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LIFE LINES

NAVIGATING DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS



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DESTINY AND CHOICE

ALESSIO GIUSSANI

Slow-moving yet seemingly inexorable, demographic shifts have always been about more than just numbers, feeding the political imagination and popular culture alike. What is striking is how widespread panic about overpopulation has, in just a few years, given way to its mirror image: the fear of population decline and civilisational collapse. This anxiety now sits at the core of debates around migration, gender, identity, welfare, and more.

Indeed, since the mid-1960s, Europe's birth rates have been in decline. In 2024, the total fertility rate in the EU stood at 1.34 live births per woman, well below the replacement level of 2.1. Low fertility, combined with rising life expectancy, leads to ageing populations and smaller workforces. These demographic trends are not confined to Europe or the West: while the global population is still growing, largely driven by most of Africa and parts of Asia, it is projected to peak before the end of the century and then begin to decline.

These long-term shifts have complex social, political, economic, cultural, and environmental causes and consequences, making them difficult to steer but impossible to ignore. According to the European Commission's Joint Research Centre, the EU could have around 43 million fewer people in the labour force by 2070. Economists warn this could put further pressure on public finances, at a time when climate impacts and higher defence spending are already tightening fiscal constraints.

Migration can partly shore up dwindling workforces, but it can also exacerbate demographic imbalances by leaving entire regions depopulated and underserved. This, in turn, increases inequality and plays into feelings of abandonment and resentment, undermining social cohesion and civil preparedness. These dynamics are particularly visible in Eastern Europe,

D R I A L

where emigration has compounded the effects of consistently low birth rates. In response, governments in the region have intensified their efforts to attract back citizens who left following their countries' accession to the EU, with mixed results so far.

Across the continent, age is emerging as an electoral fault line, with young voters exhibiting less attachment to political parties and higher polarisation than older generations. While all people have a tendency to discount the future, a bias towards the present is more pronounced among older cohorts. As they grow in number and their electoral weight increases, support for public spending on pensions and healthcare is likely to surpass that for expenditure on childcare, education, or employment.

In this context, a clash of generations may seem inevitable. But democratic innovations could help avert this – for instance, by rebalancing institutional processes in favour of those most affected by political decisions: children and young people, as well as future generations. To this end, a handful of EU countries have already established legal frameworks that grant voting rights to citizens under 18 (typically at 16). More radical proposals advocate for ageless suffrage, arguing that excluding children from the right to vote is a form of systemic discrimination. In a similar vein, the EU has recently launched a Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness to ensure a just distribution of opportunities, resources, and burdens across generations.

As the debate on social media bans for minors sweeping across Europe illustrates, the boundary between the participation and the protection of young people is not always clear. The days of naive social media utopianism are gone; today, platforms are widely seen less as enablers of a globalised public sphere than as reckless dopamine dealers. But for precisely this reason, some regard age-based bans as a surrogate for meaningful regulation, and it is undeniable that for many young people, social media remains a gateway to finding community and political engagement.

EDITC

The complex role of social media has been most evident in recent Gen Z protest movements outside Europe. In Nepal, a 2025 ban on 26 platforms ignited discontent that was already boiling beneath the surface. More interconnected and educated than any previous generation, young Nepalese drew on lessons from other movements to defy repression – unseating one prime minister and appointing another within 48 hours. But the role of social media wasn't only positive: TikTok complied with government censorship, while Discord amplified violent political emotions. Digitally enabled uprisings can nonetheless infuse new political awareness, even when they fall short of their aspirations – as in Kenya, where the violent repression of mass protests in 2024 could not put the genie of change back in the bottle.

That many of the most consequential political mobilisations of recent years have occurred in younger societies also raises questions about the prospects for radical politics in an ageing Europe facing democratic erosion and a rising far right.

Reactionary forces, for their part, claim to have answers to what they frame as a looming “demographic winter”. They have successfully dragged the dominant discourse on migration sharply rightward, stoking fears of “ethnic replacement” and now openly advocating “remigration”. They also want to roll back gender equality and women's reproductive freedom in the name of demographic revival. However, the carrot of economic incentives for families influences little more than the timing of births, while the stick of coercion only delivers discrimination and suffering – certainly not the baby boom illiberal politicians fantasise about.

Alarmist rhetoric has not remained confined to the far right. In 2024, for example, French president Emmanuel Macron spoke of “demographic rearmament” to combat infertility, while neoliberal institutions routinely talk of Africa's youth as a “bulge” to be socially engineered into a “dividend”.

DRIAL

In its early days, ecologism bought into demographic panic, too. Concerned about hunger, pollution, and resource depletion, early environmentalists warned of runaway population growth. That analysis was both superficial – how we produce and consume matters more for planetary health than how many of us there are – and prone to weaponisation – since those who are identified as “too many” are too often poor and racialised. Since then, political ecology has shrugged off its Malthusian heritage, but this has come at a cost: by disengaging from demographic questions altogether, it has relegated them to the private sphere and ceded the terrain to conservative framings.

This is a mistake that ecologists have the tools to overcome; after all, the question of how we inhabit the planet cuts to the core of the ecological worldview. Drawing an analogy to climate change may prove useful here. Just as we can no longer fully prevent global warming, we are also in no position to reverse ongoing demographic shifts. But that does not mean that nothing can or should be done. Better childcare, longer parental leave, banning infertility-inducing chemicals, gender equality, and standing for a more peaceful, less anxiogenic world all count as essential mitigation measures.

Adaptation can be equally transformative. It is about reforming democracies to foster participation and intergenerational dialogue, but also reckoning with the true value of paid and unpaid care work, including rehabilitating a sector that has long been undervalued and under-resourced. More fundamentally, however, it means pivoting our entire social and economic model away from productivity and growth and towards care for one another and for the planet.

"GREY POWER"

DOES THE FUTURE BELONG TO THE OLD?

ARTICLE BY
BEN WRAY

While generations are not monolithic blocs, age is becoming an increasingly reliable predictor of how Europeans vote. As older cohorts grow in number and pull public spending towards their own needs, the gap between what the old have and what the young need is widening – leading some to warn that Europe is bound for an unavoidable clash of generations.

Europe is getting older. The median age in the EU rose to 45 for the first time last year. Elderly people, those aged 65 and over, are now comfortably a larger section of the population than those under 18 (22 per cent compared with less than 18 per cent). And the greying of Europe has by no means peaked: by 2050, nearly 30 per cent of the population is predicted to be aged 65 and over.

As the “old continent” gets older, the electoral power of elderly people increases. Over-50s now make up a majority of the electorate. More than one in four Europeans of voting age (27 per cent) are over 65. In reality, this underestimates their political power, as older people participate in elections more than young people. In the last European Parliament elections in 2024, just 36 per cent of eligible under-25s voted, compared to 65 per cent of over-55s.

There is no election in Europe today in which the “grey vote” is not critical to the outcome. The greying of politics has consequences not just for which parties come to power but also what policies they favour. A politics shaped by the preferences of older people invariably has a knock-on effect on the economy. For better or worse, those with less time left on this Earth will continue to play a decisive role in shaping Europe’s future.

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IDEOLOGY VS VOTE

Like any voting cohort, the grey vote is by no means homogeneous. Elderly voters' preferences are also shaped by social factors other than age, like gender and social class. Nonetheless, political scientists have found that age is an increasingly decisive indicator of voter preference.¹

The German federal elections in 2025 clearly exemplified this tendency. Exit poll data showed that more than two-thirds of over-70s voted for the two traditional parties of power in the country, the centre-right CDU/CSU (43 per cent) and the centre-left SPD (25 per cent). No other party received more than 10 per cent of the vote from elderly voters.

On the other hand, the vote of those aged 18 to 24 was much more evenly spread and polarised. The Left party won 25 per cent of the youth vote, with the far-right AfD second at 21 per cent, the CDU/CSU winning 13 per cent, and the SPD 12 per cent. The traditional parties of power won just a quarter of the youth vote, while the two most radically left- and right-wing parties won the most support, at a combined 46 per cent. Although women leaned more to the left and men to the right, and although lower-income voters were more likely to vote for AfD and higher-income voters leaned more towards the Greens, none of these sociological factors was as relevant as age to Germany's voting pattern.

Not all elections in Europe have shown such a stark age-based contrast as in Germany, but it is a familiar pattern. There is no official data on age-based voting in the recent Hungarian election, but polling indicated that 65 per cent of voters under 30 supported Péter Magyar's insurgent Tisza Party while support for Viktor Orbán's defeated Fidesz party was mainly concentrated among older voters.

1 Francesco Barilari, Nicola Mastroiocco & Matteo Paradisi (2025). "Population aging, voting, and political agendas". *European Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 90. Available at <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2025.102748>>.

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Interestingly, although voting patterns have become increasingly polarised by age, political scientist Tom O'Grady has found that ideological polarisation between different generations is no greater than it was in the 1980s, with all generations becoming more socially liberal in their views.² "Despite all cohorts liberalising over time, each new cohort has also been persistently more socially liberal than its predecessor," O'Grady states. However, O'Grady's research challenges the common misconception that young people are straightforwardly more ideologically left-wing than older people, instead finding that they are "relatively libertarian": they are more socially liberal but also more in favour of reduced government spending and taxes.

WHAT THE GREY VOTE WANTS

What, then, explains the increasingly sharp difference in voting patterns? O'Grady finds that party identification differs from ideological preference, as young people have less loyalty to parties and are more open to parties that are relatively new to the political scene, whereas elderly people have more longstanding party political commitments and thus are less likely to shop around with their vote. "Age divides might appear to have grown due to the actions of parties, but in reality, young and old voters in Europe are not more polarised than in the past," he says.

We have established that there is such a thing as a grey vote, and there are signs that it is a more unified political bloc than the youth vote. But what is it that elderly people want politically?

One recent review of the evidence found that older people have high levels of support for pensions and healthcare spending and low support for education and childcare spending. They are more politi-

² Tom O'Grady (2023), "Is ideological polarisation by age group growing in Europe?", *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 62(4), pp. 1389–1402. Available at <<https://ejpr.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1475-6765.12575>>.

cally sensitive to high inflation than to high unemployment and show less concern for high public debt than the population in general. In other words, elderly people seek to defend their interests as those who live off a pension rather than a wage.

“All people tend to discount the future and are myopic,” explains Tim Vlandas, a political scientist at the University of Oxford who has written extensively on “grey power”. That being said, there is some evidence that older people tend to discount the future even more than the average person does. “It’s not that older people say they don’t care about other things. It’s that when you force them to make a trade-off, they are more likely to prioritise things that affect them more strongly.”

Interestingly, this age-based self-interest does not seem to be specific to the “boomer” generation (born between 1946 and 1964), who currently make up most of the elderly population. Vlandas has found that grey voter preferences have broadly been consistent across decades of polling.³ We can expect, then, that the preferences of elderly voters will persist as their weight of numbers continues to grow.

GREY POWER AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Across Europe, spending on pensions is rising as a share of total public spending. The latest OECD data finds that in France, pension spending rose to a new peak of 22.9 per cent of total public spending. Meanwhile, in austerity-ravaged Greece, pension spending now makes up 28.5 per cent of public spending, up from 21.9 per cent in 2000.⁴ Pensions are the largest single item in public expenditure budgets, but healthcare and social care for elderly people are also major costs on government balance sheets. The European Central Bank estimated that age-related fiscal costs were a quarter of total public spending in 2022.

Of course, the rise in spending on elderly people is, to a large degree, need-driven: the fact that there are more older people of a dependent age means that demand for public services among that age group inevitably rises. But public spending priorities are as much about political will as they are about necessity. Perhaps no country has been a greater test of the battle between the two than France.

French president Emmanuel Macron has repeatedly pursued pension reform, most recently in 2023, when he sought to raise the standard

3 Tim Vlandas (2025). “Aging Advanced Capitalist Democracies: The New Electoral Politics of Economic Stagnation”. *World Politics*, Vol. 78(1) Available at <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/395661388_Ageing_Advanced_Capitalist_Democracies_the_new_Electoral_Politics_of_Economic_Stagnation>.

4 OECD (2025). *Pensions at a Glance 2025: OECD and G20 Indicators*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at <https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/pensions-at-a-glance-2025_e40274c1-en/full-report/public-expenditure-on-pensions_ddc9a2dd.html>.

retirement age from 62 to 64 via a bill on social security financing. Faced with opinion polls showing deep opposition to the reforms, major strikes, street protests, and rebellion from inside the National Assembly, Macron relied on an arcane constitutional rule to force through the bill, sidestepping a parliamentary vote.

What does the French experience tell us about the politics of ageing? David Jamieson, a Scottish writer and activist, believes that French society, from young to old, shows a high level of commitment to defending a dignified "third age". "You envy France's political culture in some ways," he says. "There seems to be a greater consciousness in France that there exists class interests and social interests which are not overwhelmed by generational divides."

Jamieson, a new father and a millennial, rejects the "technocratic" notion that trade-offs between public spending on the needs of elderly people on families, and on worker-friendly policies are inevitable. "Let's be honest about the political direction of travel in Europe," he says. "There's not a wave of governments trapped by electoral arithmetic who desperately want to redirect money from pensioners to the working-age population." He adds, "In reality, governments are eager to subtract from both those of pensioner age and those of working age, and redirect those resources to defence spending and various forms of financial support for big business."

France is by no means the only country in which attempts at pension reform have met immense political resistance. The German government came up against fierce public opposition last year when it sought to raise the retirement age to 70. In Spain, pensions were delinked from the inflation rate during the eurozone crisis in 2014, but after years of protests, the Spanish government restored indexing pensions to inflation in 2021.

PENSION CONSENSUS AND VICIOUS CIRCLES

Part of the reason for the stubbornness of pension spending is that it is supported by both young and old. Vlandas believes that the positive attitude of young people towards pension spending can be at least partly explained by the fact that many are economically dependent on their parents, especially in Southern Europe. “In Greece, Italy and Spain, where the welfare state is quite pension-heavy, the young face a lot of labour market insecurity,” he says. “If you are in that world and you live with your parents – as a lot of young people do in these countries – it makes perfect sense for you to be invested in the one thing that does offer security for you: the pension of your parents.”

“So the more pension-heavy a country becomes, the more it reinforces support for pensions. Why would I support my parents’ pension being cut, in exchange for a potential investment in people of working age that I don’t trust will actually be delivered? That trade doesn’t seem very appealing,” Vlandas concludes.

The paradox of a politics that is heavily weighted towards public spending on elderly people is that the ability to sustain that spending over time is strongly influenced by the productivity of the very workers who are not being prioritised for investment. Charles Goodhart, a retired LSE professor of economics who also

worked at the Bank of England, believes this contradiction will ultimately make it “difficult” for governments to continue to satisfy the demands of elderly voters.

“The problem is that as the old-age dependency ratio grows, the fiscal position gets worse and also GDP growth slows, which then worsens the fiscal position even more,” he adds. “With rising defence spending and the increased spending which will be needed to manage climate change, the fiscal outlook really is dire.”

Goodhart co-authored *The Great Demographic Reversal*, published in 2020, which finds that the global economy is at the start of a profound shift from a low-inflation era to a permanently high-inflation one, as the number of elderly people – who are consumers but not producers – grows. Moreover, lower labour supply due to ageing and higher taxes on the working-age population will push workers to seek above-inflation pay rises, which will add to inflationary pressures. With elderly voters tending to punish governments for inflation, Goodhart is “certain” that this will lead to political division on an intergenerational basis. “The young are in trouble. If you just take the issue of housing, elderly people are relatively asset-rich while the young find it very difficult to get out of their parents’ home, to finance their own, and to start having a family,” he explains.

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"That's one of the factors keeping fertility down, which then shrinks the native workforce even more. Low birth rates add to the pressure for immigration to meet labour gaps, particularly in elderly care, which in turn spurs right-wing populism. So the whole thing is circling in a very dangerous way."

IS INTERGENERATIONAL CONFLICT INEVITABLE?

On the right and the left, the view that intergenerational conflict is inevitable is increasingly prominent. Philip Pilkington, author of *The Collapse of Global Liberalism* and an advocate for Viktor Orbán's far-right Fidesz party in Hungary, has argued that young people are likely to respond to being a demographic minority by taking advantage of the fact they are "physically stronger" to impose their will, as "it will be in their self-interest to abolish democracy".⁵ Pilkington even goes as far as to say that the young will "not just accept, but actively promote, euthanasia" as a solution to win the "intergenerational war".

Oli Dugmore, executive editor of centre-left magazine *The New Statesman* and a millennial, appears to provide evidence for Pilkington's prediction, writing that assisted dying would be "distasteful pragmatism" because it is a sure-fire way of curbing healthcare and pension costs while avoiding unnecessary suffering. He concludes, "Let them die."⁶

Jamieson believes that these hyperbolic positions can in part be explained by political polarisation, as populist parties – and their media advocates – seek to build age-based blocs of support. "We used to think parties construct voting blocs through consensus, whereas now it is clear that voting blocs are constructed through polarisation, and that invariably takes on a culture war form," he argues. "That's what we are seeing now as the Right and the Left seek to speak to specific –

⁵ Philip Pilkington (2025). *The Collapse of Global Liberalism: And the Emergence of the Post Liberal World Order*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

⁶ Oli Dugmore (2025). "Let them die: the case for assisted dying". *The New Statesman*, 16 September 2025. Available at <<https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk-politics/2025/09/let-them-die>>.



and often different – generations. But fundamentally, the issue of an ageing population is not a generational one.”

Vlandas agrees that the generational dimension can be exaggerated in the public debate. “There are very few things that are specific about being a baby boomer to the challenges which arise from population ageing,” he finds. “It’s fundamentally about the position you occupy within the economic structure of advanced capitalism, and what makes you occupy this position is a shorter time-horizon, but more importantly, where you derive your livelihood from, which for the elderly is the pensions system.”

What could stop a descent into populist intergenerational conflict? Vlandas makes the case for structural solutions that would increase the electoral participation of young people to counterbalance the grey vote, such as mandatory voting, and policy fixes like indexing pensions to wage levels. “You need to have a pension system that aligns the interests of people with pensions with the working age population as much as possible,” he says.

Jamieson, on the other hand, believes that we should look to the power of social movements to disrupt the status quo. “I think a lot of people have the idea that you get social change when 50 per cent plus one of the population

moves into action,” he says. “That never happens. Typically, it’s a small section of the population that engages in meaningful, confrontational action.”

THE FUTURE OF RADICAL POLITICS

But what is the future of protest politics in the context of an ageing population?

Huey P. Newton, co-founder of the Black Panther Party, famously said that “the revolution has always been in the hands of the young”, but if the young are an ever-shrinking section of society, will they still be an effective force in leveraging social change? Some on the left have raised doubts about the potential for radical upheaval in the context of grey power,⁷ but Jamieson believes these concerns are overblown. “There is a strong element of truth that if you look at the history of revolts, they are waged by young people,” he says. “There may be sociological and psychological reasons for that. But it’s important to remember that radical change is always driven by a minority of the population.”

For Jamieson, “We have seen again and again in history that what is required from the rest of the population is either that they are more passively engaged on the side of the revolu-

⁷ Asher Dupuy-Spencer (2025). “The Challenge of Low Birth Rates for the Socialist Project”. *Jacobin*, 16 July 2025. Available at <<https://jacobin.com/2025/07/socialism-birth-rates-fertility-future>>.

tionaries, or that they simply don't defend the status quo."

In considering grey power, then, it is important to bear in mind that electoral weight is only one metric by which we should assess the potential political potency of a particular age group. Moreover, age does not deterministically define beliefs and actions: whether in the climate action movement or the Palestine solidarity movement, plenty of elderly people have played pivotal roles in recent years.

However, age does matter. The structure of our economy and society changes as it becomes older, and that socio-economic structure frames the political choices available to us. Even if policies to increase birth rates worked, they would not increase the size of the workforce for another two decades or so.

"Demography is destiny," 19th-century French philosophe Auguste Comte is thought to have said. That might be slightly overstating the case, but at least in the realm of politics, Comte's maxim retains a large grain of truth: governments are largely constrained by demography, and the reality of an ageing population means those constraints tighten by the day.



BEN WRAY

is a freelance journalist and researcher from Scotland, who lives in the Basque Country. For the last five years, he has been writing about the gig economy in Europe and is currently conducting research for the European Trade Union Confederation on the topic. Ben is co-author of *Scotland After Britain* (Verso Books, 2022).

THE VALUE OF A MOTHER

AN INTERVIEW WITH
EMMA HOLTEN

Built on the assumption that price is the best measure of value, modern economics has never adequately grasped non-transactional exchange – care relationships and reproductive work above all. Declining birth rates and ageing societies are now laying bare the limits of a framework that feminist thinkers have long critiqued. An interview with economist Emma Holten.

GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL: The history of modern political theory is marked by a major omission – of bodies, their needs, and the necessity of caring for them. How did this omission come about?

EMMA HOLTEN: Enlightenment thinking was very much about liberating the individual – from hierarchy, from the ties of religion and superstition, from the bounds of class. Thinkers like Thomas Hobbes, for example, were very progressive in their belief that the individual has value in and of itself. That conviction became the building block of modern political theory, and it has been hugely important for feminism, too. However, it overlooked that individuals are connected not only in oppressive systems but also in positive relationships. Human beings exist only in the context of other human beings. But that interdependence disappeared.

This omission was most striking in the context of birth and family relationships. The whole story of what it takes to give birth and raise an individual completely disappeared, and we started making political theory about well-educated adults, as if they sprang up like mushrooms.

How did this original sin become so entrenched in modern economics?

Economics, too, had a noble ambition: to provide a clear description of the political system and to be able to quantify it. In the 1870s, this ambition culminated in the marginalist revolution, which was probably the most influential shift in the history of economics. Marginalism is based on the idea that you can use market prices to establish value. According to this theory, the market-clearing price is the perfect balance between supply and demand, between how much one wants to be paid for a product or service and how much someone else is willing to pay for it.

The obvious corollary is that if something doesn't have a price, it doesn't have value. Economics loses the ability to speak about things that don't have a price, such as time spent with friends or in the home. The only way to measure the value of time spent at home caring for others or being cared for by others is to calculate how much you would make if you used that time in the market instead.

However, I don't think price is a good measure of value in the market either. I spend a lot of time talking to nurses, caregivers for elderly people, and social workers, and when I tell them that economics measures their value by their salary, they are either shocked or start laughing. When you receive care, you don't

necessarily know what the value of that interaction is going to be; it only becomes visible in the long term. And if this interaction happens in the public sector, then the market is all the more unable to grasp its value. Economic methods find it much easier to understand the value of a car than the value of care, both paid and unpaid.

Why is this way of thinking about value so difficult to dispel?

Many of us grow up thinking that economics is like physics or chemistry. That it has always been the same, and we've always looked at value the same way. And this is a huge part of economics' power. We don't question it, because it would feel like questioning gravity. American economist Paul Samuelson famously said that he didn't care who held political office as long as he got to write economics textbooks. Economics conditions the way we think about politics.

The rise of Thatcherism, of neoliberalism – the idea that the market comes before the state, and that the state's responsibility is to take care of the market, not the people – has reinforced this influence. We let economists decide how much we should work, how much time parents should be able to spend with their children, what the optimal way to provide childcare is, or how to take care of nature. But these are fundamentally political questions.

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Their depoliticisation has exacerbated the dynamic whereby things that economics can value tend to be overvalued, while those it cannot value become completely valueless.

Dominant theories may be unable to account for the value of care in the economy, yet they assume a steady and abundant supply of care to sustain the economic system. How do you make sense of this paradox?

