission is also addressing loneliness and mental health, although its activities in this area are limited primarily to collecting data.

On the subject of migration, he emphasised that the issue must be dealt with in a more constructive manner politically. He pointed to the increasingly negative and migration-critical debates. Nevertheless, migration can only be a temporary solution to our demographic problems. For the Commission, the promotion of talent partnerships is an important project, for example. He also referred to the region-specific 'right to stay' proposed in the Letta Report to reduce territorial disparities and the loss of skilled workers within the EU.

The European Commission also recognises the link between higher education and later parenthood. He sees solutions to this problem in a balanced mix that reduces the structural disadvantages of motherhood in highly skilled fields of employment, facilitates a return to work after motherhood, and respects personal preferences and national traditions.

In conclusion, Marco La Marca pointed out that the European Commission had successfully integrated demographics into its proposal for the 2028-2034 multiannual financial framework for social, regional, research, health and cultural policy.

## Discussion

The discussion focused on the implementation of EU directives in various Member States and their impact on social structures and the birth rate.

The EU directive on work-life balance was regarded as an important tool for families. However, it would be helpful if the European Commission were to support Member States in this regard and, where necessary, increase the pressure on them to implement the directive appropriately.

The link between unpaid care work and the challenges posed by the resulting pension gap was also addressed. It was argued that simply shifting the existing pension gap from one group (currently mostly women) to another (e.g. working fathers) was not a good solution. Instead of shifting gaps within the existing system, the social significance of unpaid work must be fundamentally recognised and reassessed.

In this context, reference was made to Finnish reform efforts aimed at offsetting the financial disadvantage faced by young families compared to pensioners.



## Family policy and demographic policies and their implications in EU countries

### Insights from Italy: Prof. Dr. Manuela Stranges



Manuela Stranges reported that Italy is facing a demographic crisis with one of the lowest birth rates in Europe, currently standing at 1.18 children per woman. Since 1977, the rate has been below the replacement level of 2.1. The average age at childbirth has risen to 32.6 years by 2024, contributing to a shrinking and ageing population of women of childbearing age. Her country is thus at the forefront of population ageing, as one in four people in Italy is aged 65 or older, and this proportion is set to rise to one third within 20 years.

The Italian government recognises the crisis. However, its measures are limited to pro-natalist rhetoric and a one-off monetary bonus for each mother who gives birth to a child, rather than focusing on sustainable structural investment in childcare and stable employment for mothers. Responsibility for care work is delegated to mothers and grandmothers. Some argue that childcare is not needed in Italy because grandparents are available.

In fact, this model has been the precarious basis for relieving the burden on young parents for many years, but it is very uncertain whether this will remain the case in the future. Current and future generations of grandparents are much more integrated into the labour market. In contrast, national spending on families and children continues to account for only 5.6% of social spending or 1.62% of GDP. Furthermore, childcare provision is very selective, with many families excluded.

In addition, financial measures have long been highly fragmented. In 2022, however, all the different, fragmented regulations were abolished and a universal child allowance was introduced. Universal means that it is granted to all families with children under the age of 18. It is granted depending on the family's total income and ranges from 50 to 200 euros per month. However, this amount is not sufficient, as the poorest families and people with a total annual income of €15,000 have no effective incentive to have more children. Overall, the current measures are inadequate.

Maternity leave is five months with 80% wage replacement (100% in the public sector) and is compulsory. Paternity leave has recently been increased to 10 days with 100% wage replacement. However, take-up is very limited due to cultural barriers, traditional gender roles and low wages.

The childcare coverage rate is only 13.6% in the public sector and 30% when the private sector is included, with very strong heterogeneities across regions, with the Southern ones being those with the lowest coverage. However, the private sector is cost-intensive, so families with low incomes may not easily access them.

Manuela Stranges criticised the fact that politicians tend to focus on appeals to increase the birth rate rather than on fundamental problems such as housing, youth unemployment and gender inequality. Nor are the diverse modern family structures taken into account. She has the impression that families are changing and developing much faster than politics. Policies target only traditional families, while excluding all the new rising forms.

Finally, Manuela Stranges underlined that policies should have a stronger focus on families' and family members' well-being rather than simply chase an increase in fertility.

## Discussion

The discussion focused on the discrepancy between the desire to have children and actual fertility in Italy, as well as the low take-up of parental leave by fathers.

When asked about figures on paternity leave, Manuela Stranges explained that only around 65% of Italian fathers take the 10 days of fully paid paternity leave. She identified cultural factors as the main reason: according to surveys, many men feared professional disadvantages or stigmatisation. The traditional image of the male breadwinner remains a central barrier to the effectiveness of family policy measures.

