Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Resolution 1502 (2006)[1]

Demographic challenges for social cohesion

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The member states of the Council of Europe are facing unprecedented demographic changes that will have an important impact on the whole of society. Europe's population is expected to decline by about 100 million by 2050 (medium variant of United Nations projections). In particular this trend is due to a continuing decline in fertility rates and an increase in life expectancy.

2. In most European countries there has been a significant drop in fertility rates. For Europe as a whole this rate was 1.8 children per woman in 1990 and 1.4 children per woman in 2002. The level needed to replace the population is 2.1. However, among the countries of Europe, there are important differences. In 2003 the number of children per woman in Ukraine and the Czech Republic was less than 1.2; in the Russian Federation the number of children per woman in 2004 was 1.37; whereas in Albania and Turkey the number of children per woman was above 2. The overall trend will contribute to the ageing of society and to a reduction in the population.

3. As fertility continues to decline and life expectancy rises, Europe is currently at the forefront of the population ageing process. The decrease in the European population is accompanied by transformation in their age structures: the percentage of people aged between 20 and 64 will drop from around 60% today to about 50% by 2050 and the number of people aged 65 and older will increase from around 15% of the total population today to close to 30%. With present retirement rules there will be fewer and fewer active persons to carry the burden of an ageing European population.

4. During the last two decades a number of general demographic trends bear testimony to changing family formations in Europe. These are: the slight rise in crude marriage rates in the majority of European countries; an increase in age at first marriage; the rise in divorces; and an increase in partnerships in the form of non-marital unions, or cohabitation. In some countries they represent more than half of the unions during the phase of family formation. Lone parenthood, one-person households, unmarried and same-sex cohabitation and reconstituted families have become more common and more socially acceptable living arrangements, as reported in surveys on social values.

5. Since the middle of the 1980s, Europe as a whole has become a continent of immigration. In most European countries, immigration is today the most important component of population growth and in many countries immigrant births are an important contribution to the natural growth of the population.

6. The European context of population ageing and depopulation on the one hand, and the world context of decelerated population growth, on the other, represent considerable economic, social, cultural and environmental challenges and require concerted political action over the short, medium and long terms. Education, family planning and migration policies will require particular attention. Both the decline in the population and the ageing of the population require policies which are adapted to the many domains of social and economic life.

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1. Text adopted by the Standing Committee, acting on behalf of the Assembly, on 29 May 2006 (see Doc. 10923, report of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Population, rapporteur: Mrs Vera Oskina; andDoc. 10937, opinion of the Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee; rapporteur: Mr Michael Hancock).

7. The time has come to rethink social policies in Europe in order to take up future challenges. While each country differs in its demographic structure and has its own specific cultural, social and economic traditions, there are a number of common principles and behaviours which are crucial to the reforms in Europe.

8. The Parliamentary Assembly, therefore, urges the Council of Europe member states to:

8.1. meet the new demographic challenges of modern societies with particular regard to fertility and policies related to the family, longevity and ageing, or migration as key population issues for the identification of priority areas of action with regard to social cohesion;

8.2. with regard to policy implications of changing family formations:

8.2.1. promote a more child-friendly and family-friendly environment in all spheres of society, and more particularly in urban areas, including housing, child-care programmes, working conditions, fiscal policies, time schedules and recreational facilities so that children again appear as a welcome constituent in society. To promote child- and familyoriented values, inter alia, by introducing family and population issues in the educational system; to rethink the organisation of the entire life-course perspective of work, parenthood and retirement;

8.2.2. adopt measures to enable individuals and couples to exercise their right to decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children. These measures should increase the access of individuals and couples to education, information and the means of regulating their fertility, including the treatment of infertility, regardless of overall demographic goals. Counselling and quality family planning services should be provided and supported to reduce the number of induced abortions;

8.2.3. recognise conciliation of professional and family life as a guiding principle for each policy and strategy dedicated to the improvement of social cohesion and population growth;

8.2.4. ensure that marital status, motherhood and childrearing will no longer be seen as an insurmountable obstacle for women's employment;

8.2.5. make work and education more compatible with motherhood in order to help avoid very low fertility levels. For instance, the Nordic countries achieve relatively high fertility rates with a high female labour force participation;

8.2.6. make a special effort to reduce uncertainty for young adults with regard to access to housing and the labour market, which may explain international differences in family formation. The postponement of the transition to parenthood may arise as a rational response to socio-economic incentives;

8.2.7. fully use the experiences of the countries having best succeeded in creating a woman-friendly, child-friendly and family-friendly policy framework, thus also reaching relatively high fertility rates. Only a coherent general approach, combining financial, technical and tax-related instruments and policies can succeed in tackling family-related problems. Explicit employment, housing and education policies have an observable impact on family policies and family patterns;

8.2.8. carefully analyse the consequences of alternative family formations and divorce as well as the risk of poverty, low educational achievement, underemployment and other forms of social exclusion on the well-being of children and parents;

8.3. with regard to population ageing and its challenges to social policies:

8.3.1. ensure that the elderly, living alone, will have access to formal support (nurses, doctors, hospitals) and/or informal networks (friends, neighbours), to compensate for lack of family support or to replace it;

8.3.2. modify gradually social and economic policies to take account of changes in the age structure of the population;

8.3.3. promote active ageing by giving those who are still in good health, and who express a willingness to do so, the chance to work longer, and by giving more attention to the number of years worked, rather than age on entering retirement, in other words, more flexibility;

8.3.4. design diversified policies to enable people to work longer in healthy conditions, particularly by promoting possibilities for training and retraining;

8.3.5. adapt the health sector and long-term care to the increasing number of the most aged people;

8.4. with regard to the impact of migration on society and policies:

8.4.1. promote the successful integration of migrants and their families, in particular those coming from non-European countries, into their European host societies. Non-integration can lead to the eruption of social conflicts and even become a fertile ground for terrorism and other crimes;

8.4.2. pursue concerted migration-related policies between countries of origin, transit and destination, aimed at preventing irregular migration, addressing its root causes and thereby regulating the phenomenon of migration. International protection for persons in need is an important element of any migration management strategy. The strategy for an orderly management of migration adopted by the member states of the Council of Europe is an appropriate framework for bilateral and multilateral co-operation;

8.4.3. consider housing, employment, education and language policies, and policies with regard to cultural and religious rights, political participation, access to citizenship and intercommunity relations as key policy measures in this context, particularly in the cities and urban areas of Europe;

8.4.4. ensure, with regard to this policy area, the respect for human rights, dignity, and the social, cultural and political rights of migrants.