This is probably the central paradox in how modern economics deals with care. It has the idea that people are rational agents, act in their own self-interest, and are oriented towards the market. And so the provision of care, which largely falls outside the market, remains a blind spot. Economic theories tend to assume an endless supply of care, without a clear theory of how it is sustained.

Based on their own reasoning, women would never have children because it is completely irrational from a market perspective. Yet when birth rates decline, suddenly shock ensues. I sometimes wonder whether economists are angrier at women when they have children or when they don't. If they do have children and need to work part-time, that's expensive and doesn't create enough value. But if they don't have children, that suddenly becomes a huge issue for the economy.

When you study economics, the first thing you learn is the production function. How does a product come to be? In that function, there's a variable called "L". That's labour power. But there is no acknowledgement of where it comes from; it's just there. And I think that tells you everything you need to know about the poverty of the theories.

THE VALUE
OF A MOTHER,
JUST LIKE THAT
OF A TREE,
IS NOT VISIBLE
AT THE TIME
OF THE EXCHANGE

Feminist thinkers have challenged the approach that treats care as entirely outside the economic equation, but they haven't always agreed on how best to make the case for it.

Feminist theorists, particularly Italian feminists like Silvia Federici, have been instrumental in showing that the undervaluing of care is a central part of capitalism. This applies to paid and unpaid care, to the public and the private sector alike.

The big question was, to price or not to price? Should we speak the devil's language? Some feminist economists, especially in the early days of the field, argued that we should price unpaid care so we can include it in GDP and measure it. This was based on the reasoning that we can't change the system, and so we need to use its language and its rules in our favour.

We've seen a similar logic at play in the environmental movement, where putting a price on a tree or a marsh seems to be the best way to protect it. But pricing ignores the relationships; it isolates and splits things up. And when you talk about nature, you cannot isolate and split. The same goes for care. The value of a mother, just like that of a tree, is not visible at the time of the exchange; it is long-term, and it is reciprocal: mother and child are changing one another. You cannot say that one is giving something to another, as if it were a simple transaction.

The home, in particular, has been a subject of controversy within feminist thought. Is it a prison or a shelter, a site of oppression and exploitation or one of liberation?

It is both. Historically, the home has been a site of extreme violence against women, and we can understand why so much of feminist thought was focused on getting women out of the home and getting them to make their own money. The dominant type of feminism,



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middle-class feminism, places a strong emphasis on achieving workplace equality between women and men. You can see this in EU strategies for gender equality, for example. That's what takes up all the space. But many women, especially lower-class or migrant women who face exploitation, are actually fighting to get into the home, to have enough money to see their own children, to have time to rest. This is the double vision we need when we deal with care. The fight goes both ways. And for many people, home is also a place of liberation.

Meanwhile, we haven't made a big enough effort to get men into the home. Sometimes, we have fallen into the trap of idealising men's lives and framing them as free, equating paid work with freedom. But paid labour isn't necessarily freedom. There are many men who are exploited or work in terrible conditions. Where's the policy to liberate them?

Could the resurgence of "traditional" gender roles – as promoted in the "manosphere" and the "tradwife" online movements – be partly understood as a reaction to these failures rather than simply a backlash against women's emancipation?

When it comes to care, many of the distinctions between right-wing and left-wing positions tend to collapse. Sometimes I see overlaps in places I didn't expect. "Tradwives" and other socially conservative people often ask for the same things that progressive people ask for: more community, more time with children, less market dominance in our lives, more focus on love and social relationships, and a reaction against individualism. When I hear a conservative woman say that life is more than work, that what matters are the people we love, I find myself nodding. Then she might add that the man's role is to dominate, and that's where she loses me.

But we should not underestimate the potential to speak about these issues across differences. When I speak to nurses in hospitals, they suddenly realise they find common ground on this, even with

people they usually disagree with politically. The devaluation of care is the core of both right- and left-wing anger right now.

Does the devaluation of care help explain Europe's consistently low birth rates over the last few decades?

If I were to speak to a politician who cares about economic growth and wants women to have more children, I'd tell them to start by offering better childcare and longer parental leave. I was brought up in the 1990s and 2000s, thinking that we had gender equality, and women would live lives that were completely like men's. Many of us were more educated than most men and made more money than many men. But when they had children, many in my generation were shocked to find out how much gender still mattered.

But I don't think it's just a matter of affordability. Birth rates are declining worldwide, regardless of the cost of living situation. This can be a good thing from a feminist perspective, especially if very young women are waiting longer to have children. But it also has to do with the types of societies we have created, where having children can be quite lonely and make it very difficult to spend time on anything else, including work and hobbies.

Do pro-birth policies focusing narrowly on economic incentives miss the point?

Economic theory and policymaking lack a theory of culture, but economics and culture go hand in hand. What we value economically tends to spill over into what we value culturally and vice versa. The decision to have or not to have children is influenced by both cultural change and economic considerations. Yet when economists speak about demographics, they are at the limit of their theoretical capabilities because culture is simply not something they're used to dealing with. In their market theory, there is no place for family choices. In a way, you could say that economics is supremely feminist in that rational market agents have no body and no gender. For many economists, I'm a consumer in the same way that a man is, at least until I become pregnant.

There are, of course, exceptions. Alice Evans, for example, has done a lot of empirical work, interviewing women around the world about their choices to have or not have children. She found that cultural factors, such as social media use, can have a major impact on reproductive choices because they give access to different types of women's lives and different female cultures, showing that options other than having a family also exist. She calls this phenomenon "cultural leapfrogging".¹

¹ Alice Evans (2025). "Cultural Leapfrogging: Swiping Past Tradition". *The Great Gender Divergence*. 1 January 2025. Available at <<https://www.ggd.world/p/cultural-leapfrogging-swiping-past>>.

The Left seems more reluctant to talk about demographic crisis or decline. Is there a way of reframing the issue in a more progressive way rather than surrendering it to right-wing narratives and cultural panic?

Demographic decline is an umbrella term for many things, some of them good and others concerning. We should be extremely concrete in how we talk about decline and what we are worried about. My biggest worry is that, if the state retreats, the ever-expanding group of elderly people will have to be cared for by their daughters, as is already the case all over Europe.

But there's also an opportunity to think creatively about how we adapt to the new demographic situation. We cannot leave these big decisions to the market – the state needs to play a big role, too. All over Europe, we're already seeing major recruitment issues in hospitals because pay is so low. From a green perspective, more jobs in care can be good news because it is a very sustainable type of work and one that is extremely useful to society.

Maybe the best way is to understand what we are going through as a care crisis, not a demographic one. It's a new situation, and we need to adapt.

Pro-birth policies tend to focus on heterosexual couples or, at best, the nuclear family model with two parents raising children. Is it time we question this norm?

The family organisation of two parents raising children is actually quite unique in human history. It is the configuration that takes the least time away from the market because it is very steady and small; it requires little organising.

If you ask any feminist economist what her main policy goal is, she will probably choose a shorter working day, which means more time in the home. Of course, there can be downsides, and we see it

in countries where family care has a bigger cultural role: women tend to make less money and be less independent, which in turn creates a patriarchal family structure. However, there's also the upside that families are more connected and have closer relationships, so we need to strike the right balance.

This isn't just about raising children. In Scandinavia and other parts of northern Europe, we tend to just hide elderly people away. When someone cannot work anymore or is no longer self-sufficient, we don't really want to see them; we don't want them in the home. When I speak with Muslim feminists who have migrated to Europe, they tell me they find this to be extremely inhumane; they have a much more integrated relationship with elderly people in day-to-day life.

In the new demographic reality, opening up the home means not only more care for those who need it but also more help with raising children – and this doesn't mean the state shouldn't play its role in providing care. But we have closed off the home too much, and I think we see it in the crisis of loneliness that many adults are facing.



EMMA HOLTEN

is a feminist economist and writer. Her book *Deficit* (Danish: *Underskud*, Politikens Forlag, 2024) sold more than 50,000 copies in Denmark and has since become an international bestseller.

She sat on the European Institute for Gender Equality's Experts' Forum as an expert on feminist economics, and is on Human Rights Watch's advisory committee on women's rights.

SOCIAL MEDIA BANS FOR MINORS

CURE OR STOPGAP?

ARTICLE BY
CELIA FERNÁNDEZ

As the harmful effects of social media have become undeniable, the exciting promise of a globalised public square has given way to growing anxieties over uncontrolled digital addiction. Children and adolescents, with their hyperactive cerebral reward systems, are especially vulnerable to algorithms designed to grab users' attention at any cost. A number of countries, both within and outside Europe, are weighing whether to ban minors from social media. However, some argue that such restrictions will not solve the problem.

Social media has shaped generations in ways both exciting and unsettling. For Guilherme Alexandre Jorge (24, member of Volt Europa in Portugal) and Anna Mazzei (23, member of the Italian Young Greens), it began as a gateway to knowledge and connection. Jorge joined Twitter at 15: "I started following people, then exploring what different topics meant, and I started becoming more aware of issues both globally and locally." Mazzei, who began using social media at 14, followed pages run by younger creators rather than traditional media, finding them more engaging. "Once I got into activism," she recalls, "it was also a way to see who shared my views and to follow green activists in Italy and abroad. It helped me to feel part of something."

More than a decade ago, social media was largely celebrated as a portal to a globalised world: fast access to news, digital encounters with loved ones abroad, and communities bound by shared interests. In 2010, Facebook's founder Mark Zuckerberg was named *Time*'s Person of the Year, emblematic of the promise of this new digital era. Those years now feel distant, and social media has gone from being

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OF EUROPEANS SEE
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TO PROTECT
CHILDREN ONLINE

seen as a revolutionary communication tool to being treated by courts and regulators as a system that maximises attention through aggressive algorithms at the expense of users' mental health. In 2026, Zuckerberg is more likely to make headlines for legal cases and fines imposed on his company, Meta.

According to the Eurobarometer report *The Digital Decade 2025*, over 90 per cent of Europeans see an urgent need to protect children online, citing on mental health (93 per cent), cyberbullying (92 per cent), and the importance of restricting access to age-inappropriate content (92 per cent). In response to citizens' concerns, governments have begun taking action. In December 2025, Australia became the first country in the world to enforce a law banning access to social media for users under 16, requiring platforms to implement age detection systems. In Europe, France has passed legislation restricting access for minors under 15 unless parental consent is provided, while Spain is currently advancing a law to ban access for those under 16, with mandatory platform-based age verification. Other countries, including Portugal, Germany, Norway, and Italy, rely primarily on parental consent models for regulating minors' access.

The European Parliament, too, overwhelmingly backs restricting children's access to social media. At the end of 2025, it passed a non-binding resolution stating that minors should not access social media before the age of 16, although parents could give consent from age 13. While the document has no legal force, it places political pressure on the European Commission, which now holds the power to turn these recommendations into actual EU legislation.

DIGITAL DRUG

These developments respond to growing concerns among experts, teachers, and families about excessive smartphone use and the risks social media poses to young people, particularly in terms of mental health,

exposure to harmful content, and cyberbullying. While there is broad, across-the-board agreement that social media presents a genuine and pressing challenge, there is far less consensus on how best to address it. Some advocate strict measures like age-based bans, whereas others favour solutions centred on education, digital literacy, and platform accountability, reflecting broader tensions between protection and autonomy and differing views on who should bear responsibility. Consequently, the measures banning social media use for minors have sparked scepticism and debate over whether such restrictions address the root of the problem or merely act as a partial and potentially ineffective fix, raising broader questions about enforcement, privacy, and the role of platforms themselves.

Shortly before proposing the law to restrict social media access for minors in November 2025, the Spanish government presented the most comprehensive study to date on the impact of technology on childhood and adolescence. *Childhood, Adolescence, and Digital Wellbeing*, published by Red.es, UNICEF Spain, the University of Santiago de Compostela, and the Spanish General Council of Computer Engineering, gathers the voices of nearly 100,000 children and adolescents in Spain. According to the research, 41 per cent had their own smartphone at age 10 and 76 per cent by age 12. Nearly 20 per cent of those surveyed aged 10 to 20 say they spend

more than five hours a day on social media at weekends, and intensive use is associated with higher anxiety, lower quality of life, and greater exposure to harassment, cyberbullying, and digital control in romantic relationships.

Further evidence suggests that by delaying the introduction of smartphones to children until they are 13 or 14 – rather than at 10.8 years, which is the average age in Spain – problems such as video game addiction, exposure to sexting and pornography, and contact with strangers are reduced by half.

“The scientific evidence we have shows that the increasingly early introduction of smartphones, and social media in particular, into the lives of minors is not harmless. It takes away more than it gives,” summarises Antonio Rial, co-leader of the national study, senior lecturer in social psychology at the University of Santiago de Compostela, and a leading expert on adolescent behaviour, digital media, and non-substance addictions.

The adolescent brain, with its hyperactive reward system and still-immature executive control, is highly vulnerable to social media mechanisms designed to capture users’ attention at all costs. Anna Lembke, one of the first researchers to document this effect, wrote in her 2021 book *Dopamine Nation*, “The smartphone is the modern-day hypodermic

needle, delivering digital dopamine 24/7 for a wired generation.”

In other words, parents have good reasons to worry. María Gijón, author of the 2026 book *Tú puedes dejar tu móvil si sabes cómo* (“You Can Quit Your Phone if You Know How”) and mother to a 12-year-old, directs the Madrid branch of *Adolescencia Libre de Móviles* (“Smartphone-Free Adolescence”). The movement began in 2023 with a conversation among concerned mothers in a park in Barcelona’s Poble Nou district and has since grown into a nationwide initiative. Its goal is to bring families together around delaying smartphone use for children. “The idea is that if we all agree to wait until later, it becomes easier to resist the social pressure we used to feel to hand over a smartphone at age 12,” Gijón explains. The association, unsurprisingly, supports the Spanish government’s proposed measures to limit minors’ access to social media.

Gijón believes that minors and adolescents are not using their phones for activities like learning how to play the piano or studying three languages. “Those cases are a needle in a haystack,” she explains. “What we are talking about here is public health, and in public health we have to focus on the majority.” Rial and Gijón both emphasise that banning social media use for minors under 16 would protect economically vulnerable families in particular,

as the children of poorer households tend to use digital devices more excessively than others. While digital addiction is a global problem that does not differ by socio-economic status, race, or gender, not every child has the opportunity to attend a good school where they can be guided in the proper use of technology. “The lower the socio-economic level, the greater the misinformation and, likely, the greater the harm. This makes preventive action through legislation even more necessary,” says Rial.

The expert’s position is clear: social media should be illegal for minors, just as alcohol and tobacco are. “For once and for all, policymakers have sided with minors, who need to be protected. They have sided with families, who need support and guidance. And they have called out the tech industry, making it clear that the greatest share of responsibility lies with them, not with the children or their families,” he says.

DISEASE AND CURE

As governments move to regulate platforms, the tech industry has responded shrewdly, flooding public discourse with content that highlights the benefits of social media and presents digital education as the primary solution to mitigate its shortcomings. But there are also experts who, despite criticising the way these platforms operate, oppose measures

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UNTIL THEN?

that restrict minors' access, arguing that the cure may be worse than the disease. Those who believe minors should retain access argue that social media provides adolescents with information, connection, and role models they might not encounter in their family or school environments. For many marginalised groups, these social platforms have served as a vital space for self-expression and finding community. "If we pursue bans without exploring alternatives, we end up depriving them of participation in public life, as well as a wide range of opportunities for connection and learning," says Marta G. Franco, a journalist, social media expert, and author of *Las redes son nuestras* ("Social Media Is Ours"), published in 2024, who describes herself as "citizen of the Internet since 1999".

Alexandra Geese, a Green member of the European Parliament who works on digital issues, agrees: "We shouldn't punish kids instead of the platforms. A ban should address specific social media platforms that don't comply with the rules for the protection of minors." At the same time, she says, "We should support initiatives to build a better Internet. They could offer safe spaces for kids and should not be affected by a ban."

Franco points out that, despite growing calls to restrict social media, government officials continue to rely on these platforms real-time information. She notes, for instance, that following a major train accident in January, the Spanish transport minister shared live updates on rail services via Twitter, underscoring the state's dependence on social media as an instant communication tool.

Moreover, critics warn that bans would undermine efforts to enhance youth engagement in politics. Mazzei points to a paradox: If 16-year-olds are allowed to vote, as is the case in a growing number of European countries, does it make sense to restrict their access to information on social media until then?

Franco also cautions against drawing sweeping conclusions from studies. While youth anxiety and depression increased around the same time social media became widespread, between 2010 and 2015, other factors – such as the global economic crisis – may have contributed to that outcome. Franco adds that in the United States, where many of these studies originate, screenings began to be conducted among adolescents around the same time, potentially creating the impression of a surge in mental health issues. “Just because two things happen at the same time does not necessarily mean one causes the other. It is even worth asking whether the reverse could be true: that psychological problems may lead to increased social media use,” she notes.

Rial disagrees: “Levels of anxiety, somatisation, and depression triple, and the risk of suicide quadruples, among adolescents who clearly show a pattern of maladaptive social media use. Could it be that a young person with emotional deficiencies, or an existing mental health problem, is more likely to develop this type of social media use? Of course. The relationship is bidirectional, but that does not exclude the existence of the first direction.”

Like Rial, Franco is critical of digital spaces created by private companies and designed to extract maximum profit from our data, and in her work, she advocates for alternative environments that foster healthier interactions.

However, she thinks banning access altogether means throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTION

Nicoleta Prutean, senior analyst at the Centre for Future Generations (CFG) and an expert in brain science and psychology, works on shaping policies to safeguard mental health in the era of technological acceleration. She believes that age-based restrictions are a political response to an ill-posed question. “The question, ‘Does social media harm mental health?’ sounds to me very much like asking, ‘Does food harm physical health?’ Food can be good, but also bad.” In her view, the right approach is to ask which features in the design of social media are harmful. “The answers would be the recommender system features, the interface features, the infinite scrolling, the autoplay, the variable rewards that exploit our attention capacity and our reward sensitivity,” she notes. Disregarding the fact that the problems of social media are at the design level risks leaving us vulnerable to new technologies – such as generative AI – that may replicate those features. “If we keep focusing on social media as a whole and not on the mechanisms, we will miss other technologies where these mechanisms are even stronger.”

Current EU legislation specifically addresses the features of digital platforms that are known to disrupt mental health. “The Digital Services

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Act (DSA) looks at the right objects, it acknowledges that the design of the systems has a very important role to play and has a financial penalty,” Prutean explains. In February 2026, the European Commission disclosed preliminary DSA findings about TikTok, concluding that its addictive features – such as infinite scroll, autoplay, and highly personalised recommendations – may violate the law by failing to mitigate risks to users’ wellbeing. If confirmed, the company could face fines of up to 6 per cent of its global annual turnover, the DSA’s maximum for serious violations.

Geese also calls for targeting specific platform practices. “Rather than discussing a general social media ban, we should single out problematic practices like algorithms privileging borderline content, targeting, and addictive features. On the basis of the Digital Services Act, the European Commission could already enforce better rules for social media.”

However, Prutean argues, both the measures restricting minors’ access to social media and the DSA overlook the broader spectrum of mental wellbeing. The former reduces it to the absence of pain, but Prutean emphasises that “being healthy mentally also means being empowered, for example. We shouldn’t hope for future generations just to not be depressed or anxious; we should hope for more.” In the case of the DSA, she notes that harm often occurs long before a clinical pathology emerges. “This is not clearly explicit [in the legislation]. Broadening the definition of mental harm and providing scientific evidence and benchmarks would make these laws more enforceable. The reference to mental health is there, but the threshold for what constitutes harm is just not very clear, making enforcement difficult.”

For Franco, “It’s somewhat paradoxical that we are constantly hearing calls to create new laws, while at the same time Spain is one of the countries [along with Germany and France] supporting the deregulation of data protection laws through the Digital Omnibus, which

is currently being debated in the European Commission.” She notes that Spain is also behind in transposing the DSA, which mandates the establishment of a national authority for its implementation.

HOLDING PLATFORMS ACCOUNTABLE

A central challenge of measures restricting minors’ access is the age verification system. Australia’s world-first ban has struggled in practice: the law does not mandate specific technology, leaving platforms to choose their methods. While millions of underage accounts have been closed, many minors remain active because verification tools are imperfect and platforms allow multiple workarounds. By contrast, Spain (and more broadly, the EU) is developing a privacy-preserving protocol by which users would hold a cryptographic credential – similar to a digital ID – that proves their age without revealing personal details. Stored in a digital wallet, the credential is presented securely to platforms, which are only informed whether or not the user meets the age requirement, not given their full identity.

While Gijón stresses the need to accompany restrictions with an effective age verification system that ensures compliance by platforms (including through penalties severe enough to deter rule-breaking) and prevents minors

from easily circumventing the measures, Franco is wary of the risk of online activities being tracked to users’ legal identities. She warns, “No matter how much we are told that it will be handled in a way that doesn’t involve sharing our identity with the platform, any data we leave behind is extremely risky and can potentially be captured in some way.” Geese has similar concerns: “It is vital that no additional data – and in particular, no biometric data – is used. Biometric data can be used for sexualised images or for political surveillance many years later.”

The people interviewed for this article offered different solutions to the social media problem, but they all agree on two points: that the way social media is currently designed does not exclusively affect minors and that major tech companies should be held accountable. Jorge notes that while minors’ screen addiction would bring clear benefits, the issue cannot be framed as affecting children and adolescents alone, and that is why intervention needs to focus on the algorithms that drive compulsive engagement. “I’m 24 now, and I am still glued to my phone,” he says. Mazzei, meanwhile, highlights the importance of enabling young people to participate in a digital society, even as she warns against an “unmanaged algorithm”. She does not take a firm position on the debate but cautions against outright bans, suggesting that “banning” may be the wrong approach: “Maybe restricting or moderating access is better.”

Rial, meanwhile, situates the debate within a wider democratic concern, asking, “If we look at the problem more deeply, this is a question about the quality of democracy. Studies in the US show that 80 per cent of hate speech is driven by just 20 per cent of users or accounts. What happens with that?”

The digital space, once celebrated as a democratic public forum, today resembles more a shopping mall than a town square. The alternative, Franco argues, lies in fostering different digital environments: “This means greater public collaboration with companies and citizens to build digital spaces based on open-source software and other guiding principles.”

While such collaboration is being attempted, “the mental, physical, and social health of children and adolescents continues to decline,” Gijón worries. “Technology is advancing far faster than legislation, and the only way to protect minors – who lack the capacity to self-regulate in the face of addictive designs or tools – is to delay their age of access.”



CELIA FERNÁNDEZ

is a journalist drawn to many kinds of stories, with a particular focus on the eco-social emergency, contemporary social trends, and alternative or marginal forms of culture. She is a regular contributor to *El País*, *Ballena Blanca* (eldiario.es), and the *Green European Journal*.

OVERCOMING PRESENTISM

INTERGENERATIONAL FAIRNESS IN EUROPE

ARTICLE BY
**JÖRG TREMMEL &
LENA WINZER**

The tension between electoral cycles and long-term thinking has long preoccupied political philosophers. While experiments in institutional design have been underway at the national level for some time, the EU has recently embarked on its own path towards intergenerational fairness. Can a commitment to the future expand democratic possibilities rather than shrink them?

On 4 March 2026, the European Commission published the Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness, the first ever comprehensive political framework at the European level to engage systematically with the fair distribution of opportunities and burdens across generations.¹ Led by Glenn Micallef, the first European Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport, the initiative also involved a citizens' panel comprising 150 randomly selected Europeans from all member states.

The significance of this strategy should not be underestimated: in European governance, strategy documents often serve as springboards for subsequent legislation and programmes. They shape discourse, set priorities, and lend structure to the political process.