Research findings suggest that men respond more strongly to financial compensation than women. Since fathers earn more on average, the loss of income is a decisive obstacle. A genuine change in

behaviour within the couple dynamic ('gender behaviour') is necessary. In Italy, care work continues to be valued less by society than employment.

Although acknowledging a change in the strict social norms about having a child, according to which the share of childless women is rising, Manuela Stranges underlined that there is still gap between the expressed desire to have children and actual fertility. This is shown by the fact that 45% of women between the ages of 40 and 44 still expressed a desire to have children. This underscores the unmet demand, confirmed also by the fact that one in three children born to women over the age of 40 is conceived with the help of reproductive medicine treatments. In addition, a growing number of women have their eggs preserved in advance, and this proves that the desire of having a child is often postponed for several reasons. However, freezing eggs is still very expensive in Italy: each cycle costs 7,000 Euros and, moreover, only heterosexual couples are allowed to use these techniques.

## Insights from Germany: PD Dr. Susanne Schultz



Susanne Schultz analysed the 'demographisation of politics' from a political-sociological perspective, drawing on a DFG-funded research project on this topic. In doing so, she criticised that responses to complex global crises (social inequality, environmental destruction) are often reduced in the debate to purely quantitative population data. In this context, a form of "methodological nationalism" often emerges, suggesting that social problems can be solved by controlling national birth rates or the composition of the population.

Susanne Schultz explained how a selective pro-natalist family policy has become established in Germany since the early 2000s. This includes the parental allowance introduced in 2007, which specifically provided incentives for the educated middle class, whilst transfer payments for low-income groups and people without a German passport were cut or offset against social benefits. This policy is based on a problematic concept of human capital, which economically hierarchises the socialisation work of families and their children according to origin and class.

She then warned that the alarmist discourse of the 2000s was now paving the way for far-right narratives. Whilst official bodies now speak more moderately about fulfilling people's desire to have children, the link between family policy and national demographic goals often persists in public discourse. She cited, for example, the AfD's election poster bearing the slogan "'New Germans?' Let's make them ourselves." She warned that right-wing actors were exploiting narratives of demographic decline to promote pro-natalist, racist policies – such as 'remigration'. This raises critical questions

regarding the exclusion of migrant groups and the instrumentalisation of birth rates. The political demand and promotion that 'German' women should bear children for the sake of national demographic development, alongside concurrent discussions about the currently said statements by chancellor Merz on 'the problem in the cityscape' in regards to migration and the restriction of the right to family reunification, points to the racist core of the current debate.

## Discussion

One point of discussion was the demographic pressure on the pension system. In view of rising costs to stabilise pension levels, the question was raised as to whether purely 'mathematical' necessities

might not, after all, require an active demographic policy. Susanne Schultz countered that the solutions were diverse: instead of one-sided birth promotion, whose potential to solve the pension problem is overestimated, wealth taxes, alternative pension systems and redistribution must be debated. A narrow focus on the quantitative ratio of generations overlooks deep social inequality, particularly among women in the low-wage and care sectors.

There was agreement that family policy over the last 20 years had failed to tackle poverty. Efforts to combat child poverty had been unsuccessful for years, yet there had been no re-evaluation of the measures. However, the fact that one in eight children lives in poverty poses a long-term threat to democracy.

## Insights from Lithuania: Prof Dr. Lijana Gvaldait



In her input on the demographic situation in Lithuania, the representative of the National Family Council, founded by parliament in 2020, highlighted the country's drastic population development. Since 1992, there has been a decline from 3.7 to 2.9 million inhabitants. Despite recent positive net migration due to increased immigration especially from Ukraine and Belarus, the demographic situation is perceived as worrying due to a very low fertility rate of 1.18 children per woman in 2023 and a rapidly ageing population. Particular attention is being paid to the shrinking group of 14- to 29-year-olds. The decline in this group is primarily due to emigration.

In addition, there is a trend towards starting families later in life. The average age for first-time mothers is currently 28. Furthermore, the unstable geopolitical situation and economic uncertainty in the

Baltic region are having an impact on the birth rate.

Lijana Gvaldaite criticised in particular the fragmentation of Lithuanian family policy. This is currently spread across nine fourteen ministries and other institutions, resulting in a lack of coordination and strategic continuity. Although there are positive individual measures, such as generous parental allowance, universal child benefit and the family card for large families, there is a lack of scientific evaluation of their effectiveness. To address these challenges, the National Family Council has recommended the re-establishment of a central family policy commission to improve coordination among ministries and the introduction of a 'Family-Friendly Environment Index' to measure success assess the effectiveness of family policy measures. In addition, the Council emphasised that a sustainable demographic policy must go beyond purely financial incentives. There is a need for positive social communication about family life and the options offered by politics, as well as greater involvement of family NGOs as strategic partners.