Intergenerational fairness, as a concept, asks whether the decisions on policies such as climate, public debt, natural resources, and social security taken by those alive today distribute opportunities and bur-

¹ European Commission (2026). *Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness*. (COM(2026) 110 final). Available at <<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52026DC0110&qid=1774418330193>>.

dens justly across generations or secure advantages for the present at the expense of those who will inherit the consequences. Via this route, it could come to shape future decision-making across the EU.

That the EU is engaging with intergenerational fairness as a guiding political principle is, in itself, a significant development. But does the strategy adequately reckon with the structural roots of the problem it seeks to address – democracy’s inherent bias towards the short-term?

THE ORIGINS OF AN IDEA

Intergenerational fairness is pursued as a normative goal for a range of reasons – predominantly moral but also psychological and relational.

According to American political philosopher John Rawls, each generation should adopt principles they would want preceding generations to have followed, no matter how far back in time.²

From a universalist perspective, it is unjust for one generation to consume resources or cause harm that future generations must bear, because moral duties extend to all persons regardless of when they are alive. If we accept

that we should treat future people as moral equals, then obligations of fairness between generations follow as a matter of course.

As for the relational and psychological foundations of intergenerational fairness, American philosopher Samuel Scheffler has shown that our identities extend beyond our individual lifetimes: we care about the future because our sense of meaning is bound up with projects, communities, and relationships that outlast us.³ If we contribute to a long-term endeavour through scientific research, institutional reform, or cultural preservation, we do so for people we will never meet, because the significance of our own lives depends on the continued existence of a world that values what we have valued.

Australian philosopher John Passmore’s earlier theorisation of a “chain of love” is complementary. According to this principle, each generation cares for its own children for personal and dynastic reasons, creating a cascading chain of concern that reaches forward across time.⁴

Indigenous knowledge traditions have long articulated similar beliefs, such as the Seventh Generation principle, which holds that decisions should be evaluated in light of their conse-

² John Rawls (2001). *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

³ Samuel Scheffler (2013). *Death and the Afterlife*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁴ John Passmore (1974). *Man’s Responsibility for Nature: Ecological Problems and Western Traditions*. New York: Scribner.

DIFFERENT THEORIES AND
 IDEAS CONVERGE ON THE
 SAME FUNDAMENTAL CLAIM
 THAT JUSTICE DOES NOT
 STOP AT THE BOUNDARIES
 OF THE PRESENT

TRAPPED
 IN THE PRESENT

quences seven generations
 hence. More recently,
 the Future Design research

programme led by Japanese economist
 Tatsuyoshi Saijo has explored how imagin-
 ing the lives of future people through story-
 telling, deliberative exercises, and practices
 can strengthen a form of “time-spanning
 empathy”.⁵

These different theories and ideas converge
 on the same fundamental claim that justice
 does not stop at the boundaries of the present.

By focusing specifically on the fair distribu-
 tion of opportunities, resources, and burdens
 between successive generations, intergenera-
 tional fairness differs from intragenerational
 fairness, which concerns inequalities among con-
 temporaries, whether these arise from wealth,
 social class, gender, ethnicity, or geography.
 These two dimensions of justice interact – since
 structural disadvantages within a generation
 can compound across generations – but they
 remain distinct. In this sense, intergenerational
 fairness is not a wild card that can be played
 for any and every concern about social justice.

The plural foundations of intergenerational
 fairness and the breadth of the intellectual
 consensus behind it contribute to its political
 force as an idea. But why, then, has it proven
 so difficult to translate it into political reality?

The answer lies in a structural deficiency
 of democratic governance that has been widely
 discussed in recent years: presentism.

Presentism is not the same as short-
 termism; not every short-term action is a
 form of myopia. In a public health emergency,
 for instance, deficit spending to protect
 lives in the present is not only justified
 but imperative – even if it increases the fiscal
 burden on future generations. Meanwhile,
 in constitution-making, too rigid a long-term
 orientation can itself be intergenerationally
 unjust, entrenching past preferences at the
 expense of a future generation’s right to self-
 determination. What presentism designates
 is rather the *systematic* tendency of democratic
 institutions to privilege the interests of those
 currently alive at the expense of future
 citizens. This tendency is not exclusive
 to democracies. Authoritarian regimes
 typically display even less concern for future-
 oriented interests, given their patronage

⁵ Tatsuyoshi Saijo (2025). “Future Design’: An Innovative Approach to Decision-Making”. *UNU-CPR Blog*. 25 March 2025.
 Available at <<https://unu.edu/cpr/blog-post/future-design-innovative-approach-decision-making>>.

THE ROOTS OF
PRESENTISM ARE
BOTH ELECTORAL
AND COGNITIVE

and the absence of accountability. But it is in democracies that the problem is most amenable to structural reform.

The roots of presentism are both electoral and cognitive. Voters, for reasons that are not entirely irrational, tend to favour policies whose benefits materialise in the present or near future and whose costs are deferred. After all, it is not unreasonable to prioritise the tangible over the speculative.

Current demographic trends intensify this dynamic: empirical research has found that with each year of ageing, the odds of supporting increases in child benefits – that is, investment in the next generation – decrease by approximately 4 per cent. Childless elderly people, in particular, are roughly half as likely as parents to support such measures.⁶ One must therefore be cautious about equating more direct democracy, particularly in ageing societies, with less presentism.

Politicians, for their part, operate under the structural pressures of the electoral cycle. Even those who are genuinely committed to long-term outcomes must first win and retain office, and the only way to do so is by catering to the preferences of the current electorate. Political competitions between a candidate promising near-term benefits and one pledging the same benefits in the more distant future do not end up favouring the latter. As John Stuart Mill observed in 1861, “Rulers and ruling classes are under a necessity of considering the interests of those who have the suffrage, but of those who are excluded, it is in their option whether they will do so or not.”⁷

This dynamic breaches the “all-affected principle” central to democratic theory: the idea that all those affected by a decision should have a say in its making. The decisions on climate policy, fiscal strategy, and resource

6 Jörg Tremmel (ed.) (2008). *Demographic Change and Intergenerational Justice: The Implementation of Long-Term Thinking in the Political Decision Making Process*. Berlin: Springer.

7 John Stuart Mill (1861). *Considerations on Representative Government*. London: Parker, Son, and Bourn.

**WE SHOULD NOT THINK
OF THE ANTHROPOCENE
AS MERELY ANOTHER
ANALYTICAL FRAME BUT
RATHER AS A WAKE-UP CALL
TO REFORM DEMOCRACY**

stewardship of citizens
alive today profoundly
shape the living condi-

tions of people not yet born, who have no voice in the political process, as they cannot vote, petition, protest, or organise. As German philosopher Hans Jonas wrote, “The nonexistent has no lobby, and the unborn are powerless.”⁸

This representation gap is different from the exclusion typically experienced by already existing and marginalised social groups such as women, immigrants, and ethnic minorities, who are present in the here and now and can, in many cases, exert political pressure. Future generations are invisible and unidentifiable.

THE FUTURE BRANCH

The consequences of presentism are most acute in the environmental domain. Scientists refer to our geological epoch as the Anthropocene because the effects of human action on ecosystems reach into the future on timescales that were unimaginable during the Holocene, when our political institutions were designed. Climate change, species extinction, radioactive contamination, the depletion of fossil energy resources, and the accumulation of space debris all involve temporal scales measured in thousands or millions of years. Yet voters and politicians alike keep making decisions that focus

narrowly on the present or the near future.

With this in mind, we should not think of the Anthropocene as merely another analytical frame but rather as a wake-up call to reform democracy.

These insights have generated a growing interest in institutional innovation, leading to the creation of offices for future generations (OFGs), tasked with introducing the interests of future citizens into today’s political system. These offices aim to initiate a paradigm shift from a three- to a four-branch model of government, supplementing the classical legislative, executive, and judicial pillars with a dedicated “future branch”.

Pioneering experiments include Finland’s Committee for the Future, the Commissioner for Future Generations in Israel (2001–2006), the Ombudsman for Future Generations in Hungary (2008–2011), and the Future Generations Commissioner in Wales. There is evidence that such institutions are most democratically legitimate when they possess the right to initiate legislation rather than just delay or veto it. They should be proposers, not preventers, ensuring that long-term concerns are aired at the earliest stage of the policy cycle without adding an extra step to already complex legislation processes.

⁸ Hans Jonas (1984). *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.



A FISCAL
CONSERVATIVE AND
A CLIMATE ACTIVIST
WILL DRAW
VERY DIFFERENT
CONCLUSIONS
ABOUT WHAT
FUTURE
GENERATIONS
NEED

STRENGTHS AND MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

By articulating intergenerational fairness as a cross-cutting political principle at the European level, the European Commission recognises that political decisions carry long-term consequences, and that democratic systems need institutional mechanisms to reckon with those effects. Its diagnosis of presentism is compelling, and its ambition to mainstream intergenerational thinking across policy domains, as it has already done with gender, reflects a sound understanding that the consequences of presentism manifest in many arenas.

Concrete proposals such as the Intergenerational Fairness Index could become valuable instruments for tracking long-term trends and furnishing political debate with empirical substance. The choice of 16 November as a day marking intergenerational fairness, originating in civil society advocacy, signals receptiveness to civic impulses. The strategy also draws on existing national initiatives, including Finland's Committee for the Future, Spain's National Office of Foresight and Strategy, and Malta's Guardian of Future Generations, demonstrating awareness of the institutional landscape.

Yet it also has significant shortcomings.

The most conspicuous deficiency is institutional. The citizens' panel had called for the establishment of an independent Council for Intergenerational Fairness at the EU level, comprising a scientific expert panel and an assembly of randomly selected members of the public.⁹ This body would have given permanent institutional expression to the interests of future generations within the EU's decision-making architecture. Yet the strategy did not take up this recommendation, nor does it address the panel's recommendation to lower the voting age to 16 as a means of strengthening the political voice of younger generations.

⁹ European Citizens' Panel on Intergenerational Fairness (2025). *Final Recommendations*. Brussels: European Commission. Available at <https://citizens.ec.europa.eu/document/download/ba87bc2e-999c-448d-bc48-8165be0f1e1f_en?filename=ECP%20IGF_Final%20Recommendations.pdf>.

Instead, the Commission opted for a gradualist approach, integrating long-term perspectives into existing processes without creating new institutions. But if democratic institutions are structurally predisposed towards discounting the future, then the corrective cannot consist solely of exhortations to those same institutions to think more long-term. The strategy's own diagnosis undermines the proposed remedy.

A second concern is conceptual. The Commission's focus on fair places (alongside fair policymaking and fair opportunities) aims to ensure intergenerational fairness across territories. However, it reveals a tendency to stretch the concept of intergenerational fairness beyond its analytical bounds. Regional inequality, addressing disparities in access to education, infrastructure, and employment between urban and rural areas, or between economically strong and structurally disadvantaged regions, is a pressing concern. But it is primarily a question of intragenerational justice because it pertains to differences between contemporaries distinguished by geography, not by their position in time. In Germany, for instance, the enduring inequalities between West and East are profound, yet calls for enhanced inter-state fiscal equalisation are not strictly a matter of intergenerational fairness. If it sacrifices analytical precision in the name of political breadth, the strategy risks diluting its effectiveness. The power

of intergenerational fairness derives precisely from its specificity.

A third limitation pertains to fiscal policy. Long before the environmental crisis entered the discourse, public debt was already a central concern of intergenerational justice debates, including for US founding father Thomas Jefferson. Yet the strategy accords this dimension only marginal attention. This is a missed opportunity, not least because the EU's own treaties acknowledge the importance of balancing revenue and expenditure in the EU budget and directing EU spending overwhelmingly towards investment.

Finally, the strategy's reliance on soft instruments such as strategic foresight, impact assessments, public consultations, and an AI-enabled "Futures Balance Tool" raises questions about its ability to exert real influence on policymaking. Such instruments already exist at the European level, but their impact has remained limited. The mainstreaming approach places heavy demands on institutional coordination, and when a guiding principle is to be embedded across a multitude of policy fields, there is a risk that responsibilities become diffuse and the agenda is reduced to rhetorical aspirations.

While the strategy lays important foundations for intergenerational fairness, the real test of its worth begins now.

THE POLITICS OF THE LONG TERM

There is, however, a deeper question that no strategy document can resolve on its own, and which advocates of intergenerational fairness, ourselves included, must confront honestly.

Intergenerational fairness is a powerful idea, but it is not a cure-all. As we have argued, the concept itself derives its force precisely from its focus on the distribution of opportunities and burdens between successive generations and not every dimension of social inequality. Losing sight of such specificity can put the concept at risk of becoming politically instrumentalised.

The language of future generations can be mobilised to expand political possibilities but also to constrain them. Austerity programmes have been justified in the name of fiscal responsibility towards those who come after, even as they deepened inequality and eroded public services for those alive today. And in some context, appeals to long-term sustainability have been used to resist redistributive claims made by people who are suffering now. When this happens, intergenerational fairness ceases to be a tool for justice and becomes a device for deferring it.

This risk is compounded by the fact that future generations, precisely because they do not yet exist, cannot speak for themselves. Their interests must be interpreted and are inevitably shaped by the political commitments of those doing the interpreting. A fiscal conservative and a climate activist will draw very different conclusions about what future generations need. Future generations can be pulled in whichever direction present-day politics requires, which is why the institutional design matters so much. The question of who speaks on behalf of the unborn is not a technocratic matter but a deeply political one.

The challenge, then, is to ensure that intergenerational fairness expands the horizon of democratic politics rather than narrowing it. This means resisting the temptation to treat the concept as a trump card that

overrides democratic deliberation in the present. It means insisting that obligations to future generations do not come at the expense of obligations to those who are marginalised today.

These tensions cannot be resolved by any single strategy, however well intentioned. They must be collectively negotiated, debated, and revisited – which is to say, they must be kept within the domain of democratic politics. The EU's strategy is a valuable opening move, but the conversation it sparks will need to be more searching, more self-critical, and more willing to engage with the uncomfortable question of whose future is being secured and at whose expense.



JÖRG TREMMEL

is an extraordinary professor of political science at the University of Tübingen, where he specialises in intergenerational justice, democratic theory, and institutional design. He is the author of *A Theory of Intergenerational Justice* (Routledge, 2009) and has published widely on offices for future generations and the reform of democratic institutions.

He is also the founder, scientific director, and a member of the executive board of the Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations in Germany.



LENA WINZER

is a project manager at the Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations and a researcher in international law, peace, and security. She holds an MA from King's College London and the University of Aberdeen and is currently completing her LLM with the University of Amsterdam and Columbia Law School.

PRONATALISM IN HUNGARY

LESSONS AND IMAGINARIES

ARTICLE BY
FANNI SVÉGEL

Efforts to boost Hungarian birth rates date back centuries, but the pronatalist agenda gained new momentum under Viktor Orbán. Introduced in 2010, his “family-friendly governance” attacked women’s self-determination and equality, but recent political developments bring hope. A look at the past – and to the future – of demographic policy in Hungary.

“*If you don’t own a home, it’s very hard... renting is extremely expensive, especially with utilities on top. My partner and I tried to work it out. If we lived by ourselves, we wouldn’t be able to make ends meet. If we wanted to maintain our standard of living and provide everything for our child, it just wouldn’t be possible. By the third month, we’d already need to take out a loan and go into debt. That’s how it would go, which is why we live with my mother in her house.”*¹

In 2018, a young woman from Dombóvár in southwestern Hungary spoke for many when she opened up about her life in the country under then-prime minister Viktor Orbán. Skyrocketing living costs and low wages in rural areas made cohabitation with family members often the only viable path to starting adult life and having children.

Curiously, a range of generous grants, benefits, and tax breaks was available to families with children and couples planning to start a family under the Orbán regime, particularly from 2015 onwards.

¹ Anikó Gregor & Eszter Kovács (2018). *Nőügyek 2018: társadalmi problémák és megoldási stratégiák: a kutatási eredmények összefoglalója*. Budapest: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Available at <<https://collections.fes.de/publikationen/ident/fes/14461>>. Author’s translation.

FEARS OF DEPOPULATION HAVE LONG SHAPED HUNGARIAN DEMOGRAPHIC DISCOURSE

These measures belonged to a series of population policy initiatives aimed at triggering a baby boom in Hungary. However, experts raised concerns about their fairness, sustainability, and accessibility. Many key instruments, including tax credits and refunds, strongly favoured high-income married couples. Those who did not align with the regime's preferred model of the ideal white Christian Hungarian nuclear family, such as non-heterosexual and non-married couples, as well as less well-off couples and families, were marginalised. The country's Roma minority, who experience higher rates of poverty and exclusion, was disproportionately affected. Baby-linked housing subsidies contributed to rising property prices and rents – pushing younger generations towards alternative housing arrangements.

Furthermore, even when young couples were able to take advantage of these financial incentives, this often triggered an ethical paradox.² While they used these schemes to realise plans they already had, many expressed moral unease about having children at a particular time to qualify for state support. As a result, family subsidies became a site of tension and moral negotiation among citizens.

But the most serious concern surrounding this policy direction – ostensibly taken

in response to fears over demographic decline in Hungary – was its effect on women, specifically their reproductive autonomy, economic independence, and equality.

HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE DEMOGRAPHIC PANIC

Fears of depopulation have long shaped Hungarian demographic discourse, with experts and politicians repeatedly invoking the spectre of national decline. Although circumstances have changed over the centuries, these narratives have remained remarkably consistent. In modern Hungarian historiography, concerns about demographic decline are often traced back to the aftermath of World War I and the Treaty of Trianon (1920), which drastically redrew Hungary's borders. Since then, politicians, journalists, and demographers have repeatedly sounded the alarm over national survival.

During the interwar, authoritarian Horthy regime, a maternalist framework came to dominate public discourse. From 1928 onwards, women with many children were awarded the Medal of Merit for Valiant Mothers, and comprehensive social policies were introduced to support the agrarian population, particularly large but impoverished families. However, these policies increasingly relied on the confiscation of so-called “Jewish wealth”

2 Szandra Kramarics (2025). “The marketization of family planning: the role of banks as policy actors in Hungarian reproductive policies”. *Intersections: East European Journal of Society and Politics*, Vol. 11(2), pp. 26–45. Available at <<https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v11i2.1368>>.

from the late 1930s onward,³ while disqualifying people of Jewish origin from the welfare cooperatives that distributed assistance, giving them a distinctly exclusionary and discriminatory character. The loan-based schemes that were introduced, under which families were exempted from repaying state loans upon the birth of a fourth child, bear a striking resemblance to family policies introduced in the 2010s.

After World War II, a Moscow-backed communist regime was established in Hungary, yet the maternalist framework persisted. In the early 1950s, the state launched a strict anti-abortion campaign, tightening regulations to the point of near prohibition.⁴ At the same time, social benefits for mothers were expanded. Pronatalist discourse continued to draw on longstanding fears of depopulation, though its ideological foundation shifted: higher birth rates were now framed as essential to building the ideal communist society.

The third distinct phase of the twentieth century emerged in the 1970s, when the state socialist regime initiated another demographic campaign. Much like the pronatalist discourse of the interwar years, this approach linked population growth to broader social and economic prosperity. It primarily focused on financial

support via a new “childcare allowance” (*gyermekgondozási segély*, GYES) in 1967. The GYES offered women the opportunity – but also subjected them to the implicit social pressure – to stay at home with their children for the first three years of their lives, supported by limited state compensation. Other measures included the development of healthcare infrastructure and conscious family planning, as well as the re-regulation of strict state committees to review applications for abortion.

ORBÁN'S ILLIBERAL CONTRACT WITH WOMEN

While there were sustained challenges to women’s reproductive rights and autonomy from conservative and religious actors following the fall of communism in 1989, it was only after 2010 that a distinctly neo-conservative reproductive regime took shape. In its early years, the emphasis was on material incentives – for instance, families with three or more children benefitted from significant tax reductions, signalling a shift in the country’s approach to social citizenship. The introduction of the Family Housing Subsidy scheme (*Családi Otthontermelési Kedvezmény*, CSOK) in 2015 further strengthened the pronatalist direction of population policy by offering families with children

3 Dorottya Szikra (2009). “Social Policy and Anti-Semitic Exclusion before and during World War II in Hungary. The Case of the Productive Social Policy”, in Gisela Hauss & Dagmar Schulte (eds). *Amid Social Contradictions: Towards a History of Social Work in Europe*. Opladen & Farmington Hills, MI: Barbara Budrich Publishers. Available at <<https://bit.ly/3QBmcU7>>.

4 Andrea Pető & Fanni Svégl (2024). “Nationalism, Pronatalism, and the Guild of Gynecology: The Complex Legacy of Abortion Regulation in Hungary”. *Central European History*, Vol. 57(4), pp. 499–516. Available at <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938924000037>>.

THE ILLIBERAL
"CAREFARE
REGIME"
PROMOTED PAID,
FULL-TIME
MOTHERHOOD AS
AN ALTERNATIVE
TO PARTICIPATION
IN THE LABOUR
MARKET

financial assistance with buying a home. Beyond demographic goals, these initiatives also aimed to stimulate consumption and give a boost to the construction sector.

The year 2018 marked a further turning point. Following his third consecutive electoral victory, Orbán declared it the "Year of the Families" and, in 2019, launched the Family Protection Action Plan (*Családvédelmi Akcióterv*). This programme expanded financial incentives, including the "baby-expecting" loan (*babaváró hitel*), mortgage reductions tied to the birth of children, and lifetime income tax exemptions for mothers of four or more children. According to Orbán, having children is "the most personal public matter", a framing that reinforces a maternalist narrative in which women are primarily defined through motherhood and provide a service to the state by bearing and raising citizens.

The illiberal "carefare regime"⁵ promoted paid, full-time motherhood as an alternative to participation in the labour market, presenting this arrangement as an attractive option for women. At the same time, it oversaw the privatisation of public services, including healthcare and education, implicitly relying on women's reproductive labour as a low-cost substitute for state provision. For their part, working women were expected to perform both productive and reproductive labour to maximise state benefits. This process of "housewifisation" functioned as a distinctive – and ultimately largely ineffective – response to broader economic and social challenges.

A further feature of Orbán's pronatalist drive was the tightening of access to abortion. In 2011, a clause was introduced into the Hungarian constitution that enshrined the protection of life from conception. While this did not result in the criminalisation of abortion, it set the tone for the years to come. Due to "sneaking restrictions" including the outlawing of medical abortion in 2012, the need for self-financing, and increasing

5 Eva Fodor (2022). *The Gender Regime of Anti-Liberal Hungary*. Cham: Palgrave Pivot. Available at <<https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/51949>>.

bureaucratic and psychological pressure – exacerbated by the controversial “heartbeat decree” introduced in 2022 that obliges doctors to provide pregnant women seeking an abortion with “a clearly identifiable indication of fetal vital signs” before going ahead with a termination –, women under Orbán faced many barriers that made it very difficult to access the procedure.⁶

CONSEQUENCES OF THE CAMPAIGN

Over the past sixteen years, enormous amounts of public money have been spent on the pronatalist ambitions of policymakers in Hungary. At times, family support reached around 5 per cent of GDP. Meanwhile, the associated tax benefits have increased year on year.

Despite the money spent, the anticipated baby boom never really arrived, and demographic trends remained largely unchanged. According to the Hungarian Central Statistical Office,⁷ in 1998, the number of live births in Hungary was 97,301. After Orbán’s return to power in 2010, birth rates lay at just over 90,000 and stagnated until 2013. This was followed by a brief increase between 2014 and 2017, with a high of just over 93,000 recorded in 2016.

Many of these births were not additional but rather brought forward from future years, echoing the short-term effects of pronatalist campaigns of the 1950s. Following the 2016 high, birth rates fell slightly and then remained relatively stable for a number of years before declining sharply from 2022 onwards. In 2025, Hungary recorded the lowest number of live births in its history, suggesting that the downward trend may be difficult to reverse, particularly if structural challenges remained unaddressed. These include the declining number of women of childbearing age and the continued emigration of young people to Western Europe in search of higher living standards and happier lives.

But while the influence of Orbán’s pronatalist policies on birth rates was ultimately negligible, their impact on women was significant, with increased risks of impoverishment, domestic and obstetric violence, economic dependency, inequality in employment, and the gradual tightening of reproductive rights and decision-making autonomy.

The clearest impact can be seen in the area of reproductive rights. The number of pregnancy terminations has decreased significantly, from approximately 40,000 in 2010 to just over 20,000 in 2024. However, this trend should

⁶ Andrea Pető & Fanni Svégl (2024).

⁷ Hungarian Central Statistical Office (n.d.). “22.1.1.6. Live births, total fertility rate”. Last accessed: 27 April 2026. Available at <<https://bit.ly/4tCP4tG>>.

not be interpreted as a direct result of tighter abortion regulations; it is more reasonably explained by factors such as increased contraceptive use and more conscious family planning, and it has continued independently of legal restrictions. Therefore, fewer women are seeking abortions, but access to the procedure has also become more difficult, particularly affecting young and low-income women, who are more likely to rely on abortion as a last resort for family planning.⁸

Meanwhile, the rate of caesarean sections rose from 38.46 per cent in 2015 to 41.59 per cent in 2024, which Hungarian women's health campaigners consider to be one manifestation of widespread obstetric violence.⁹ Added to this is the fact that rural obstetric departments have been closing down due to the declining birth rate and the brain drain of medical personnel, while the lack of general practitioners and school nurses is noticeable in everyday life, causing worrying gaps in care.

Another illustration of the effect government policies have had on women's ability to make life choices free from coercion was a dramatic spike in marriages, peaking in 2021.¹⁰ Within marriages, these policies reinforced

traditional gender roles and women's economic dependency, with higher earning men more able to take advantage of tax breaks without getting involved in child-rearing.

In relation to employment inequality, the (up to) three-year leave period associated with the GYES childcare allowance has generated tensions, not only between employers and employees but also among women themselves. Extended absences for family reasons – and even days off to care for sick children – are often poorly tolerated by employers. As a result, young women are often treated as ticking bombs that could go off at any time. As one woman puts it, “If you have already given birth, that is seen as a disadvantage, because young children may fall ill, and you are therefore undesirable. If you have not yet given birth, you are also undesirable.”¹¹ This reinforces structural disadvantages for women in the labour market.

In 2018, a representative study published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung explored the everyday realities and aspirations of Hungarian women.¹²

8 Fanni Dész & Krisztina Les (2024). “*Azt a füzetet nem szabadna mutogatni*” Nők élményei Magyarországon az abortuszhoz való hozzáférés gyakorlatáról. Budapest: Patent Egyesület. Available at <<https://bit.ly/4uE6uH8>>.

9 Andrea Pető & Zsuzsanna Balázs (2026). *Viktor Orbán's Affairs with Women: The Illiberal Playbook: Gender, Power, and Control*. Budapest: CEEOL Press.

10 Eurostat (2026). “Marriage and divorce statistics”. Data extracted in March 2026. Available at <<https://bit.ly/4dQqLC9>>.

11 Anikó Gregor & Eszter Kovács (2018).

12 Ibid.

It highlighted a range of structural problems, including inadequate working conditions and low wages, a growing care crisis involving both elderly relatives and children, and the tension between demographic expectations placed on women and workplace demands that assume constant availability. In this context, material conditions dominated the discourse, while symbolic political struggles around gender equality and sexual harassment were largely secondary or absent. The analysis points to a grim reality: for many Hungarian women, having children has become an increasingly unaffordable enterprise rather than a realistic life choice.

The greatest challenge lies in caring for children already born, while simultaneously being confronted with repeated calls for higher birth rates. In practice, however, state concern often remains rhetorical, focused primarily on the unborn, both present and future. Couples and single parents who have already fulfilled the regime's pronatalist expectations are frequently left without sufficient support. At the same time, most women continue to express a desire for children but identify the workplace and a toxic work culture as significant obstacles to achieving a fulfilling life.

REALITY KNOCKS AT THE DOOR

Viktor Orbán relied on various forms of symbolic pressure and political messaging to obscure the structural problems affecting women.

Yet, in the spring of 2026, reality came to confront the regime directly.

Following the parliamentary elections in April, centre-right party TISZA gained a landslide victory, and the Orbán regime collapsed. The anti-liberal project ultimately failed. It was primarily residents of smaller settlements and towns, many with vocational training or high school diplomas as their highest level of education, who turned against Orbán's so-called System of National Cooperation (*Nemzeti Együttműködés Rendszere*, NER), the ideological and political framework that turned Hungary into an illiberal regime. Healthcare workers, teachers, and civil servants emerged as the clear losers of a corrupt system marked by economic stagnation and the constant emotional strain of state-driven propaganda.

Viktor Orbán and his hegemonic party Fidesz failed to address the everyday realities facing Hungarians. The illiberal "carefare" regime prioritised population growth over quality of life, obscuring more pressing social concerns. By naturalising reproduction as a default aspiration, this discourse reinforced anxieties about national decline and limited the scope of public debate. While Orbán waged symbolic campaigns against pseudo-enemies, the newly elected prime minister Péter Magyar has pledged to refocus on economic policy and to rebuild trust with European allies. For many Hungarian women, such a shift could bring long-awaited

**THE HUNGARIAN CASE
ILLUSTRATES A BROADER
TENSION BETWEEN
DEMOGRAPHIC POLICY,
GENDER INEQUALITY,
AND SOCIAL WELFARE**

relief, particularly if political actors retreat from attempts to regulate their bodies and their private lives.

consider to be revealing of the new government's stance on these issues.

REORIENTING DEMOGRAPHIC THINKING

The Hungarian case illustrates a broader tension between demographic policy, gender inequality, and social welfare. One possible solution in the post-illiberal era is to reorientate demographic thinking from an exclusive focus on increasing birth rates towards improving life expectancy, health, and overall quality of life, and for more equal, democratic approaches to care.

The demographic future proposed by TISZA focuses primarily on diaspora return. The party has announced plans to encourage the return of Hungarians living abroad, many of whom left the country due to economic insecurity and fearmongering politics. A second key element of its electoral programme is improving life expectancy. Since 1981, deaths have consistently outnumbered live births, with annual numbers remaining around 130,000 since 2010. Women also continue to die in slightly higher numbers than men each year. While the programme references the “rehumanisation” of obstetric care and improved access to IVF treatment, it pays comparatively little attention to the persistent demographic pressure placed on women to give birth, which many

Compared to the demographic paradigms of previous decades, a policy focus on diaspora return and increased life expectancy would indeed represent a meaningful shift in both rhetoric and practice. By moving away from an exclusive fixation on fertility rates and the regulation of women's reproductive choices, such an approach could reframe demographic policy around lived lives rather than abstract population targets. Instead of attempting to reverse what may be an irreversible demographic trend, policy and resources should be directed towards improving the wellbeing of those already living. The success of future policies remains an open question, but it certainly points to a more humane horizon for demographic policy.



FANNI SVÉGEL

is a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Her research focuses on gender and healthcare in 20th-century Hungary.

WOMEN, SCAPEGOATS OF POLAND'S DEMOGRAPHIC CRISIS

In 2024, Poland recorded one of the lowest fertility rates in the European Union (1.14 children per woman), bringing demographic concerns to the forefront of political debate. As the country is gripped by growing demographic anxiety, women's reproductive choices remain restricted, while the low birth rate is framed as a moral or cultural failure rather than a structural issue.

BLAME AND SIMPLIFICATION

In 2022, the leader of the then-ruling Law and Justice party, Jarosław Kaczyński, sparked controversy after "jokingly" suggesting that low birth rates were linked to women's lifestyles, including drinking alcohol. Three years later, Prime Minister Donald Tusk from the rival Civic Coalition echoed a similarly simplified narrative. In an interview with *The Times*, he argued that young people, especially women, avoid parenthood not because of housing or financial constraints but because they "don't like this way of life, the obligations, the responsibilities".

According to Monika Mynarska, a professor of psychology at Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw and director of the Families and Generations Lab, such claims rely on a narrow understanding of reproductive decisions. Mynarska notes, "Whenever I hear that Polish women are deciding not to have children because they are afraid of responsibility, my first question is, What about Polish men?" Parenthood, she stresses, is a joint decision, and men are now more involved in childcare even though inequalities persist. Nevertheless, public debate continues to frame low fertility as a problem of women's attitudes.

Despite the record-low fertility rate, most people in Poland still express a desire to have children. Understanding the country's demographic crisis requires moving beyond simple explanations. As Mynarska notes, there is no single cause of low fertility. From an individual's perspective, recurring concerns include economic insecurity, high housing costs, unstable employment, difficulties reconciling work and family life, problems within the healthcare system – including prenatal care –, and even fears of war.

In other words, individual decisions cannot be separated from broader structural transformations. Mynarska explains that Poland, like many other countries, has entered a stage of demographic development where low fertility is normal. Comparisons to the past – when conditions were often materially worse, yet birth rates were higher – are therefore misleading.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF CONTROL

In the past decade, Poland has significantly restricted reproductive rights, justifying these changes primarily on the grounds of "protecting life". A 2020 Constitutional Tribunal ruling banned abortion in cases of severe fetal abnormalities – the stated reason for more than 97 per cent of Poland's legal abortions up until then –, allowing only two exceptions: when the pregnancy results from a criminal act or when it poses a threat to the woman's life or health.

The consequences have been profound. In 2021, a 30-year-old woman named Izabela died of septic shock after being denied a timely

abortion, even though scans had shown numerous defects in the fetus. Her death sparked nationwide protests and became a symbol of the chilling effect of abortion laws on medical practice: doctors, fearing legal repercussions, have at times delayed interventions even in life-threatening situations. Only now, five years later, have the doctors responsible for Izabela's death been sentenced.

Unsurprisingly, Polish women increasingly view pregnancy as a source of uncertainty and risk. A study by economist Anna Matysiak, Anna Kurowska, and Magdalena Grabowska shows that concerns over restricted access to abortion are among the key factors shaping childbearing decisions, especially among childless women. Their findings suggest that restricting reproductive rights may discourage, rather than increase, fertility. Limited access to prenatal care, the closure of maternity wards, and uneven healthcare quality further deepen this insecurity.

These challenges are even more acute for migrant women, whose experiences remain largely absent from demographic debates. Language barriers, precarious legal status, and restricted access to healthcare make pregnancy significantly more difficult for them.

One instance is the case of a Georgian woman named Lela, who in February 2026 experienced severe pregnancy complications and wanted to undergo

an abortion. She received the necessary medical care only after intervention by NGOs and widespread media attention. Information about her situation spread beyond Poland and was shared by the European citizens' initiative My Voice, My Choice. Once her condition stabilised, Lela decided to continue the pregnancy.

THE WAY FORWARD

Poland has introduced several measures to increase birth rates, such as paid maternity, paternity, and parental leave, investment in nurseries, and tax relief for families. Most of these initiatives concentrate on financial benefits, and while they provide short-term support, their long-term impact on fertility remains limited.

Mynarska argues that people who do not want to have children cannot simply be "encouraged" to do so. Instead of pronatalist slogans, policies should focus on creating conditions that make parenthood feasible: better access to childcare, healthcare, housing, and stable living conditions.

Beyond the numbers, Poland's demographic crisis is a matter of rights, trust, and the role of the state. Supporting parenthood is less about increasing birth rates than about improving quality of life more broadly, including by providing better access to public transport, education, and environmental protection. ■



MARIA DYBCIO

is a Polish freelance journalist living in Germany. She writes on migration, sustainability, and social issues. Her work has appeared in the Polish and international media. She also hosted a radio programme on the music of protests and revolution entitled *Revolution Starts with Music*.

THE CHILDIST CASE FOR AGELESS SUFFRAGE

ARTICLE BY
JOHN WALL

Children bear the consequences of today's major crises more than most, yet their concerns and experiences remain largely invisible in political life. A childist revolution calls for transforming the political space to cultivate a deeper sense of our social and natural interdependence – including fully democratising democracies through ageless suffrage.

Democracies face crises when populations lose confidence in their ability to address fundamental concerns – as is usually the case in periods of rapid industrialisation, runaway inequality, economic depression, mass migration, and war. During such times, they often backslide into authoritarian appeals but tend eventually to evolve new democratic norms and practices.

The worldwide crisis of democracy today revolves around issues that centrally concern one of the most disempowered social groups: the third of humanity who are children. It is children above all who face the greatest impacts of climate change, both immediately and in the long term. Children in rich and poor countries alike suffer disproportionate poverty because of global neoliberalism. Young people die in outsized numbers from civilian-targeted modern warfare and terrorism. And they are hit hardest by the ways that new digital technologies manipulate information and foster technological addiction.

However, children remain largely invisible in political life. Indeed, it is this very invisibility that keeps children's issues at the margins of democratic policymaking.

**ADULTISM IS THE OFTEN FORGOTTEN SIDE
OF PATRIARCHY, THE HISTORICAL
POWER OF THE "PATER" OR FATHER,
WHICH IS NOT ONLY
GENDERED BUT ALSO AGED**

THE RISE OF CHILDISM

The past couple of decades have seen the rise of a movement among academics and activists to respond to these democratic and childhood realities under the umbrella of childism. Childism is a critical approach to societies similar to feminism, anti-racism, decolonialism, and the like. It seeks to empower children and acknowledge their concerns and experiences by transforming historically ingrained assumptions and structures. Its aim is to reconstruct social norms to make them genuinely age-inclusive.

The word “childism” was coined in the early 2000s in academic literature rooted in the then-emerging field of childhood studies, which seeks to understand children’s agency and experiences as children rather than as developing adults. In the 1990s, the term was used briefly in literary studies to refer to a practice of reading like a child. More recently, it has also been used in a negative sense, akin to sexism and racism. But the predominant meaning in scholarship – and now also in social activism – is in its positive sense of children’s empowerment.

The central problem that childism addresses is a deeply rooted adultism: the assumption that the adult is the measure of the human. Adultism is the often forgotten side of patriarchy, the historical power of the “pater” or father, which is not only gendered but also aged. Like sexism, adultism is deeply embedded in our histories, cultures, and languages.

Adultism in particular asserts a binary opposition between supposedly rational and independent adults on the one hand and supposedly irrational and dependent children on the other. In this way, it divides social relations in everything from families and communities to human rights and law.

Children themselves are already practising an implicit childism. Young climate protesters are demanding age inclusivity in environmental policy. Child labour union activists are calling for recognition for non-adult work. Youth are fighting for schools free of gun violence. Transgender children are pushing their communities to change how they think about gender identity. Children and youth in the dozens of countries with child and youth parliaments are pressing for children’s perspectives on safe streets, access for people with disabilities, and education reform.

CHILDREN’S SUFFRAGE

As marginalised groups over history have found, however, the ultimate right to political inclusion is the right to vote. Suffrage does not solve all problems, but it does confer on those possessing it the status of first-class citizens with equal political dignity. It is the right to participate in the process of forming rights. This is why non-landowners, the poor, racial and ethnic minorities, and women fought so hard to achieve it. And it is why the Uni-

versal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights call, without any type of qualification, for “universal and equal suffrage”.

Children have been fighting for suffrage since at least the 1990s. They have done so in campaigns and legal actions by groups like We Want the Vote and KRÄTZÄ in Germany, the National Youth Rights Association (NYRA) in the US, Young Pirates of Europe (YPE), and Green Youth. Adults have joined them with academic and policy support, including through initiatives like the Children’s Voting Colloquium, Amnesty International UK, the Freechild Institute, the National Association of Large Families, and the Child Rights International Network (CRIN). What is more, children and adults have sued governments for ageless suffrage in Germany,¹ California² and Massachusetts³ in the United States, Sweden,⁴ and Canada.⁵

The childist argument for ageless suffrage is that it is necessary for the wellbeing of both children and democracies. Children themselves would finally have their lives and perspectives

taken just as seriously by policymakers, whose jobs would no longer rely solely on pressure from adults. And democracies would benefit from the full range of the people’s ideas, thus making better-informed decisions.

A MATTER OF COMPETENCE?

The main objection to children’s suffrage has historically been that children lack voting competence. People under the age of maturity are thought to be deficient in democratic thinking skills, knowledge, and independence and to be too open to manipulation. And they are presumed to lack the experience and understanding needed to contribute to difficult decisions about complex political matters like war, health policy, and immigration.

But these presumptions misunderstand both democracy and childhood. Working backwards from the aims of democracy, voting competence consists in the ability to give voice to political views. The purpose of democratic voting is not to place decisions in the hands of those with certain types of knowledge but to hold elected representatives accountable to the

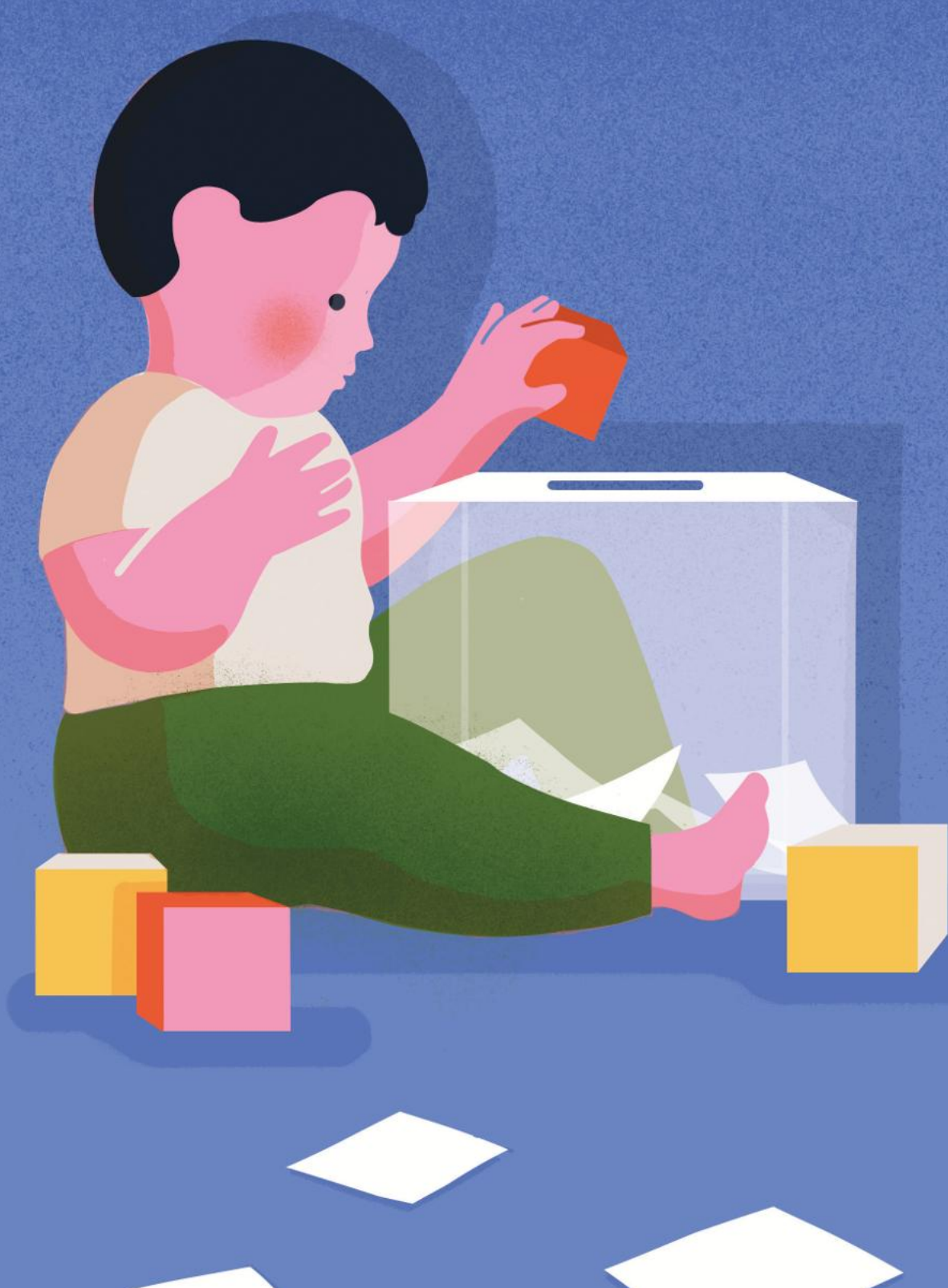
1 K.R.Ä.T.Z.Ä. – KinderRÄchTsZÄnker (n.d.). “right to vote without age limit”. Available at <<https://en.kraetzae.de/vote/>>.

2 Rafael A. Perales (2023). *First Amended Complaint: Perales as Guardian of A.P. v. Garland et al.*, Case No. 5: 23-cv-00767-SHK. United States District Court, Central District of California. 30 May 2023. Available at <https://www.childrenvoting.org/_files/ugd/8edd45_6b44fb475cb64c7da0025eed03ed55.pdf>.

3 Massachusetts General Court (2025). *Enabling children’s right to vote*, Bill S.508, 194th General Court. Available at <<https://malegislature.gov/Bills/194/S508>>.

4 Anita Svantesson (n.d.). “Demokratisera demokratin – ge rösträtt till alla genom att låta föräldrar ombudsrosta för sina barn”. Motion to Miljöpartiet de Gröna. Available at <https://www.childrenvoting.org/_files/ugd/8edd45_44568b4c8966495da1f8faab871bd3f3.pdf>.

5 Justice for Children and Youth (n.d.). “Penney-Crocker et al. v Canada [Voting Age Challenge]”. Available at <<https://jfcy.org/en/cases-decisions/vac/>>.



**BARRING CHILDREN FROM
VOTING HOLDS THEM TO A
STANDARD OF COMPETENCE
THAT IS NOT APPLIED TO THE
REST OF THE POPULATION**

people impacted by their decisions. Anyone should be included in the vote who wishes to have a say in what policymakers may do.

If voting competence is properly understood, children have much more of it – and adults much less – than commonly thought. It is hard to deny democratic capacities to the millions of children who march for climate change policies, fight against racism, or participate in children’s parliaments, child labour unions, or any number of other political organisations. Children worldwide discuss politics at the dinner table, read or watch the news, and hold diverse opinions about current events. There is no magical stage of neurological development at which the capacity to have political views suddenly arises. It is a general capacity of anyone aware of their larger world.

This capacity of children to participate in democratic life is already legally recognised in Articles 12, 13, and 15 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. These guarantee children the rights to “express [their] views freely in all matters affecting the child”, “freedom of expression” without unnecessary restriction, and “freedom of association”. All of these rights are violated when children are banned from exercising their democratic capacities.

Likewise, adults exhibit very wide ranges of democratic skill, knowledge, and suscep-

tibility to influence.

Adults have the right

to vote regardless of ignorance, thoughtlessness, and openness to manipulation. They retain this right even if they suffer from severe cognitive impairment, mental disability, or dementia. History shows that adults frequently make terrible voting decisions. Furthermore, no adult has a deep understanding of all the matters they must vote upon, from economic statistics to military capacities, health innovations, top secret information, legal precedents, and much else.

Barring children from voting is, in reality, a form of systemic discrimination. It holds them to a standard of voting competence that is not applied to the rest of the population. The European Court of Human Rights defines discrimination as “differential treatment in comparable situations without an objective or reasonable justification”. Adult-only voting excludes children as a class of citizens for reasons outside the objective requirements of voting itself.