## Discussion

When asked about integrated family policy approaches, Lijana Gvaldaite emphasised that Lithuanian family policy has been fragmented to date. However, a more complex debate is now developing

that goes beyond childcare and pursues a broader integration of diverse measures, including economic instruments, services, housing and other forms of support, and even cross-generational approach. The Council's aim here is to establish family policy as an independent, cross-departmental policy area.

The National Family Council is an advisory body to parliament. It analyses the situation of families and makes recommendations, with the committee reflecting the different views and political interests

that exist in society, which often makes it difficult to reach consensus on proposed measures.

The National Family Council is an advisory body to Parliament of Lithuania. It monitors, analyses the situation of families and makes recommendations. In this work, different views and political interests present intersect, which often makes it difficult to reach consensus on proposed measures.

## Insight from the Czech Republic: Jiřina Kocourková



Jiřina Kocourková explained that, up until the 2020s, the Czech Republic had experienced a rise in the total fertility rate up to 1.83 that was unique in Europe. Furthermore, by 2021, the average age of mothers at the time of their first birth had not increased any further. Conditions for starting a family early had been very favourable due to strong economic growth. For young people, there had been a period of relative financial security, affordable housing and a growing system of family policy measures. However, following the pandemic, the Czech Republic had been confronted with a series of crises, including an energy crisis and inflation that was among the highest in the EU. Despite signs of economic recovery, a further decline to 1.25 births per woman is expected by 2025, representing a fall of one third within four years.

In the decade prior to the pandemic, there had been an expansion of Czech family policy, which had included tax relief for families with children, a tax credit for pre-school fees, and a parental allowance scheme offering great flexibility for parents. Following the pandemic, however, financial constraints

had set in. The tax credit for preschool fees was abolished and the child allowance was not increased despite high inflation. On the other hand, parental allowance was increased from 300,000 to 350,000 CZK (though the duration was shortened).

In 2023, the government adopted a family policy strategy up to 2030 with long-term goals. In addition, a broadly composed 'expert team for demographic stability' was appointed from late 2024 to October 2025 to advise the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. The expert group led by Jiřina Kocourková agreed on the need to strengthen policy instruments aimed at better compensating the economic costs of families with children. Effective support measures for families must go beyond financial incentives and focus more strongly on structural support as well. The proposed measures included, among other things, higher tax deductions for children, income-dependent parental allowance payments of up to 100% of previous income, affordable mortgages for young families, the expansion and systematisation of early childhood care, as well as greater social recognition of families and the promotion of stable family relationships through public campaigns and ethics lessons in schools. However, the government had missed the opportunity to improve the situation of families by implementing these recommendations. Following the parliamentary elections in October 2025 and the change of government, there is considerable uncertainty about the future policy direction of the new government.

## Discussion

The debate focused on the economic role of families and the importance of stable couple relationships. The question was raised as to why the expert team had primarily emphasised the economic function of the family. Jiřina Kocourková explained that financial support represented the government's most direct and effective tool for counteracting the multifactorial fertility gap. Nevertheless, there was consensus within the expert panel that a purely economic perspective was insufficient. Recommendations were therefore also put forward regarding

housing, the expansion of ECEC/pre-school care and a better work-life balance.

The inclusion of couple relationships and relationship stability in the demographic discussion in the Czech Republic was discussed positively. As fertility generally requires stable partnerships and finding a suitable partner, the need to broaden the focus of the discussion to include both partners was emphasised. Consequently, the importance of communication and conflict resolution between partners and within families, as well as the family as a place of social learning, must be embedded in school education from an early stage.

## Insight from France: Jérôme Gourod



The representative of the French umbrella organisation for family associations, UNAF (Union Nationale des Associations Familiales), outlined the current situation in France. Following a historically high fertility rate, an accelerated decline has been observed since 2014. For a long time, France had not pursued an explicit demographic strategy; it was only the recent, steady decline that led to a political reorientation under the banner of 'demographic rearmament'.

A key point of criticism is the massive budget cuts in the family sector over the last 14 years: savings of around five billion euros in financial support for families. A reduction in paid parental leave by a third, as well as rising costs for early childhood education and care, have exacerbated the situation. These cuts also hinder equality within couples.

The UNAF calls for family policies not to be developed primarily with population trends in mind, but rather to identify and base policies on the actual

support needs of parents. Surveys by the UNAF's Family Observatory showed that the desired number of children has remained stable at an average of 2.3, but that achieving this is thwarted by financial hurdles, a lack of childcare places and a lack of work-life balance. Family policy should aim to support families in getting closer to the number of children they desire. The core message is: effective family policy requires investment in financial support and infrastructure to bridge the gap between desired and actual family size.