STRONGER DEMOCRACIES

But the most important reason to give children the right to vote is that it would improve life for children and adults and strengthen democracies.

Children themselves would live in political environments that are required to take their interests into account centrally instead

of peripherally. Currently, they cannot vote politicians out of office, which means authorities are not truly incentivised to take children's experiences and concerns seriously. Children may be objects of democratic beneficence, but like adults, they also need to be treated as subjects with democratic agency.

If children could vote, they would likely pressure politicians, for example, to finally take the climate emergency seriously, fight child poverty, regulate digital media, invest in meaningful education reform, attend to lifelong healthcare, and create safer streets and greener spaces. They would also have greater recourse to fight social discrimination, such as social media bans, age curfews, exclusion from divorce proceedings, corporal punishment, school discipline, issues with access to medical care, and much more.

Granting children the right to vote would also benefit adults. Everyone would gain from better climate policies. Parents would be helped by children's greater economic support. Teachers would be empowered by education policies that better respond to children's actual lives and experiences. Doctors would find greater resources for child healthcare and research. And business leaders would hire from a better-educated workforce.

Moreover, democracy itself would be strengthened by becoming more fully responsive

to the people's actual lives. Policymakers would find themselves equally beholden to all instead of just some of their constituents. Democratic leaders could make clearer decisions with – so to speak – a third more pixels added to their policymaking screen. And democracies would make choices about war, spending, and judicial reform in more inclusively informed ways.

What is more, children's suffrage could provide the needed antidote to today's slide of democracies into authoritarianism. The right to vote for all would undercut the assumption that some are natural rulers over others. And it would eliminate the problem of citizens spending the first quarter of their lives being told that their views do not count, which opens citizens to simplistic authoritarian appeals. Instead of looking to father figures, democracies would more likely turn to broad-minded defenders of human rights.

SYSTEMIC INCLUSION

Childism calls for not only new understandings of voting rights but also new electoral practices. Suffrage movements typically shift how voting actually takes place. We have come a long way from landowning men choosing representatives in taverns.

A good first step is to lower the voting age. In countries that have lowered the national voting age to 16, children have been shown

**CHILDREN MAY BE OBJECTS
OF DEMOCRATIC BENEFICENCE, BUT LIKE
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WITH DEMOCRATIC AGENCY**

to turn out in
higher numbers

for elections than young adults and to retain higher voting rates into adulthood. They have also moved policymakers to include more child-friendly interests. However, from a childist perspective, lowering voting ages does not go far enough. It still only enfranchises children who are thought to have achieved adult-like competencies, whereas genuine democracies need to move beyond adulthood.

There are several different proposals for ageless voting rights, but my own is for what I call proxy-claim voting. Under this proposition, all citizens would have a proxy vote from birth to death, which can be used by their legal guardian – a parent, caretaker, or next of kin. This proxy vote would most likely be used on behalf of infants, young children, cognitively impaired children and adults, adults with significant disabilities or health issues, and elderly persons with dementia. But all citizens would, at the same time, have the right to claim the exercise of their vote on their own behalf. Whenever a citizen desired to vote independently, regardless of their age or condition, they could claim their right to do so.

Some might object that a proxy-claim right to vote would advantage larger families, but in reality, it would advantage the children themselves in these families who deserve their own equal representation. Others might find proxy voting fundamentally undemocratic,

yet it already
exists in most

countries for impaired (or even just travelling) adults, so why not also for the youngest children? Some do not think voting is all that powerful anyway, but is it fair or just to ban one group even from the choice to participate?

Childism calls for children's systemic inclusion and empowerment. It suggests, just like first-wave feminism, that the right to vote is a fundamental human right. But suffrage is only a first step. Childism sets in motion a systemic critique of societies' adultistic biases across law, policy, culture, and family. It insists that children are not second-class citizens but central to infusing societies with humanity.



JOHN WALL

is Distinguished Professor of Philosophy, Religion, and Childhood Studies, and director of the Childism Institute, at Rutgers University Camden in the United States. He is best known for developing the critical theory of childism as well as for research examining the intersection of political philosophy and children's rights. He has published nine books including *Give Children the Vote* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

FEWER BUT STRONGER? WORKERS IN AN AGEING EUROPE

ARTICLE BY
**JEREMIAH
NOLLENBERGER**

The era of globalisation was built on cheap and abundant labour. That era is now ending. As falling birth rates and longer lives shrink the working-age population, tighter labour markets will become the new normal – but what follows is not predetermined. Through collective bargaining and a renewed focus on care, workers can turn demographic change into an opportunity for redistribution and greater equality.

“ Prediction is difficult – particularly when it involves the future.” This maxim, commonly attributed to Mark Twain, is often used to remind economists of the limits of their models and conjectures. Yet for slow-moving trends like demographic change, society is better positioned to make forecasts, potentially allowing foresight to both shape outcomes and foster resilience.

In Europe and globally, a long-running demographic transformation is unfolding, with declining working-age populations and a growing elderly population set to become defining features of the 21st century. The fertility rate – the average number of children born to a woman over her lifespan – has, over the last 40 years, fallen below the replacement level (2.1), stabilising at approximately 1.4 in the EU in the 1990s.

At the same time, mortality has decreased due to medical advancements, increased occupational health and safety standards, and healthier lifestyles. Today, life expectancy at birth is over 80 years in Europe – 10 years higher than in the 1970s. The overall result is that fewer children are being born, but people are living longer. Taking into account net migration to the EU, which has averaged around one million per year since the 2000s, Eurostat expects the population to remain stable at 450 million through to 2050 (not accounting for EU enlargement).¹

¹ Eurostat (2025). *EUROPOP2023 – Population Projections at National Level (2022–2100)*. Available at <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/metadata/en/proj_23n_esms.htm>.

One of the biggest shifts underway is in the working-age population (those between 20 and 64). In the baseline scenario, the mean age in Europe is expected to rise from 43.5 to 47 by 2050. This is due to both low fertility rates and lower mortality, with the two factors combining to increase the number of people over 65 from 21 to 29 per cent of the population total (indeed, those aged 85 and over are expected to double in number, from 3 to 6 per cent). The result is that the working-age population will decline from 59 to 53 per cent of the total. To view it another way, by 2050, there will be 26 million fewer people in the working-age demographic. Putting both developments together, the old-age dependency ratio is projected to shift from 3:1 to 2:1. This means that there will soon be just two people of working age for every one person over 65.

Particularly strong declines in the working age population are expected in Eastern and Southern Europe, where fertility rates have been especially low, and where emigration to other parts of the EU has accelerated demographic trends. (This is seen most clearly in Eastern Europe.) Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary, as well as Greece and Portugal, are all faced with a decline in the working-age population of over 20 per cent, according to these projections. Conversely, immigration is set to boost this age group

in Malta, Luxembourg, Sweden, Ireland, and Belgium, some of which have also benefitted from a less severe decline in fertility rates.

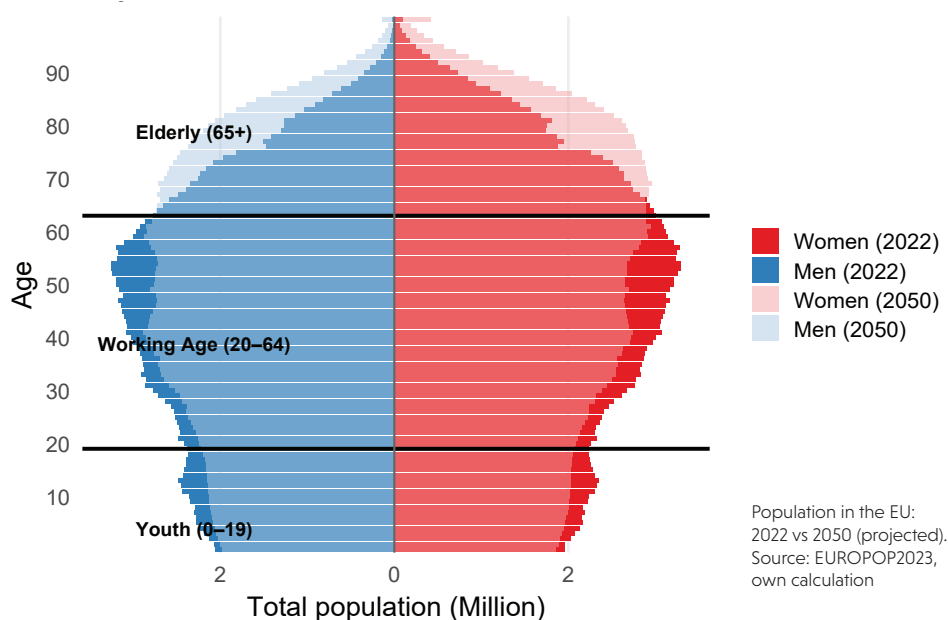
POSITIVE SHOCK

As economists Charles Goodhart and Manoj Pradhan observe in *The Great Demographic Reversal* (2020), what characterised the era of globalisation starting in the 1970s and 1980s was a positive labour market shock: large cohorts of baby boomers in Europe and North America entered the globalised labour market, followed by Eastern European workers after the fall of the Soviet Union and China's workforce following the country's 2001 accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). The combined effect was to make labour cheap and abundant.²

These demographic developments have been reversing since the 2010s, and many emerging economies are following trajectories similar to those described for Europe. The global population is expected to peak before the end of the century. Today, population growth is concentrated in a few parts of the world, including India and sub-Saharan Africa. However, workers in these regions remain, for the time being, less integrated into global production.

In economic terms, Goodhart and Pradhan argue that smaller workforces will stunt GDP growth.

² Charles Goodhart & Manoj Pradhan (2020). *The Great Demographic Reversal: Ageing Societies, Waning Inequality, and an Inflation Revival*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.



A recent ILO working paper estimates that the demographic drag in the baseline employment rate scenario will cause European growth to be 0.25 per cent lower annually up to 2050. Furthermore, the smaller workforce will be met with high consumption demand from older households spending their lifetime savings, increasing scarcity, inflationary pressure, and tightening labour markets.³

REVERSING THE REVERSAL?

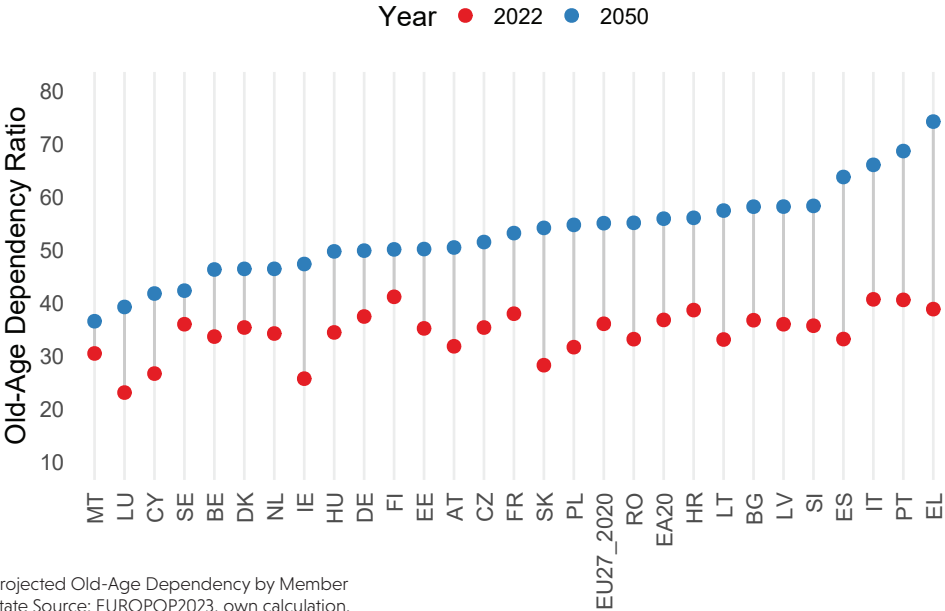
As with any projection, there is a degree of uncertainty. Barring catastrophic wars or plagues, there are two main factors that could, in theory, halt the demographic reversal or its consequences in Europe: migration and labour market mediation.

With regard to the first, immigrants are, on average, considerably younger than the

native-born population, and migration could therefore grow the labour force and reduce old-age dependency. However, migration is the most uncertain element in the demographic projection. It is also, quantitatively speaking, the smallest. In 2024, there were 4.8 million deaths and 3.6 million births in the EU; net migration was, on average, around 1 million per year. Even significantly higher migration would not, therefore, stop Europe's ageing. Even with a 30 per cent increase in net migration above the baseline projection, the working-age population would still decrease from 262 million to 249 million. For reference, the baseline projection for 2050 currently stands at 236 million.

Net migration would need to be sustained at levels higher than 50 per cent compared to previous years if the working-age population is to stabilise and even higher to stabilise dependency ratios. With countries such as China and Brazil

3 Sabrina De Gobbi et al. (2025). "Demographic Change in Europe and Central Asia: Addressing the Issue of a Shrinking and Ageing Labour Force". *ILO Working Paper*, 139. Geneva: International Labour Organization. Available at <<https://www.ilo.org/publications/demographic-change-europe-and-central-asia-addressing-issue-shrinking-and->>.



increasingly competing with Europe and elsewhere for immigrants, these levels are implausible. Moreover, even if they could be achieved, such large inflows of migrants into Europe would likely overwhelm administrative capacities and public provisioning – and, most likely, go against public sentiment. These are all decisive factors for the successful integration of migrants into the labour market. Migration and demography scholars come to substantially similar assessments.⁴

This does not mean that immigration will not be key to mitigating demographic risks. Migrants perform essential work in short-staffed and critical fields such as logistics, food (processing), industry, and healthcare. The shortages of seasonal farm workers during the Covid-19 pandemic, or of truck drivers after

Brexit, are a stark reminder of this. Realistic migration scenarios, however, cannot reverse the shrinking workforce, much less stop old-age dependency ratios from skewing further.

On the second factor, demographic dependency does not directly translate into economic dependency, as this relationship is mediated through the labour market. The labour market determines the proportion of people who receive money from social protection systems (such as elderly people and those who contribute money to them (such as workers)). This, in turn, determines economic dependency. Combatting unemployment and promoting labour force participation decreases old-age dependency. For instance, model calculations show that the combined effects of high employment and high migration could reduce the increase in old-age

⁴ See, for example: Hein de Haas (2024). *How Migration Really Works: 22 Things You Need to Know about the Most Divisive Issue in Politics*. London: Penguin.
Simona Bignami et al. (2024). "Low Fertility in the EU: A Review of Trends and Drivers". *Science for Policy Brief*, No. JRC137492. Brussels: European Commission Joint Research Centre. Available at <<https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC137492>>.

STRUCTURAL CHANGES IN THE CORPORATE LANDSCAPE WILL REQUIRE UNIONS TO EXPAND BEYOND THEIR TRADITIONAL STRONGHOLDS

economic dependency by more than 50 per cent in Germany and Austria.⁵

Policies can go a long way towards achieving this outcome. For example, increasing the compatibility of work and family by expanding public infrastructure, offering longer parental and care leave, and combatting gender-based discrimination, such as the gender wage gap, could increase women's participation in the labour force. Adapting workplaces and promoting flexible working hours could meanwhile encourage older workers to remain on the job for longer or transition into retirement more gradually. Lastly, easier skills recognition, equal treatment, and good work standards would boost migrant participation in the labour market.

However, the bottom line remains that even if migration is well managed and labour force participation rates are boosted, this would only moderate – not reverse – the demographic trend towards increased old-age dependency.

EMPLOYMENT, INVESTMENT, AND PRODUCTIVITY

The demographic projection is that for every person turning 65, the number of people turning 20 will decline from 0.83 to 0.77 by 2050. As the cohorts exiting the labour market are larger than the ones joining, the labour market should tighten. The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) forecasts labour shortages across the skills spectrum by 2035.⁶ Professionals, service workers, elementary occupations, plant and machine operators, and assemblers are all forecast to have a “type 3” shortage on a four-point scale. Labour shortages and vacancies going unfilled have been on the rise since the 2008 global financial crisis.⁷

For European workers, labour shortages will have two effects: first, greater inflationary pressure due to production bottlenecks and intensified – and often longer – working hours in the impacted sectors; second, increased bargaining power, especially as the declining working-age populations combine with rising geopolitical tensions to restrict the attractiveness of outsourcing options.

5 For Austria, see: Josef Wöss & Erik Türk (2014). “Demografie und Sozialstaat: Arbeitsmarkt hat zentrale Bedeutung”. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Vol. 40(3), pp. 429–443. Available at <https://www.arbeiterkammer.at/infopool/wien/Demographie_und_Sozialstaat_-_WuG_3-2014.pdf>.

For Germany, see: Erik Türk et al. (2018). “Den demografischen Wandel bewältigen: Die Schlüsselrolle des Arbeitsmarktes”. *IMK Report*, No. 137. Düsseldorf: Institut für Makroökonomie und Konjunkturforschung (IMK). Available at <https://www.imk-boeckler.de/de/faust-detail.htm?sync_id=HBS-006858>.

6 Cedefop (2025). Cedefop Labour and Skills Shortage Index. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at <<https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/a29414ce-e900-11ef-b5e9-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>>.

7 Wouter Zwysen (2024). “Labour Shortages, Job Quality and Workers’ Bargaining Power: A European Quantitative Analysis”. *ETUI Working Paper*, 2024.11. Brussels: European Trade Union Institute. Available at <<https://bit.ly/3RxlyGz>>.

On investment, the picture is concerning. With demographic shifts implying lower growth, higher labour costs, more transfers to pensioners, and elderly households spending lifetime savings, raising investment will become more challenging. Moreover, higher central bank rates in response to inflation may compound this dynamic, driving up interest rates and thus investment costs.

Continued and accelerating productivity growth is the bedrock for rising living standards and decent work and provides scope for wage increases while easing fiscal and welfare funding concerns. This high-road strategy, which does not focus solely on cost-cutting and deskilling, is what creates high-wage jobs, competition based on quality and the value of craftsmanship, and the retention of workers at a company level. Productivity growth, however, is stagnating, and the demographic drag on GDP could lead to a shrinking EU economy, intensifying distributional contestation. In his 2024 report, former European Central Bank president Mario Draghi identified stagnating productivity as the major hurdle to European competitiveness.

One major impediment to investment is that corporate profits are being increasingly retained instead of reinvested.⁸ Workers' voices could play a major role in changing this reality, as greater employee participation in decision-making increases investment and the productivity growth of firms, which is necessary for the green and digital

transitions.⁹ Workers mitigate shareholders' tendency to focus on short-term returns (which often causes underinvestment).

CRISES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR WORKERS

For trade unions, this combination of tighter labour markets and higher inflation could act as a tailwind for renewal. Unions have faced declining membership in most countries due to factors such as a fall in manufacturing employment, outsourcing, the rise of atypical employment practices, and employer strategies. However, trade union density (the percentage of employees who are union members) has recently begun to stabilise in some countries, including Ireland, France, Spain, Lithuania, Romania, and Norway.¹⁰ In the past, trade unions have been able to organise more successfully in tighter labour markets, thereby increasing worker leverage, and in contexts of high inflation, by protecting real wages. This might become the case again in the new demographic reality.

Structural changes in the corporate landscape will, however, require unions to expand beyond their traditional strongholds in large manufacturing firms and the public sector, reaching into commercial services and smaller workplaces, where employment is growing rapidly. In addition, atypical forms of employment, such as subcontracting and platform-mediated gig work, are also becoming more prevalent.

⁸ Peter Chen, Loukas Karabarbounis & Brent Neiman (2017). "The Global Rise of Corporate Saving". *Journal of Monetary Economics*, Vol. 89, pp. 1–19. Available at <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmoneco.2017.03.004>>.

⁹ Stan De Spiegelaere & Sigurt Vitols (2026). "Worker Participation: A Missing Element on the Road to Competitiveness". *ETUI Policy Brief*, 2, 2026. Brussels: European Trade Union Institute. Available at <<https://www.etui.org/publications/worker-participation-missing-element-road-competitiveness>>.

¹⁰ Agnieszka Piasna et al. (eds) (2026). *Benchmarking Working Europe 2026*. Brussels: European Trade Union Institute & European Trade Union Confederation. Available at <<https://www.etui.org/sites/default/files/2026-04/ETU%20BM2026-WEB.pdf>>.

Successful expansion campaigns that also reach into these sectors will be necessary for the revitalisation process.

The care sector will be particularly strategic in this regard. As the proportion of elderly people in society increases, so will the share of goods and services required for their care. Thirty-seven per cent of women and 29 per cent of men above the age of 85 have severe activity limitations and require assistance to perform daily activities.¹¹ Dementia in particular puts pressure on the sector because it increases care needs without reducing life expectancy. Due to the complex social skills required for taking care of elderly people much of this work is unlikely to be meaningfully automated, necessitating a build-up of the care sector, where labour shortages are already visible.¹²

Care work is often performed informally by relatives, predominantly women. However, informal care work reduces women's employment opportunities, contradicting the goal of expanding labour force participation to mitigate demographic pressures.

As for the formal care sector, it is currently characterised by low pay and strong gender segregation. Good working conditions are necessary to attract more care workers and ensure the dignity of the ageing population. This puts society in a dilemma, as at the same time, fiscal constraints exist.

Unions could play an important role here by fighting for better working conditions

and organising workers. Such care sector campaigns could be an essential element in trade union renewal. They could also integrate the broader perspective of workers gained through social dialogue and consultation, thereby playing an essential role in shaping this key sector in an ageing society.

The demographic outlook for the 21st century comes with considerable challenges for Europe: low growth, high old-age dependency, labour shortages, inflation pressures, and a gloomy outlook for investments and the care sector. At the same time, this constellation may enhance organised labour's capability to revitalise and navigate these challenges to the benefit of working people.



JEREMIAH NOLLENBERGER

is a researcher at the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI). He holds a PhD in socioeconomics from the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies and the University of Duisburg-Essen.

11 David Pinkus & Nina Ruer (2024). "Beyond Retirement: A Closer Look at the Very Old". *Analysis*, 12/2024. Brussels: Bruegel. Available at <<https://www.bruegel.org/analysis/beyond-retirement-closer-look-very-old>>.

12 Cedefop (2025).



FORGOTTEN ABROAD, NEEDED AT HOME

ARTICLE BY
RALUCA BESLIU

Following the collapse of communism and the integration of Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic states into the EU, citizens of these regions used their newfound freedoms to emigrate westwards. Their home countries were ill-prepared for the economic and cultural effects this outflow would have but made little effort to maintain connections with their diasporas. Now, faced with increasing demographic, strategic, and democratic vulnerabilities, they are engineering ways to mend this fracture.

For decades, Central and Eastern European (CEE) and Baltic EU member states experienced sustained emigration, with millions of citizens moving abroad. Governments welcomed remittance inflows and tried to adjust to domestic labour shortages, but engagement with their diasporas remained limited. This approach was partly shaped by the historical context. Magdalena Ulceluse, an assistant professor in international migration at Sweden's Malmö University, explains, "Eastern European countries have a complicated relationship with free movement. Coming from a communist context where mobility was forbidden, emigration became associated with hard-won freedom."

However, a combination of long-standing structural factors and more recent developments is prompting these governments to rethink their social contract and relationship with their diaspora. While demographic decline has been an enduring challenge, driven in part by sustained emigration and persistently low birth rates, new pressures, including the war in Ukraine and rising political polarisation, are accelerating this shift. As a result, states are increasingly viewing their diasporas

**"EASTERN EUROPEAN
COUNTRIES HAVE A
COMPLICATED
RELATIONSHIP
WITH FREE
MOVEMENT"**

not only as economic contributors but also as politically relevant constituencies and key actors in security and demographic arenas.