## Discussion

The ensuing discussion addressed austerity measures in family policy and their impact on the birth rate as well as the willingness to form partnerships. For instance, a question was raised regarding the temporal link between the austerity measures and the decline in the birth rate in France. Jérôme Gourod explained that the significant decline in fertility began around 2014 – shortly after the start of systematic budget cuts in the family sector.

One participant asked whether there had been an official demographic strategy during the period of comparatively high birth rates in France. Jérôme Gourod denied this, pointing out that policymakers had not seen any need for a strategy or targeted demographic measures. French family policy had been structurally robust and well-funded, he said, but had not pursued any official demographic targets.

However, in addition to the financial framework, the UNAF survey also showed that the desire to have children depended on the formation of a partnership. Whilst many respondents expressed a fundamental willingness to start a family, they failed to

do so due to the lack of a stable relationship, which underscored the need to consider family policy holistically, going beyond purely financial aspects...

## Outlook: Shaping demographic change in a family-friendly and inclusive way

Dr. Andreas Edel, Population Europe, Berlin



Andreas Edel took on the task of summarising the day's discussions. He expressly agreed that there were differing interpretations of the challenges posed by demographic change and that there was no universal ideal solution to them. One should not attempt to return to outdated social models. Given the diversity of modern lifestyles and regional differences, he emphasised that policymakers must respect individual freedom of choice regarding family structures and the number of children. The younger generation would not allow the state to dictate on this matter, anyway.

He identified inequalities such as gender-specific disparities in the labour market and the pension system, the division of family care work, etc., as pressing structural problems. On top of this, there is the shortage of skilled workers, for example in the healthcare system, and the general instability of pension systems, which made fundamental modernisation within the next two decades unavoidable. At the same time, the labour potential of many women, migrants, older people and those without qualifications is not yet being fully utilised. Currently, there

is a renewed threat of austerity policies, meaning that the challenges cannot be overcome simply by allocating large sums of money.

To address these challenges, Andreas Edel advocated a comprehensive strategic approach encompassing many policy areas and measures: moving away from one-off financial incentives or 'encouraging people to have children', towards investment in social infrastructure for families. A reliable support system in the areas of childcare, education and housing, as well as access to the labour market, forms the necessary basis for young people to make a free and sustainable decision for – or indeed against – having children. This should be accompanied by a positive social narrative that integrates cultural factors and diverse lifestyles in an appreciative manner. In Germany, many benefits for young families are already available, even if there is room for improvement here and there.

He also emphasised the importance of data-driven evaluation to ensure the actual effectiveness of policy measures and to place family policy on an even more robust evidence-based scientific foundation.

In conclusion, he pointed out that it constitutes a misuse of the scientific demographic debate if supposedly demographic arguments are used to justify anti-immigration demands and/or even an individual duty to increase the birth rate. Instead, our society must be made more open and child-friendly so that the 'wonderful life with children' is easier for parents to achieve in their everyday lives.

## European Expert Meeting: Demographic and family policy discourses and practices in Europe

Date: 17 November 2025, 10:00h – 17:00h

Venue: Sozialbank-Konferenzzentrum Centre Monbijou, Oranienburger Str. 13-14, 10178 Berlin

Working languages: EN-GER (Simultaneous Translation)

### Program

10.00h	<p><b>Registration</b></p>
10.30h	<p><b>Welcome</b></p> <p>Sven Iversen, Director AGF</p> <p><b>Setting the scene:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Demographic change in Europe. Between declining birth rates, rising social inequality and the need for political action Nicole Hiekel, Max-Planck-Institut für Demografische Forschung (MPIDR)</li> <li>▪ Converging patterns of demographic policies and demographic discourse in Europe? Anna Rotkirch, Population Research Institute, Family Federation of Finland</li> </ul> <p><b>Discussion</b></p> <p><b>The European Union and its strategy for dealing with demographic change</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Marco La Marca, Member of Cabinet of Ms. Dubravka Šuica – Commissioner for the Mediterranean and for Demography, EU Commission</li> </ul> <p><b>Discussion</b></p>
13.00h – 14:00h	<p><b>Lunch</b></p>
14.00h	<p><b>Family policy and demographic policies and their implications in EU Member States</b></p> <p><b>Inputs:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Italy: Manuela Stranges</li> <li>▪ Germany: Susanne Schultz</li> <li>▪ Lithuania: Lijana Gvaldaitė</li> <li>▪ Czech Republic: Jiřina Kocourková</li> <li>▪ short contributions from other participants</li> </ul> <p><b>Outlook: Shaping demographic change in a family-friendly and inclusive way</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Andreas Edel, Population Europe</li> </ul> <p><b>Final Discussion</b></p>
17.00h	<p><b>End</b></p>

# Imprint

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