Emigration has been significant. Of Romania's roughly 19 million citizens, for example, nearly a quarter live abroad, mostly in Western Europe. They form the largest diaspora in the EU. Around two-thirds are economic migrants, filling jobs in, among others, construction, social care for elderly people, and seasonal agriculture that workers in host societies are no longer willing to take. In 2023 alone, they sent home 6.5 billion euros in remittances – nearly 3 per cent of Romania's GDP. Poland had around 1.5 million citizens living elsewhere in the EU at the end of 2023, with remittances accounting for 1.1 per cent of GDP. Latvia, with a population of just 1.86 million, has seen between 280,000 and 300,000 nationals or former nationals – more than 15 per cent of its population – settle in EU or OECD countries.

These emigration flows largely occurred after these countries' EU accession (Poland and Latvia joined in 2004, Romania in 2007). Migrants were enticed by higher wages and more stable labour markets in countries such as Germany, Belgium, Spain, and Italy. "In the home countries, the costs of emigration were visible from the beginning," Ulceluse notes, "but diaspora policies did not substantially change until the political dimension arrived through polarisation and the rise of far-right parties."

NEGLECTED AND SEDUCED

For Romania, the political consequences of two decades of inertia have become impossible to ignore. In 2024, the country's constitutional court cancelled elections due to alleged foreign interference and illegal campaign funding; during the re-run last year, pro-European candidate Nicușor Dan beat far-right candidate George Simion but not without some shock results: among diaspora communities in Germany, Italy, and Spain – countries with large Romanian communities – Simion received approximately 70 per cent of the vote.

Ulcelse argues that the scale of Simion's diaspora support reflects a shift in who has been leaving Romania. "The early waves included many highly skilled migrants, middle-class professionals moving into skilled jobs abroad. But, in recent years, recruitment agencies have spread across the country, into villages, offering to take people from their doorstep to accommodation in the Netherlands or Belgium. That infrastructure opened the door to a much more diverse group of migrants."

For many of them, particularly those in agricultural work, the experience abroad has been one of profound isolation. "They live apart, don't speak the language, and carry a deep sense of mistrust, even toward fellow Romanians," says Ulceluse. "They feel invisible: no opportunities at home, and no recognition abroad."

The Covid-19 pandemic deepened their grievances: workers in precarious or seasonal employment were frequently excluded from social protection, healthcare, and financial aid in host countries. Meanwhile, the Romanian authorities, including the president at the time, discouraged them from returning home for the holidays for fear of bringing the virus into the country. Continuously rising inflation and the cost-of-living crisis further strained their finances, with remittances falling sharply in 2024.

Mainstream politicians from the liberal and social-democratic parties only remembered them during campaigns, offering slogans and asking for their vote. Simion's far-right Alliance for the Union of Romanians party (AUR), by contrast, has made a consistent effort to engage the diaspora. The party has actively sought to meet diaspora communities where they are, engaging a wide range of social groups, from truck drivers in parking lots to participants in diaspora nonprofit events. At the last elections, these efforts paid off, even if they were not sufficient for Simion to win.

Estonia's right-wing nationalist Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE) is able to tell a similar story. In the 2019 parliamentary elections, it won 43.7 per cent of the diaspora postal vote – albeit from a relatively small segment of the overall Estonian electorate abroad (mainly by expats in Finland and Sweden). Vassilis Petsinis, an associate professor of politics at Corvinus University of Budapest, attributes part of this support to EKRE's emphasis on return policies. "EKRE has advocated for facilitating the return of Estonian emigrants and developing infrastructure to support reintegration," he says, noting that such policies may have especially appealed to certain groups, like blue-collar workers.

**ALIENATION AND
DISENFRANCHISEMENT
ABROAD, IF SUSTAINED
FOR LONG ENOUGH,
CAN HARDEN INTO EXTREME
POLITICAL CHOICES**

**AN OBLIGATION
TO SERVE?**

Across cases such as

Romania and Estonia, diaspora voting patterns suggest that alienation and disenfranchisement abroad, if sustained for long enough, can harden into extreme political choices.

But voting patterns are only part of the picture. Governments' relations with their diasporas are increasingly being reshaped by security considerations. The return of large-scale military conflict to Europe has raised an immediate, practical question: What can states legitimately ask of their citizens living abroad, including when it comes to defending their homeland?

While Romania has not reintroduced mandatory military service, it approved a draft law in 2025 establishing voluntary four-month military training for citizens aged 18 to 35, whether residing in Romania or abroad. The legislation was framed as a mechanism for building reserve capacity, but the Romanian government has begun to build the legal and institutional framework through which citizens abroad could be incorporated into national defence if the security environment deteriorates. When asked about drafting the diaspora in the event of war, Romania's chief of staff, General Vlad Gheorghiță, stated that military

service "remains a constitutional duty for all and a legal obligation".¹

Estonia is amending its compulsory military service, whereby citizens must serve for between eight and 11 months, to 12 months starting in 2027, including for the diaspora, though a certain portion of it is excluded. Citizens who have resided abroad continuously for at least seven years prior to entering the national defence obligation register, or who were born abroad and lived there immediately before registration, may be released from service obligations if they do not request to serve within five years. Those falling outside these exemptions remain within the conscription pool.

Latvia is also reintroducing mandatory military service, with seemingly fewer exemptions than Estonia. Until 2027, Latvian citizens permanently residing abroad and registered with the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs are exempt from draft lists. After that transition period ends, diaspora Latvians may be called up by the National Defence Service. According to Māris Andžāns, director of the Center for Geopolitical Studies in Riga, conscripting the diaspora will likely cut both ways. He argues that it "could incentivise some dual citizens to renounce Latvian citizenship", but spending 11 months

¹ Romania Journal (2025). "Romanian Army Chief: 'We Are Not at War, But Preparing As If We Were'." 22 October 2025. Available at <<https://www.romaniajournal.ro/society-people/romanian-army-chief-we-are-not-at-war-but-preparing-as-if-we-were/>>.

in Latvia, as the service requires, could equally “strengthen the bond with the country”. A passport, as he puts it, comes “not only with opportunities, but also obligations”.

What remains harder to predict is how different generations of Latvians abroad will react. Andžāns is careful not to assume that recent emigrants are more attached to their home country than those whose families left decades ago. “Some non-Latvian-speaking Americans of Latvian descent might be more willing to serve than those who left recently,” he believes. More recent emigrants, he suggests, often departed because they felt they could not build a life in Latvia, and they may feel little pull to return.

The Latvian government is already running workshops at embassies and diaspora camps abroad to explain the policy and manage expectations. But, as Andžāns acknowledges, the next five years will be the real test of which direction the diaspora moves in. More broadly, Andžāns stresses that the return of conscription is not just a Latvian or Baltic phenomenon but part of a wider European shift driven by security concerns and demographic pressures.

NEW STRATEGIES

These security concerns are unfolding against a deeper structural backdrop: demographic decline. Population projections for the region are worrisome. Romania’s population is expected to decline from approximately 19 million today to 14 million by 2100 without accounting for immigration; Poland’s from 38 million to 24 million.²

Lower fertility rates are a key driver, but sustained emigration has compounded the pressure considerably. In Romania, some analysts expect long-term structural effects. Remus Gabriel Anghel, professor at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration and a researcher at the Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities, says that “a significant part of the Romanian rural population will probably disappear”, with population increasingly concentrated in urban centres of different sizes. Immigration, he argues, is unlikely to fill the gap. In public institutions and companies, “in the future, you will need people with at least an acceptable level of Romanian to write, read, and prepare documents”, a requirement that limits how much of the shortfall can be offset by outside arrivals. In principle, Moldovans, whose official language is also Romanian, could help fill some of these gaps. But rather than settling in their neighbouring country, many prefer to migrate

2 Alex Clark (2025). “Visualised: Europe’s population crisis - See how your country compares.” *The Guardian*. 18 February 2025. Available at <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2025/feb/18/europes-population-crisis-see-how-your-country-compares-visualised>>.

to Western and Southern European countries, such as Italy, or head east to Russia in search of better economic prospects.

Even with low-skilled labour, Anghel foresees that scaling up immigration would not be easy. Despite the current modest scale of foreign labour in Romania, populist and anti-immigration rhetoric is already gaining ground, suggesting that the political ceiling for any managed immigration programme may be lower than the demographic need would warrant. The implication is that diaspora return, or at least the maintenance of strong diaspora ties that may eventually facilitate return, is among the more tractable policy levers available.

In response to these challenges, governments in the CEE and Baltic regions have spent the past few years trying to reshape their diaspora policy. According to a report published in 2025 by the EU Global Diaspora Facility, 13 EU member states, including Romania, Latvia and Poland, now have a dedicated diaspora law, strategy, or policy. The report also identified 97 public institutions across the EU involved in diaspora-related policy.³

Poland has embarked on one of the most comprehensive attempts at reform. In the last few

years, the country has been adapting its policies to the reality that the diaspora now includes “the next generations of the Polish community, people who were not born in Poland, and émigrés”.⁴

In late 2025, Poland’s deputy prime minister stressed the need to “intensify and modernise methods of teaching Polish, including as a foreign language, in Polish community schools and in the education systems of the countries where members of the Polish community live”.⁵ This came not long after the Polish Council of Ministers adopted the Government Strategy for Cooperation with the Polish Diaspora and Poles Abroad for 2025–2030. Opportunities for younger members of the diaspora are a key focus of this strategy. As part of it, in 2026, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched programmes targeting young people of Polish origin, including study visits to Poland and business internship programmes intended to make relocation and settlement feel like a realistic option.

Bastian Sendhardt, a research associate at the German Institute of Polish Affairs (DPI), says that these recent measures signal “a shift toward a more strategic and state-driven approach to managing transnational national ties”. Yet Sendhardt notes their reach is uneven.

3 Maria Regina Tongson (2025). *Reaching Out: How EU Member States Engage Their Diasporas*. Brussels: International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD). Available at <https://diasporafordevelopment.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/EU-MS-Engagement-Report_EN-v.8.pdf>.

4 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Poland (2025). “Deputy PM Radosław Sikorski in Polish Senate on policy towards Polish community”.

16 October 2025. Available at <<https://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/deputy-pm-radoslaw-sikorski-in-polish-senate-on-policy-towards-polish-community>>.

5 Ibid.

DESPITE POLICY
GAPS AND FAILURES,
SOME DIASPORA
MEMBERS
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RETURNING

They tend to work best “for those who already have some connection to Poland”, as they offer support at key moments such as education or early career mobility. As a result, the policies remain “structurally limited”, primarily engaging individuals who are already mobile and culturally connected, rather than more assimilated later generations. In this sense, they “are better understood as reinforcing existing connections than as reversing longer-term processes of detachment”.

Romania is also in a process of overhauling its diaspora policy, with an added push following last year’s elections. Over the years, the country has expanded its consular network, funded programmes aimed at preserving Romanian identity abroad, and introduced initiatives to encourage return migration, including financial support for returning entrepreneurs.

Researchers question these policies’ effectiveness. “In Romania, there is a lot of rhetoric about engaging the diaspora, but no effective diaspora policy,” stresses Anghel. “The only consistent programme, Start-Up Diaspora, has mostly helped those who were already planning to return.” The EU Global Diaspora Facility report’s author, Maria Regina Tongson, agrees. She states that, “countries can adopt policies on paper without necessarily allocating resources to implement them, especially if the goal is simply to give symbolic visibility to their diaspora.”

Romania’s political leadership has also acknowledged these shortcomings. Shortly after his election, President Dan admitted, “Romania does not have a real strategy for the Romanians in the diaspora, doesn’t have an exhaustive survey on the needs of these people.” He added that the foreign affairs ministry and the presidency will need to develop a strategy with “objectives, budgets, and deadlines”.⁶

⁶ AGERPRES (2025). “RADR/President Dan: Romania does not currently have a real strategy for Romanians in the diaspora.” 26 August 2025. Available at <<https://bit.ly/4tWWaZw>>.

**BELONGING CAN BE CULTIVATED
THROUGH LANGUAGE, CULTURE,
AND SUSTAINED ENGAGEMENT
RATHER THAN SYMBOLIC GESTURES**

For a state that spent two decades receiving remittances while offering little in return, the admission was telling. When finally forced to act, Romania's response was to promise the kind of basic policy infrastructure that might have been expected to be in place earlier. At the time of writing, no such strategy had been formally published.

Despite policy gaps and failures, some diaspora members are nevertheless returning. In 2022, around 190,000 Romanian citizens who were living abroad moved home. In 2023, that figure rose to approximately 218,000. In Poland, 19,500 people returned permanently in 2024, nearly 30 per cent more than in 2023. Up to 300,000 Poles are estimated to have moved back to the country since 2017.

Anghel is careful not to attribute this to the government's diaspora strategy. What is drawing people back, he argues, is a convergence of more prosaic forces: family, culture, exhaustion, and the situation of Western European labour markets, where salaries have stagnated and rents have risen sharply since the peak emigration years. "Going to Western Europe brings much fewer comparative returns than it did 15 years ago," he says.

WHAT A PASSPORT MEANS

Since entering the EU, CEE and Baltic states have benefitted from their citizens' labour

abroad, from receiving remittances to exporting unemployment, and have offered little in return. Now, facing increasing vulnerabilities – demographic, strategic, democratic – they are starting to ask for more from their citizens: a vote cast in their direction, a military obligation honoured, a cultural loyalty maintained.

At its core, what many European governments are facing, particularly in the CEE and Baltic regions, is a question about the social contract: specifically, what it means when that contract is broken by one party. For first-generation emigrants, the calculation is immediate and personal: what they gave, what they received, and whether a meaningful bond still exists. For second- and third-generation emigrants, no such reference point exists. "They often feel more German, Italian than Romanian, even though both parents are Romanian," says Anghel, "because they grew up there and developed their references there."

They did not leave. Many of them were never there. The social contract was not broken; it was never made. A passport becomes, for many, a matter of paperwork rather than identity, a connection sustained, if at all, through fragments: a grandparent's language, a paid-for visit, an inherited name.

Sendhardt agrees that, "there is a clear structural pull toward the country of residence, where individuals are embedded in education

systems, labour markets, and everyday social life.” He adds that attachment to the home country persists but “more as a symbolic or familial reference point than as a primary site of political or social loyalty”. Yet identity is not fixed, and belonging can be cultivated through language, culture, and sustained engagement rather than symbolic gestures.

Poland’s outreach to younger diaspora communities suggests that some countries are beginning to recognise this. For Sendhardt, the most effective policies are those that create sustained, practical engagement such as language education, youth exchanges, study programmes, internships, and professional opportunities linked to Poland. This is because “they embed Poland in people’s lived experiences rather than appealing only to abstract notions of identity.” However, he cautions that, “their impact depends heavily on accessibility and continuity: one-off programmes tend to have limited long-term effects.”

These tensions also unfold within a broader European project that remains, in important respects, unfinished. The EU’s post-national promise, embodied in free movement and deep economic integration, has enabled a “cross-contamination” of identities and life trajectories across borders. Yet key dimensions of belonging and obligations remain national, from emotional attachments and political narratives to more concrete

elements such as military service. The result is a layered and sometimes contradictory landscape in which individuals live transnational lives, while states continue to make claims rooted in national frameworks.

For CEE and Baltic states, this contradiction is particularly significant: they were among the greatest contributors to the EU’s experiment in free movement and among the least prepared for what it would cost them. The defining question that they now face is whether they can still close a gap they allowed to widen for decades, especially across generations. How they answer may determine not only the future of their diasporas but also their resilience as states.



RALUCA BESLIU

is an independent journalist whose reporting focuses on climate, geopolitics, and the impact of new technologies.



TOO MANY, TOO FEW

MALTHUSIANISATION AND THE POLITICS OF POPULATION ANXIETY

ARTICLE BY

SOUMAYA MAJDOUB

Demographic speculation rarely presents itself as such. Dressed in rigorous scientific language, it depicts futures with a certainty that facts alone cannot shake. But treating populations as aggregates erases the social and historical reality of people's lives – narrowing not only what is studied but what can be imagined.

Until a decade ago, European publics were told there were too many people on the planet. Population bombs, carrying capacities breached, the Global South reproducing itself into planetary catastrophe. Today, the same publics are told there are too few. Collapsing fertility, ageing societies, depopulating regions, civilisational decline. Elon Musk warns that “population collapse” is a greater threat to humanity than climate change. Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni made defending the “natural family” a priority of her government. Her former Hungarian counterpart, Viktor Orbán, financed motherhood with tax breaks (all the while fortifying his country's southern border against those who might repopulate it). Somewhere between the two alarms, the narrative shifted. The underlying logic did not.

I spent years writing and speaking about the first panic, dismantling the overpopulation myth, showing audiences that consumption, not reproduction, drives emissions; that the wealthiest 10 per cent of humanity is responsible for two-thirds of global warming; that blaming fertility in the Global South is a way of protecting the consumption patterns of the Global North. But I eventually realised that demographic thinking functions as a reflex. It arrives already formed, wrapped around an anxiety, unmoved by facts that come afterwards. When the overpopulation panic quietly dissolved and was replaced, almost overnight, with its mirror image, the reflex had not weakened. It had simply found a new vehicle. The fear of too many and the fear of too few are not opposing positions – they are the same operation.

I call this operation Malthusianisation: the discursive, affective, and institutional process through which the structural outcomes of political, economic, and ecological systems are transformed into demographic problems. In *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), English clergyman and political economist Thomas Robert Malthus argued that population grows geometrically while food supply grows arithmetically, making famine and disease inevitable correctives. He opposed poverty relief on the grounds that it encouraged reproduction among the poor. His framework has shaped two centuries of debate on resources, fertility, and welfare and lent its name to a recurring style of catastrophist reasoning. Malthusianisation is not the passive inheritance of an old idea but an active, ongoing process that turns housing crises into immigration problems, climate breakdown into calls for stricter border policing, the effects of inequality into integration failure, and political choices into population inevitabilities. Its survival has never depended on it being true; rather, its usefulness keeps it in circulation.

NUMBERS AND FEAR

The language of demography rarely presents itself as overtly ideological. Nor does it speak in a single voice. On the one hand, there is the language of projections, ratios, dependency curves, and carrying capacities: technical, measured; the sober – apparently neutral – man-

agement of numbers. On the other hand, there is a vocabulary – always in circulation – of invasion, flood, replacement, and collapse: visceral, urgent, and difficult to contest without appearing naïve. Neither register would be sufficient on its own. The technical voice alone would be dry and contestable; the visceral voice alone would be politically embarrassing. Together, however, the two registers make exclusion feel both reasoned and necessary, each reinforcing the other so effectively that they become difficult to disentangle.

Consider the way contemporary European policy frames migration. The EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum, adopted in 2024, speaks at length about solidarity, burden-sharing, and dignified procedures, while formalising accelerated border screenings and return partnerships with third countries whose human rights records remain largely unaddressed. The emphasis on figures – arrivals, capacities, ratios – creates an impression of technical necessity, while the political nature of the choices being made is quietly displaced. Like sections of an orchestra, numbers provide the melody of legitimacy, and fear beats the timpani of urgency. The ensemble is what allows policies that would otherwise be controversial to pass as pragmatic responses to demographic realities.

The unease that attaches itself to demographic change is not a response to data; eight billion

**POLITICIANS WHO WARN OF
DEMOGRAPHIC DECLINE OR
CULTURAL REPLACEMENT LEGITIMISE
ANXIETIES THAT WERE ALREADY
LOOKING FOR A POLITICAL HOME**

is a number nobody can hold in their mind. This is why attempts to correct demographic claims through empirical evidence so often fail.

Politicians who warn of demographic decline or cultural replacement legitimise anxieties that were already looking for a political home. The effect is cumulative. Dutch far-right leader Geert Wilders' warnings about "ethnic replacement",¹ French far-right leader Marine Le Pen's rhetoric of civilisational survival, Orbán's cry for more Hungarian babies: these are not arguments in the conventional sense but rather invitations to *feel*. And once those feelings are activated, they become remarkably resistant to correction. What begins as speculation about demographic futures – projections about who will be born, who will arrive, and what kind of society will result – gradually takes on the appearance of common sense. In this way, demographic narratives become self-reinforcing: they shape the perceptions through which they are interpreted.

Time plays a crucial role in sustaining this dynamic. Demographic crises are almost always projected onto a future that is close enough to demand immediate attention, yet distant enough to avoid direct verification. Malthus gave catastrophe a few decades

to materialise; Paul Ehrlich, who died this year without ever seeing the famines he promised for the 1970s, gave his predictions a few years to come true. Today's demographers meanwhile project comfortably to 2050 or 2100, and pronatalist think tanks hold "natal conferences" with tech billionaires forecasting demographic winters with a precision that would embarrass a serious statistician.²

The horizon shifts, but the structure remains. Each failed prediction becomes the basis for the next, recalibrated but never abandoned. This produces a state of permanent urgency in which extraordinary measures, border militarisation, reproductive incentives, and migration control can be justified as emergency responses, only to become normalised over time.

POLITICS IN DISGUISE

Much of the authority of demographic reasoning relies on the appearance of scientific neutrality. Population variables circulate through climate models, migration forecasts, development frameworks, and carbon accounting systems. The sophistication of the modelling gives an impression of precision, obscuring the assumptions embedded within it. However,

1 The agreement for the coalition government led by Wilders' party sanitised *omvolking* (the Dutch equivalent of the "great replacement" conspiracy) into "demographic phenomenon", and Wilders nominated Richard van Zwol, chair of the State Commission on Demographic Developments 2050 (whose 2024 report on the demographic state and future of the Netherlands supplied that vocabulary), as informateur for the coalition negotiations.

2 Manisha Krishnan (2025). "Far-Right Influencers Are Hosting a \$10K-per-Person Matchmaking Weekend to Repopulate the Earth". *Wired*. 31 March 2025. Available at <<https://www.wired.com/story/natal-conference-matchmaking/#:~:text=Far%2DRight%20Influencers%20Are%20Hosting,the%20world%2C%20WIRED%20has%20learned->>.

**THE TRANSLATION OF POLITICAL
PROCESSES INTO DEMOGRAPHIC
TERMS OBSCURES THE DECISIONS
THAT PRODUCE THEM**

what is presented as neutral actually belongs to a particular tradition of Western science, carrying with it a particular worldview. For example, a 2024 fertility study by *The Lancet* was widely reported as evidence of imminent demographic collapse. Stripped of its methodological caveats, it entered public discussion as a clean prediction rather than a probabilistic projection under contested assumptions.³

When complex social and ecological dynamics are reduced to numerical indicators, what is gained in clarity is often lost in context. Yet it is precisely this simplification of demographic reasoning to a question of “how many” that allows it to travel so effectively across domains, from climate discourse to migration policy and development planning. This reflects particular ideas about scarcity, limits, and responsibility – ideas that determine whose reproduction is framed as a problem and whose is considered a duty. These frameworks do political work precisely because they appear not to. It is a kind of *trompe-l'œil*: politics painted so carefully that the viewer sees only demography.

At the same time, the translation of political processes into demographic terms obscures

the decisions that produce them. For example, the disagreements on asylum policy that led to the collapse of the Dutch coalition government in 2023 were widely presented in terms of housing and welfare pressures, as if these pressures were not the outcomes of long-term policy choices. Similarly, Spain’s rural depopulation is often framed as an inevitable trajectory rather than the result of economic restructuring and policy choices favouring urban centres. In each case, the shift from political to demographic language alters the terrain of debate. What might otherwise be contested as a matter of policy becomes accepted as a matter of fact. A fact of demography.

RECURRING FRAMES

Another reason this logic proves so difficult to dispel is that it travels, in different forms, across the political spectrum. Versions of it appear in progressive discourse, too. In February 2026, Valérie Tanghe, a Club of Rome member and candidate for the presidency of the Flemish Green party, told a journalist that the main reason the Earth is under such pressure is that there are so many of us.⁴ Tanghe lost the

3 Natalia V. Bhattacharjee et al. (2024). “Global Fertility in 204 Countries and Territories, 1950–2021, with Forecasts to 2100: A Comprehensive Demographic Analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2021”. *The Lancet*, Vol. 403(10440), pp. 2057–2099. Available at <[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(24\)00550-6/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(24)00550-6/fulltext)>. The study was funded by the Gates Foundation, whose population portfolio has spent two decades concerned with overpopulation in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. A single institutional vantage point spans both panics quite comfortably.

4 Christof Vanschoubroek (2026). “Valérie Tanghe is de verrassing in de Groen-verkiezing: ‘Niet de individuele burger, maar de economie moet het klimaat redden’”. *De Standaard*. 4 February 2026. Available at <<https://www.standaard.be/politiek/valerie-tanghe-is-de-verrassing-in-de-groen-verkiezing-niet-de-individuele-burger-maar-de-economie-moet-het-klimaat-redden/128866061.html>>.

vote by a considerable margin. But it is telling that such a framing could be advanced, without controversy, by a Green party candidate.

Arguments about sustainability that focus on limiting population growth often reproduce assumptions about scarcity and responsibility that are similar to those found in more overtly Malthusian narratives. As American birth control activist Margaret Sanger once wrote, birth control is “practically identical in ideal with the final aims of eugenics”.⁵ She was not being cynical, merely articulating a continuity that remains uncomfortable to acknowledge.

The capacity for adaptation of Malthusian reasoning is reinforced by the movement of ideas across institutional boundaries and careers. Concepts developed in one context – academic research, policy analysis, political campaigning – are taken up in others, without losing their core assumptions. Individuals and organisations move between these spaces as well, carrying with them particular ways of framing problems and solutions. The Washington-based Population Reference Bureau, founded in 1929 by eugenicist Guy Irving Burch, had rebranded itself as environmentalist by the 1960s without changing its mathematical models, only its vocabulary.

More recently, the trajectory of Fabrice Leggeri illustrates this dynamic. Leggeri ran Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, between 2015 and 2022, a period during which journalists, NGOs, and the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) documented systematic illegal pushbacks at the Greek border with Turkey, along the Evros River and in the Aegean. He resigned in 2022 after an OLAF investigation concluded that serious misconduct had occurred on his watch. In February 2024, however, he reappeared on the list for the European elections of the French far-right Rassemblement National (RN). He told the press that he was committed to fighting the “migratory overload”, which European institutions “do not consider a problem, but rather a project”.⁶ He was elected to the European Parliament and now sits on the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, helping to shape the migration policy he once enforced. The same man, the same logic. Only the uniform has changed.

POPULATIONS AS TOOLS

Running through all of this is a deeper transformation that concerns the way populations themselves are conceptualised.

5 Soumaya Majdoub (2021), “Malthusian Fears in Current Migration Debates: Contemporary Manifestations of Malthusianization”, in Sarah Bracke & Luis Manuel Hernández Aguilar (eds). *The Politics of Replacement: Demographic Fears, Conspiracy Theories, and Race Wars*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 23–26.

6 Youmni Kezzouf & Camille Polloni (2024). “Former Frontex Boss to Stand as French Far-Right Candidate in European Elections”. *Mediapart*. 19 February 2024. Available at <<https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/france/190224/former-frontex-boss-stand-french-far-right-candidate-european-elections>>.

Groups are increasingly understood as aggregates defined by demographic attributes: size, growth rate, age structure, mobility. This abstraction facilitates a mode of governance in which populations can be managed, redistributed, or contained according to strategic considerations. Depending on the needs of the moment, the same group can be framed as economically necessary and culturally dangerous within the same policy framework. What disappears in this process is the social and historical reality of people's lives. They become flows to be regulated, burdens to be shared, or threats to be mitigated.

In certain contexts, populations are even instrumentalised within broader political conflicts, directed towards or away from borders as part of strategic manoeuvring. In 2020, when Turkey opened the border along the Evros River to put pressure on the European Union, Greek police pushed people back, some stripped, some beaten, while Athens described them as a "hybrid threat". The same happened in 2021 at the Polish border with Belarus, with the latter doing the pushing and Poland responding by building a wall and suspending asylum rights.

The language used to describe demographic dynamics both reflects and reinforces this instrumentalisation. The result is a form of governance in which populations themselves become tools. They are deployed, managed, and negotiated in ways that would be dif-

ficult to justify without the seemingly objective language of demography. This is not an accidental by-product of policy but a consequence of a way of thinking that frames populations as variables to be optimised rather than as communities to be engaged. And yet, for all its apparent coherence, this way of thinking rests on a set of exclusions that are rarely made explicit.

NAMING SUPPRESSION

In 1377, a North African scholar named Ibn Khaldun wrote the *Muqaddimah*, a work that contained a sophisticated theory of population, economic cycles, and civilisational change. His model was cyclical. It maintained that populations rise and fall depending on political cohesion, economic specialisation, and the trust holding communities together.

Ibn Khaldun's concept of *'umran* understood population not as a pressure against a fixed wall but as a generative force, the substance from which wealth, culture, and political life are made. Meanwhile, his *'asabiyyah*, the solidarity that holds a community together, located the source of civilisational renewal not at the centre but at the margins, among those pushed to the edge by incumbent powers. Together, these terms outline a moral economy of population, in which labour, justice, and political life are inseparable from the question of how many people a society contains.

**NON-WESTERN FRAMEWORKS HAVE
BEEN SYSTEMATICALLY EXCLUDED
FROM DEMOGRAPHIC THOUGHT**

Over four centuries later, Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population* flattened the demographic question into a single, linear collision between fertility and resources. The logic underlying his theory still shapes Western understandings and anxieties around demographics, whereas Ibn Khaldun's thought was all but forgotten. Demographic research has quietly built walls around what counts as knowledge, and those walls hold across curricula, citation networks, and funding structures without anyone ever needing to defend them explicitly. Non-Western frameworks have been systematically excluded from demographic thought.

When Ibn Khaldun does appear in Western scholarship, he is usually cast as a precursor, a prefiguration, a curiosity who happened to anticipate certain European ideas, stripped of the Islamic intellectual tradition that gives his framework its coherence. The centuries of Islamic scholarship that subsequently developed his thought remain invisible, producing the illusion that demographic thinking emerged fully formed from the European Enlightenment. This narrowing of the field shapes not only what is studied but what can be imagined. Naming all of this will not, by itself, bring it down. Malthusianisation is not held in place by ignorance alone. It is sustained by institutions, by feelings, by coalitions, and by centuries of suppressed alternatives. But naming is the condition

for everything else. You cannot refuse a logic you cannot see, and demographic governance has always depended, more than it would ever admit, on remaining invisible: on appearing not as a political project but as a neutral, technical response to demographic facts. But behind the numbers, there is always a set of choices about what counts as a problem – and for whom.



SOUMAYA MAJDOUB

is a researcher in critical demography and political ecology at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. A former fellow at the Universitat de Barcelona's Political Ecology Lab and expert to Belgium's High Committee for a Just Transition, her current research examines equitable socio-ecological transformations at the intersection of population, climate (im)mobilities, and just transition politics.

LIVES TIED TO WORK: INSIDE THE *KAFALA* SYSTEM

Across the Middle East, labour migration is a defining demographic reality. An estimated 24 million migrant workers are employed across the region. The majority of them live in the Gulf states, including roughly 11 million in Saudi Arabia, 9 million in the United Arab Emirates, and 2 million in Qatar, forming the backbone of multiple economies. These workers sustain essential sectors ranging from construction and logistics to health-care, retail, security, agriculture, and domestic work. In some of these countries, migrant workers far outnumber the local population. For instance, in the UAE, almost nine out of 10 residents are migrant workers.

Despite variations between states, the reliance on migrant labour is structural and widespread. Yet this demographic and economic centrality does not translate into social or legal inclusion. On the contrary, labour migrants remain structurally temporary, excluded from citizenship, and dependent on their employers for their legal status. The *kafala* sponsorship system employed mostly in the Gulf Cooperation Council nations and countries in the Levant (Jordan and Lebanon), sits at the centre of this paradox, transforming a numerical majority into a legally and politically marginalised workforce.

HOW DOES *KAFALA* WORK?

The *kafala* system, initially designed to attract non-permanent workers, is a temporary labour migration regime that ties a migrant worker's residency status to an employer.

It establishes a tripartite relationship between worker, sponsor, and state – one in which authority over migrants' legal existence is delegated to private actors.

The dependency it creates is built not just into the legal structure itself, but also into customs and practices. A worker's right to remain in a certain country, change jobs, or leave is often contingent on the sponsor's consent. Although some reforms have been introduced, the underlying problems persist: mobility is restricted, and the risks of contesting abusive conditions are still present.

This unbalanced dynamic leads to systemic consequences. Since residency status is tied to employment, leaving an abusive employer could mean losing legal status. For migrant domestic workers, the situation is particularly acute. Frequently excluded from labour law protections and classified as "servants" rather than employees, they occupy a legal grey zone where minimum wage guarantees, working-hour limits, and mechanisms for redress often do not apply.

THE SOCIAL ORDER OF *KAFALA*

Migrant workers are not treated as a homogeneous group within the *kafala* system, which operates through hierarchies of nationality, race, class, and gender that shape access to rights, mobility, and protection.

At the top of this hierarchy are expatriates, often originating from OECD countries and employed in sectors such as finance,



NADINE EL-DEKMAK

is a PhD researcher at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Her research focuses on the legal dynamics of tied visas, exploitative recruitment practices, and human rights due diligence and their impact on the labour exploitation of migrant workers.

education, and corporate management. Although subject to sponsorship requirements, they typically benefit from higher wages, greater mobility, and stronger institutional support. The middle tier includes professional and semi-skilled workers from countries like the Philippines and India, as well as elsewhere in the Arab world, working in sectors such as healthcare, retail, and technology.

At the bottom are low-wage migrant workers from Asia and Africa, concentrated in the construction and domestic labour sectors, where protections are weakest and vulnerability to exploitation is highest. These divisions are also gendered: men are overrepresented in construction, while women make up the majority of domestic workers, often in highly isolated conditions.

For domestic workers, control often extends beyond wages and hours, with live-in arrangements frequently blurring the boundary between work and private life. This can mean long hours, constant availability, limited privacy, and dependence on employers for permission to leave the house or maintain social ties. Wages and tasks are also frequently structured by racialised assumptions linked to nationality, reproducing hierarchies within the household itself.

While the legal status of all categories remains tied to sponsorship, their ability to navigate this dependency varies significantly, reflecting wider inequalities.

MAJORITY WITHOUT MEMBERSHIP

Periods of crisis expose the structural absence of comprehensive social protection for migrant workers. Existing inequalities tend to deepen with rising anti-migrant discourses, discrimination, and human rights violations, while state protections are often prioritised for citizens.

The Israeli-American war with Iran has brought renewed attention to these vulnerabilities. Human rights organisations have raised concerns about workers whose legal status remains tied to their employers, limiting their ability to respond independently to rapidly deteriorating conditions. In Lebanon, for instance, domestic workers have been confined or abandoned by employers, at times without access to identity documents, and with limited means to secure evacuation, shelter, or assistance. In Qatar, delivery drivers were excluded from shelters. Moreover, across the Gulf, low-paid migrant workers often face additional barriers to evacuation, including financial constraints and obligations to support families abroad.

Some employers have provided continued wages or assistance with return, but these cases remain limited. More broadly, crises reveal how quickly legal dependency can translate into precarity: under *kafala*, a worker's ability to move and access protection remains contingent on a private relationship. ■

SEARCHING FOR THE "REPUBLIC OF POSSIBILITY"

ARTICLE BY
WANGUI KIMARI

If certain forecasts are to be believed, Africa's population growth augurs a future of war and societal collapse. But for some governments and NGOs, the "youth bulge" driving growth could, if instrumentalised through neoliberal processes, generate huge economic dividends. Missing from the conversation are the voices and aspirations of young Africans themselves.

In June 2024, Kenya's President William Ruto announced that he was going to withdraw a finance bill that, via tax increases, would have pushed the cost of basic commodities even further out of reach. His hand was forced by over a month of biweekly street protests, primarily led by Gen Z, across most of Kenya's 47 counties – an event whose scale was unparalleled in the post-independence history of the country.

While the police violence that ensued – including the extrajudicial execution of at least 65 people and the abduction of dozens of others – subsequently stymied these mobilisations, we continue to live in their wake: all of our landscapes – political, economic, ecological and social – were impacted by this watershed moment in Kenya's history and will never be the same.

A "PREMONITION OF THE FUTURE"

Madagascar, Morocco, Senegal, Uganda, Tanzania, Nigeria. All these countries, like Kenya, have recently experienced waves of protests with young people at the forefront. This, certainly, is a current of change that is unlikely to be halted; a movement that will only grow.

If you are an adherent of the apocalyptic “youth bulge” discourse, fearing the “premonition of the future” that Robert D. Kaplan warned about in 1994 – that of “overpopulation”, war, and “anarchy” steered by ungovernable African youth – then these Gen Z movements are more fodder for your panic.¹

Undoubtedly, much sleep has been lost by leaders – from Nairobi to Dakar, Antananarivo, Dar es Salaam, and Rabat – whose unwanted and thus illegitimate rule, shored up by militarised violence, is challenged by the very people who have been formally declared a “bulge”. (Note that it is unlikely that young people in Europe or America could ever be captured by this moniker.)

Since at least the early 2000s, this narrative of an overflowing youth population has caught the attention of governments and organisations, prompting a myriad of state and not-for-profit programmes whose objective is to turn the “bulge” into a “demographic dividend” that boosts economic growth. To be sure, what is desired is the production of economic utility by youth *for the state*, rather than a substantive citizenship stewarded by youth themselves.

The foundation for this proclivity to engineer young people socially, politically, and economically was mainly set in motion by dynamics

that have both Malthusian and colonial origins. Yet, despite this provenance, from the African Union to the World Bank, from regional policymakers to European research institutions, this African demographic is becoming the bogeyman for all sorts of phenomena: crime and terrorism, uprisings, “illegal migration”, and war.

On the one hand, the statistics are true. At least 70 per cent of the African population is under 30; according to the World Bank, by 2050 one in three young persons in the world will, therefore, be African. Furthermore, since Africa’s urbanisation rate is the fastest in the world, most of this population will be living in the continent’s cities and dwelling in geographies whose services are unable (and often unwilling) to keep up with this tide.

For these reasons, recent Gen Z mobilisations primarily take on an urban valence. Not just because young people choose city streets to exercise their right to assemble, but also because these spaces represent the highest indices of generation-specific broken promises: the yet-to-materialise (if they ever will) bounties that are contained within “Africa rising” narratives. The expressions of these vanquished pledges, the “dreams deferred” of Langston Hughes’s poem, include frighteningly high levels of unemployment,

1 Robert D. Kaplan (1994). “The Coming Anarchy”. *The Atlantic*. February 1994. Available at <<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1994/02/the-coming-anarchy/304670/>>.

food and housing insecurity, mental and physical health inequities, and much more.

As Frank Njugi, one of the young contributors to a recent *The Elephant* symposium on "structural adjustment 2.0" – a current multilateral organisation-imposed austerity that recalls similar interventions in the 1980s and 1990s in Africa and the "Third World" – writes,

It seemed possible that the country was rising in tandem with us, that our ambitions as kids were an inheritance from a newly opened era. Suddenly, we found ourselves in sun-bleached classrooms reciting in unison the futures we believed were ours for the taking. We wanted to eventually be policy thinkers who would one day stroll into ministries in crisp suits and speak the language of national renewal. Nairobi, for us growing up far away [...] shimmered like a faraway republic of possibility, a place where we boys and girls from dilapidated rural schools might ascend into the ranks of the people we admired [...] But as we grew, so did the contradictions. The very many leaders we once recited like catechism would later become architects, both by action, and by neglect, of a system defined by entrenched corruption. An elite, nestled close to the state, grew wealthier as the rest of us sat through our teenage years in the 2010s watching the gulf widen, our textbooks still heavy with promise

that the country itself was increasingly showing it might not eventually honour.²

And these promises were never honoured. Instead, it is the deepening contradictions that lead us to this current conjuncture, where young people are unable to find futures and are forced to relive histories of extreme deprivation.

"DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDENDS"

Over the years, there have been many pronouncements, by both state and multilateral organisations, about the consequences of not making African youth productive. These warnings, which have been sung from a plethora of platforms, tell of the need to turn young people into "dividends", lest they become "time bombs" or "tsunamis".

Unfortunately, these appear to be the only two options given to African youth in these arenas: neoliberal promise or disaster.

Correspondingly, many formal interventions have been launched to make them effective labour for a capitalist machine, often under the guise of "youth inclusion". These initiatives include programmes to direct them towards being "agripreneurs", "entrepreneurs", "self-employed hustlers", even while this demographic has no access to land

² Frank Njugi (2026). "Kenya's Austerity Loop: Debt, Discontent, and the High Cost of Mediocrity". *The Elephant*. 2 April 2026. Available at <<https://bit.ly/4ut9J3z>>. Emphasis added.

**THESE APPEAR TO BE THE
ONLY TWO OPTIONS GIVEN TO
AFRICAN YOUTH: NEOLIBERAL
PROMISE OR DISASTER**

or capital and less and less access to quality and affordable education. Unsurprisingly, within these schemes there is no serious discussion about the structural conditions that got us here – a place where, in the words of another young Kenyan writer in *The Elephant*, Natasha Muhanji, “Graduates enter an economy with no hands to hold them and are told that, soon, things will stabilize” – another promise that is never honoured.³

More recently, the iterations of such a politics, where youth are seen as instrumental in the neoliberal project, are witnessed in regional decarbonisation fora. Evidencing this, the Nairobi Declaration on Climate Change, which emerged from the heads of state discussions at the 2023 African Climate Summit, emphasises that,

Africa possesses both the potential and the ambition to be a vital component of the global solution to climate change. As home to the world’s youngest and fastest-growing workforce, coupled with massive untapped renewable energy potential, abundant natural assets and an entrepreneurial spirit, our continent has the fundamentals to spearhead a climate compatible pathway

*as a thriving, cost-competitive industrial hub with the capacity to support other regions in achieving their net zero ambitions.*⁴

Similarly, in a foreword to a recent report focused on a continental just transition, Kenya’s President Ruto, who is also the Chair of the Committee of African Heads of State and Government on Climate Change, writes,

*Africa is bursting with possibilities and a vast endowment of natural resources. The continent’s renewable energy potential is 50 times greater than the anticipated global electricity demand for the year 2040. The continent also has over 40% of the global reserves of key minerals for batteries and hydrogen technologies. Africa also has the largest tracts of arable land, and the continent is young, with 70% of the people under 30 years of age. It is time to tap these riches to achieve the aspirations of the people. Opportunity beckons for Africa to make this century the African Century, in which the continent’s economies leapfrog by harnessing the vast endowment of clean energy resources. We are ready to leap into a future powered by Africa and demonstrate that the continent can industrialize in a low carbon and sustainable manner.*⁵

3 Natasha W. Muhanji (2026). “Rewind Selekt: SAPs Again?”. *The Elephant*. 7 April 2026.

Available at <<https://www.theelephant.info/analysis/2026/04/07/rewind-selekt-saps-again/>>.

4 African Union (2023). *The African Leaders Nairobi Declaration on Climate Change*. Addis Ababa: African Union.

Available at <<https://bit.ly/3OW2PVu>>. Emphasis added.

5 See the preface in Youba Sokona et al. (2023). *Just Transition: A Climate, Energy and Development Vision for Africa*. Independent Expert Group on Just Transition and Development. Available at <https://justtransitionafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Just-Transition-Africa-report-ENG_single-pages.pdf>.

THIS IS NOT
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OR "TIME BOMB"
ANTICIPATED

In neither of these assertions are the aspirations of young people centred. Instead, the "novel" politics of the green transition continues to promote a "dividend" discourse, leveraging this "youth bulge" as just one of many African resources – its "riches" – that need to be directed anywhere but to their own becoming(s). It is in this way that the "African Century" is made for others, not for them; they are only important as its fuel, akin to the minerals and solar energy – a workforce devoid of other aspirations, thoughts, and embodiments.

Even so, as the protests over the last few years have shown us, young people have other ideas about their location in the present, as well as what their tomorrows should look like.

ECOLOGICAL FUTURES

In April 2024, shortly before the mobilisations against Ruto's Finance Bill, Kenya experienced flooding that led to the deaths of over 200 people and the displacement of close to 60,000. During this period, low-lying settlements in Nairobi – "slums" such as Mathare – saw households literally swept away: from kith and kin, school books and uniforms to shelter walls and gas stoves, the fast-moving flood currents were not selective about what they would carry.

Instead of offering relief, the government arrived weeks later to destroy houses that residents had rebuilt after the floods. Ostensibly motivated by the need to "protect" residents from further mercurial weather patterns, the bulldozers tore down homes that sat in the path of the previous month's flood waters.

Many of the young Mathare residents who later participated in the 2024 protests were motivated by the converging effects of anthropogenic climate change on neglected communities and the militarised abandonment that was supposedly responding to this phenomenon. These events were, ultimately, inseparable.

What's more, the high food prices that added to their grievances (the result of both IMF and World Bank debts and unpredictable weather), as well as the water and electricity shortages that were key flashpoints for the 2025 Gen Z protests in Madagascar, all gesture towards the ecological potencies of what are often taken solely as political and economic questions. This is further evidenced by the reality that all the African countries where protests have taken place are ranked as "highly vulnerable" to climate change, even though Africa as a whole contributes less than four per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions.

Now, oscillating between droughts and famine, flooding and high temperatures, cyclones and desertification, capricious weather patterns compound the corruption, decline in services and cost of living crises that took and keep taking young people to the streets.

While much has been made of the digital tools that allowed for the spread of these protests – valid, but also certainly technophilic, preoccupations –, their ecological dimensions are rarely foregrounded.

SEEDS FOR TOMORROW

As I write this in the spring of 2026, following the deepening of a fuel and cost of living crisis in Kenya, more protests are being organised. Once again, ecological questions are at the heart

of these mobilisations, and they layer onto the sedimentations of a climate emergency.

Many of the outcomes of the Gen Z uprisings from 2024 and 2025 remain inconclusive. Yet in their calls to break from business as usual, to refrain from the systemic violence that intersects with and prompts ecological pressures and creates "youth bulges", seeds for other political, environmental, and economic tomorrows can be glimpsed.

This is not the "African Century" that instrumentalises this demographic, nor the "tsunami" or "time bomb" anticipated. Rather, in the ways they represent and respond to the current moment through more people-centred articulations, this demographic may just be pointing us to the "republic of possibility" described by Njugu.

This could be our only chance.



WANGUI KIMARI

is an urban anthropologist based in Kenya. She is also the East Africa editor for the magazine *Africa is a Country*.



UNITED IN DISCORD

MAKING SENSE OF GEN Z PROTESTS

AN INTERVIEW WITH
PAOLO GERBAUDO
 BY **CELIA FERNÁNDEZ**

In 2025, Gen Z – born between roughly 1997 and 2012 and often described as “generation anxiety” – emerged as a central force in street mobilisations spanning three continents. The cycle began in 2024 with the uprising in Bangladesh and then spread across the Global South, from South and Southeast Asia to North Africa and parts of Latin America, including countries such as Sri Lanka, Nepal, Timor-Leste, Morocco, and Peru. Celia Fernández spoke with sociologist and political theorist Paolo Gerbaudo to understand the technological and demographic dynamics shaping these movements.

CELIA FERNÁNDEZ: We often refer to recent youth-led movements as “Generation Z protests”, even though they have spanned different countries and political systems. To what extent is this a helpful or accurate label, and what common threads, if any, run through these movements?

PAOLO GERBAUDO: We use this label because of the strong participation of Gen Z protesters. In a way, some people see them as the equivalent of what the “movements of the squares” of 2011 and after were for millennials. The names and popular fame that protest movements get are a bit of a force for simplification of their internal complexity. But indeed, there are some shared elements despite the evident differences in context and some of the issues and objectives present in Gen Z protests.

Many of these movements were against government corruption and authoritarianism and focused on criticising governments for their wrongdoings. At the same time, they all relied on the use of digital media, and in particular on platforms popular among Gen Z, such as Discord.

This was a very notable element in protests in Nepal and in Morocco, to the point that they were sometimes called “Discord protests”. They also shared some imaginaries, such as the *One Piece* manga flag. Moreover, Gen Z protests are movements that try to learn from one another and build solidarity online by referencing each other.

Was some ideal of democracy part of the picture?

Gen Z protests are much more about anti-authority and anti-corruption sentiments than about democracy. The 2011 movements – the Indignados in Spain, the Aganaktismeni in Greece, the Arab Spring protests in North Africa and the Middle East – and the demonstrations in Turkey in 2013 were very much pro-democracy movements. There was a sense of the need to reclaim citizens’ direct participation in decision-making and to pursue assemblies in public squares. This is mostly lacking in Gen Z movements. They are much more focused on the contestation of power and the immediate demand to address governmental corruption and intractable social issues such as unemployment, online censorship, and freedom of expression.

That said, democratic practices have emerged in some of these protests. For example, in the case of Nepal, the proposed alternative prime

minister was voted for on Discord. It was like a referendum to gain legitimacy for substituting the outgoing prime minister. So there is a sense that these movements also want to be democratic, but that democracy is pursued much more online. It is more of an online plebiscitary democracy than a typical democracy, and it is more short lived and perhaps less ideological.

In your 2017 book, *The Mask and the Flag*, you argued that protest movements from the 2010s (the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and the Indignados, among others) carry the imprint of what you call “citizenism”, as opposed to “populism”. To what extent do today’s Gen Z protests resemble that earlier wave, and in what ways do they depart from it?

I described citizenism or anarcho-populism as an ideology of social movements and protesting, which is populist in the sense of appealing to the totality of the people against corrupt leaders and elites. But it differs from institutional or global populism in that it is not leaderistic. Citizenism is instead based on a horizontal or supposedly horizontal organisational structure where squares are thought to be enough as a reference point for people to gather. In the 2011 protests, the entire point was to create an alternative democratic process that was supposed to be very open ended and horizontal.

More recent movements are still citizenist in the sense that they are very people-driven

GEN Z MOVEMENTS ARE
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and don't have thick ideologies – they are

not Marxist or liberal, for example. They have some libertarian elements, and at the same time, they are very focused on the collective redressing of issues. However, the practice of assembly democracy in the squares is absent from most of them – even though they gather in an online space – and they are much more concentrated on pushing out contested powers. These movements are more negative in the sense that they are more about destroying the public system than projecting a utopian alternative onto it.

American journalist Vincent Bevins has interpreted¹ the 2010s as a decade of mass protests that largely failed to morph into revolutions and often achieved the opposite of what they initially aimed for. Have more recent protest movements learned from those missed revolutions?

I am a bit more optimistic than Bevins about what the movements of 2011 achieved. You cannot expect too much from protest movements – they are effective at creating a political climate, a sense of possibility, and changing the conversation; in that, they were very successful. At the time, you couldn't have imagined eight years of radical left government in Spain. Of course, they did not fulfil the high ambi-

tions of their utopian ideals, but that kind of ideal

future was never going to be fully realised in practice.

Contemporary movements are perhaps more aware of the limits of utopian approaches and the need to both stamp out the problems and define what will substitute them. Especially in authoritarian contexts, what matters at the outset is bringing as many people as possible onto the squares. There should be less focus on alternative democratic procedures, which risk becoming navel-gazing, turning overly preferential, and not really speaking to broad popular concerns.

You mentioned the *One Piece* flag as a symbol used across different protest movements. What role does this kind of shared language play in terms of expression and building solidarity?

The imagery of the *One Piece* flag is not so different from the [V for] *Vendetta* mask used in the 2011 protests. This one may be more joyful and tied to today's anime and gaming subcultures, but ideologically, it remains a populist form of symbolism: the idea that government is unfair, blocks genuine self-organisation, and must be challenged by popular energy. In both cases, the movements lack a strong internal

1 Vincent Bevins (2025). "Mass Protests Without Revolutions". *Green European Journal*, 12 June 2025. Available at <<https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/mass-protests-without-revolutions/>>.

THIS ANARCHO-
POPULIST REFUSAL OF
REPRESENTATION AND
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A FUNDAMENTAL RISK

identity, defining themselves mainly in opposition to existing power. This is a highly performative, event-based, and temporary framework.

It is typical of many youth movements to use cultural symbols as a code. Protesters try to recognise a shared experience through symbology. Not everyone will know what a symbol means, and so it has a double effect of provoking the curiosity of people who are outside the movement but coming close to it, while internally it ties protesters together through shared reference. It becomes a marker of common social and cultural experience – a sort of badge of membership and complicity for those who get it.

Many Gen Z movements are characterised by a deep scepticism towards formal politics and representation, yet durable transformation still depends on electoral and institutional channels. Do you see pathways for translating this wave of protest into lasting political change, or does that distrust risk limiting its impact?

There is a paradox in these movements. On the one hand, they are very distrustful of power – often for good reasons. In many of these [Global South] countries, parties are self-serving, elites are self-referential, and control over the state is reproduced with few democratic mechanisms for change. This also applies to Western countries. The 2011 movements already signalled a crisis of democracy, and despite attempts over the last 15 years to change that through new parties, something continues to be deeply rotten in democracy these days.

At the same time, this anarcho-populist refusal of representation and suspicion towards institutions carries a fundamental risk. These movements are raising strong criticism of power, but when it comes to replacing it, they are still left with basically supporting existing parties and politicians. In Nepal's case, ultimately, the solution was to identify existing politicians who had endorsed the protest movements because there was no real alternative within the movement itself.

There remains a tension between rightly exercising the representative democracy system and the inability to build new institutions, which often leaves Gen Z movements to support whomever seems least bad among the elite.

In the West, parts of the younger generation seem to be disengaging from politics or, particularly in the case of young men, shifting towards more conservative and even reactionary positions. At the same time, in countries like Bangladesh or Nepal, Gen Z has taken to the streets against corruption and inequality. Do these apparently diverging developments have anything in common?

In a way, the idea of freedom of expression – self-expression and the popular voice vis-à-vis authorities – is a common term that explains both phenomena, despite the evident divergences in the themes they mobilise on. The protests in Nepal were sparked by a threat to shut down some digital platforms, which was seen as a violation of freedom of expression. In other movements too, the use of Discord was associated with the idea of free expression.

There are some similarities with what is happening in Europe and the United States. Here, there is growing suspicion – pushed hard by the Right – towards so-called “woke” politics and identity issues and a perception that they have become part of institutional culture, imposed rather than embraced.

Young Gen Z men, in particular, believe that the feminist and LGBTQIA+ movements have left them worse off. This ties into a broader resentment towards institutional liberalism, seen as hypocritical and censorious.

Many of the countries that have witnessed mass protest movements in recent years are characterised by a low median age. In Europe, populations are ageing. What does an ageing population mean for the future of radical politics, which has historically been led by the young?

Young people have always been a key resource for protest and dissent for a very simple reason: they find themselves in a life trajectory where their position is not yet settled, and therefore, they are a more mobile part of society. They tend to experience social contradictions and injustices more sharply: seeing narrow entry points into society, experiencing worsening conditions compared to their parents, and facing downward rather than upward social mobility. It is therefore only natural that young people are the most likely to engage in protest.

This presents a challenge for protest movements, but it doesn't necessarily mean they are going to disappear as a result of demographic reversal. We are also seeing a partial revival of protest around issues such as Palestine, war, and climate change, and older cohorts have been strong participants in these protests.

Digital platforms have been key to the politicisation of young people and the rapid mobilisation and coordination of protests, but they have also been used for surveillance and repression. Meanwhile, in Europe, there's increasing talk of banning social media for young people. If you were to assess the role social media has played so far for radical and revolutionary movements, would it be more positive or negative?

Social media always plays an ambiguous role. Platforms are private spaces transformed by movements into public ones, yet still controlled by large corporations whose – especially economic – interests often run counter to those of ordinary people. In order to attract users, digital platforms need to be seen as spaces for freedom of expression. Therefore, at times, they're also spaces that lend themselves to circulating emancipatory content aligned with social movements. For example, during the war in Gaza, TikTok became a key conduit for political videos and helped radicalise many young people on this issue. [TikTok's importance is widely recognised,] to the extent that, in the US, a group of entrepreneurs has mobilised to gain control over the platform's operations in the country, simply because Trump and the Right were concerned about its political influence.

So, on the one hand, there is no doubt that in many countries, especially those with little freedom of expression, social media has provided a venue for young people to air their views, organise, and mobilise. But also, increasingly in recent years, the ultimate anti-democratic instinct of social media platforms' owners has had the upper hand.

We are now witnessing the strengthening of what you have called the "Big Tech deep state"² – an unholy alliance between privately owned technologies and the state's military and surveillance apparatus, which aims to reassert its control over them. Do you think there's still a chance for technology to play an emancipatory role for radical political movements in the age of AI and great-power competition?

There is definitely a chance as long as it is possible to break free from the pervasive control of large corporations and US-based companies over our entire digital landscape. The level of concentration has become so comprehensive that the alternatives for users are drastically reduced. This gives the alliance of platform owners enormous leverage to control the public conversation and the political climate of any given country, with very little pushback being possible from users.

2 Paolo Gerbaudo (2025). "The Big Tech Deep State". *Jacobin*. 18 July 2025. Available at <<https://jacobin.com/2025/07/big-tech-deep-state-defense>>.

In terms of alternatives, what matters most is not achieving 100 per cent digital sovereignty – which is unrealistic – but rather providing people with some escape and autonomous options that can reset the balance of power between users and platforms and reopen democratic possibilities online. This could include a mix of open-source and alternative services – such as *Menéame* in Spain – and more local platforms. It may also involve developments within the fediverse,³ with more user-friendly tools like Mastodon and similar platforms, as well as Europe-based commercial platforms with a real mass user base. Together, these trends could help puncture the enormous concentration of power, which is largely held by a few companies dominating the public space and the political conversation.



PAOLO GERBAUDO

is a senior research fellow in the department of political history, theory, and geography at Complutense University, Madrid. He is the author of *Tweets and the Streets* (Pluto Press, 2012), *The Mask and the Flag* (Hurst & OUP, 2017), and *The Digital Party* (Pluto Press, 2019).



CELIA FERNÁNDEZ

is a journalist drawn to many kinds of stories, with a particular focus on the eco-social emergency, contemporary social trends, and alternative or marginal forms of culture. She is a regular contributor to *El País*, *Ballena Blanca* (eldiario.es), and the *Green European Journal*.

³ An open-source network of independent social media platforms, websites, and apps that cooperate instead of competing, communicating via shared protocols.

ONLINE AGAINST AN OFFLINE STATE

THE FORTY-EIGHT HOURS THAT CHANGED NEPAL

ARTICLE BY
SAMIK KHAREL

In September 2025, Nepal experienced mass youth protests triggered by a social media ban. Facing brutal repression, young Nepalis set the country ablaze and toppled the government. Part of a broader wave of digitally organised Gen Z uprisings, the movement took lessons from other successful and failed revolutions. What comes next is an open question.

The first message arrived at 9.35 pm on the night of 7 September 2025. It said, “Test”.

No name. Just a handle – “Pseudonym” – and a single word sent into the void of a Discord server, Youths Against Corruption, that had been live for less than a minute. A handful of people were there to receive it. They responded, as people do when they discover they are not alone in a new space, with the giddy formlessness of a conversation that has not yet found its subject: introductions, gibberish, tentative jokes. Someone posted an AI-generated image of Nepal’s national flag fused with the Jolly Roger flag of the manga *One Piece*, which had become, somewhat inexplicably, a symbol for Gen Z protest movements around the world. “Not everybody watches anime and can relate,” one user replied. “For peace,” a third said.

At that moment, Nepal was in a state of confusion and distress. Four days earlier, the government of Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli had followed the playbook of other governments in the region and switched off social media. The ostensible reason was regulatory: 26 platforms, including Instagram, Facebook, X, and YouTube, had failed to comply with new localisation laws requiring them to register, pay taxes, and set up offices in Nepal. TikTok had complied and was spared. The rest went dark.

The government failed to anticipate, however, that banning these tools of communication would ignite rather than extinguish the desire to communicate. By the time Pseudonym typed “Test” into the Youths Against Corruption server that night, the desire had been building for 96 hours.

LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Eighteen-year-old Shaswot Lamichhane, a self-described shy computer geek, was not the type to approach strangers or show up at public events. But he had been keenly watching footage of the 2019 protests in Hong Kong, the 2022 Aragalaya movement in Sri Lanka, which toppled the dynastic Rajapaksas, and the 2024 protests in Bangladesh that forced the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. He was absorbed by the questions of how a leaderless movement sustains itself, communicates under pressure, and keeps going when the state pushes back. Like him, Nepali youth had also watched those protests unfold.

Nepal shares with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and other countries recently convulsed by mass protests a demographic feature that governments have consistently underestimated: a very young population. Fifty-six per cent of Nepalis are under 30. They grew up watching the same political parties cycle through power for three decades, trading the same patronage networks and perpetuating the same impunity.

When the government in Kathmandu switched off social media on 4 September, Shaswot felt something he had been waiting for without quite knowing it. “I had not had that kind of trigger in a long time,” he said. “I instantly thought, this is going to lead to something huge.” The social media ban did not silence Nepali youth. It radicalised them. Within hours, Proton VPN recorded an 8000 per cent increase in new users in Nepal. People who had never heard of a VPN were installing one on the advice of strangers in online comment sections. The platforms that remained accessible – TikTok above all – became overloaded with a fury that had been building long before the ban provided it with a focal point.

The hashtags that crystallised everything were #nepokids and #nepobabies. The concept was straightforward: Nepal’s political class had spent decades enriching itself while presiding over one of South Asia’s poorest states; now their children were on social media, posing in front of luxury cars, European boutique stores, and infinity pools. TikTok’s algorithm, indifferent to political sensitivity and optimised purely for engagement, was serving those videos to millions of Nepalis struggling to earn a basic living. Angry young Nepalis used that footage to create videos that quickly went viral, with ABBA’s “The Winner Takes It All and Money Money” from the movie “Cabaret” playing in the background.

PREPARING FOR ACTION

On 7 September, Shaswot sent an Instagram message to Hami Nepal, a small nonprofit that had volunteered to provide logistics for a protest planned the following morning at Maitighar Mandala, the roundabout in central Kathmandu that serves as the city's traditional gathering point for demonstrations. The organisation's chief, Sudan Gurung, replied quickly. There was energy in the streets, rage on social media, thousands of people saying they planned to turn up, but no central coordination channel. No way to communicate in real time.

They decided to build one on Discord. Originally designed for gaming communities, the platform was now a de facto organising tool for communities of all kinds. It was private enough to feel secure, structured enough to be navigable, and equipped with voice channels, polls, document sharing tools, and sub-channels for different functions. It was also, at that moment, one of the 26 platforms the Nepal government had banned.

Shaswot became one of the moderators, operating under the username Shalmalo – based on his first and last names combined with his passion for marshmallows. The choice was partly for fun and partly for the same reason that every user in the server had a pseudonym: in a country where the state had just demonstrated its willingness

to suppress communication, anonymity was not an affectation; it was a precaution.

What followed is one of the most remarkable documents of spontaneous political organisation ever assembled. The Discord log of the Youths Against Corruption server – thousands of messages timestamped, anonymous, and archived – reads like a cross between a parliamentary record and a group chat, the high and the low, the tactical and the absurd all running in the same stream.

Within minutes of opening, users were offering practical advice:

10.39 pm – Tietole: “Also wear school or college uniform and ID if possible.”

10.43 pm – bghwawa: “Even if you can’t join the protest, you can help. Document everything safely. Be vigilant. Share evidence with international news outlets. Early international attention puts pressure on authorities.”

The sophistication in these messages is worth paying attention to. The instruction to wear school uniforms was tactical: uniformed students are harder to characterise as agitators, and cameras respond differently to teenagers in school ties than to adults in street clothes. None of this was taught to these users by a political party. They had assembled it from watching other people's revolutions on their phones.

ORIGINALLY DESIGNED
FOR GAMING COMMUNITIES,
DISCORD WAS NOW A DE FACTO
ORGANISING TOOL FOR
COMMUNITIES OF ALL KINDS

In the event of an Internet blackout, users

suggested switching to Bitchat, a mesh-network app that uses Bluetooth rather than the Internet to relay messages between devices. Nepal recorded 48,721 downloads of Bitchat on 8 September alone. Founder Jack Dorsey noticed the spike and posted on X, “There when you need it.”

The protest needed media attention, and the users on the server knew exactly how to get it. One by the name of SushantxD posted a screenshot of British TikTok creator Dylan Page, known as “News Daddy”, and proposed flooding him with messages to draw his attention. It worked. Page posted three videos about the Nepal uprising, collectively receiving millions of views. Later, he reflected on what he was seeing across the region: “Gen Z have a powerful tool that many generations before them didn’t have. Social media. Millions can now rally around a cause faster than we have ever seen. And because of its global reach, these global movements are learning from one another.”

Shaswot and his team, meanwhile, designed protest banners with a large QR code linking to the Discord server, knowing that when wire services photographed the crowds, the code would travel with those images. They compiled a list of 140 local social media influencers, created a WhatsApp group to bring them together, and asked each one to share the code.

Two minutes before midnight, a user named Talebi posted a link to a fully functional protest website, built and deployed in under two hours on a free hosting platform.

11.27 pm – pablodon: “We are only 217 online, what can so few people do? We need at least thousands.”

Turing: “217 on a platform most people don’t use, the night before the protest, is decent. I expect turnout in the range of 2,000.”

But alongside the organisational energy ran a different current. One user, 69kFeninja69, asked midway through the logistical discussion, “Guys, do we know how to make Molotovs?” Another person proposed tanking the Google ratings of the Hilton hotel – widely believed, without hard evidence, to be an investment of a former prime minister’s son – by coordinating a high volume of one-star reviews. The hotel had a different fate coming: two days later, it would be reduced to ash.

Two separate instincts, earnest organisation and incipient violence, ran in parallel in the same channel – an accurate representation of the political emotion it contained. A generation’s worth of suppressed rage does not sort itself neatly into constructive and destructive categories before it finds an outlet.

THE PROTEST NEEDED

MEDIA ATTENTION,

AND THE USERS

ON THE SERVER

KNEW EXACTLY

HOW TO GET IT

People began saying goodnight and promising to be there in the morning. The server kept running through the night, filled with banner designs, chants, and reassurances about tear gas remedies. Outside, Kathmandu settled into an uneasy sleep.

REPRESSION

By 9.59 am on the morning of 8 September 2025, user Talebi was posting from the ground: “2,000+ at Maitighar.” The number kept climbing. Young people arrived in school uniforms carrying handmade signs, *One Piece* flags, and placards chosen for their resonance with a globally connected youth culture. For the first hour, it was peaceful.

At 11.52 am, the water cannons began. At 11.58 am, the use of tear gas by police was announced on the server. By noon, security barricades had been breached. Discord moderators began posting with increasing urgency that the protest had been infiltrated and that the people pushing towards Parliament were party loyalists and political operatives exploiting the chaos. The accusation is impossible to either verify or dismiss. What is certain is that the movement’s organisers had always known of their greatest vulnerability: the absence of any mechanism to verify identity or enforce discipline in a crowd of thousands.

The gunshots started at around 12.41 pm, as announced on Discord by users. What followed simultaneously in the server and in the streets is relayed in fragments, raw and immediate:

“It’s raining bullets now”

“Floor full of blood bro, rubber bullets don’t do that”

“REAL BULLET GUYS”

“Who gave the orders to fire on innocent children?”

“Head shot”

“IT’S NOT LEGAL TO SHOOT KIDS WHO DOES THAT BRO”

At the same time, TikTok, which had stayed online, began filtering protest content. Live feeds were cut. Videos disappeared. The platform that had amplified the #nepokids narrative and given the movement its aesthetic was now quietly cooperating with the state’s desire for silence.

Nineteen young people died on 8 September. Most were shot in the head, neck, abdomen, or chest. Many were wearing school uniform, the same dress code the organisers had encouraged because it would keep them safe. By late afternoon, the government announced it would reinstate social media. It was a concession that came too late.

NEPAL ABLAZE

That evening, messages flooded the server asking a single question: “What do we do tomorrow?”

The answer that emerged from the server that night shows, with uncomfortable clarity, what happens to political emotion when it passes through a platform optimised for engagement. Grief was intense. Rage was intense. The algorithmic environment and users rewarded the messages that provoked

violent reactions. In the hours after the killings, the messages that spread were not the ones urging strategic patience.

“Eight to 10 of Nepal’s police officers’ homes should be burned.”

“Blood for blood – now everyone must carry weapons.”

“Everyone make a spreadsheet of every minister and their home location.”

Running alongside them, the voices trying to hold something together:

“Everyone, be smart. People died today – out of that anger, we must protest strategically. Can’t just act on emotions.”

But the server had grown too large for moderation. The same openness that made the movement impossible to co-opt made it impossible to control.

One name appeared thousands of times: Balen Shah, the mayor of Kathmandu and also a rapper whose songs – such as “Balidan” (“Sacrifice”) and “Sadak Balak” (“Street Child”) – had become the soundtrack of the protests, playing behind nearly every protest reel. Shah had become the movement’s iconic figure, not because he led it, but because he embodied something it wanted: someone from

ON 9 SEPTEMBER,
THE COUNTRY BLAZED.
THE PARLIAMENT BUILDING
WAS SET ON FIRE
AT AROUND 1.30 PM
THAT AFTERNOON

the culture, some-
one young, someone
who had built a fol-
lowing on authenticity rather than party machin-
ery. “Dear Balen, Lead now or never,” wrote
a user called Anonymous God at 7.47 pm that
evening. It could have been the message of the
whole uprising.

On 9 September, the country blazed. The parliament building was set on fire at around 1.30 pm that afternoon. The burning spread. Singha Durbar, the vast colonial-era complex serving as Nepal’s government secretariat, followed, as did the Supreme Court building, police stations, media houses, and the Hilton hotel. The Discord server tracked all of it, sometimes with horror and sometimes with something unsettlingly close to pride.

“Need to surround Hilton too.”

“DO NOT ATTACK SINGHA DURBAR – IT’S A DATA CENTER. It has very important documents. If you attack you will be helping corrupt politicians.”

“Burn Kantipur media, THEY WORK AGAINST US AS CORRUPT MEDIA. THEY NEED TO GO DOWN.”

The targeting was not random. The properties attacked had all been identified, debated and pin-dropped on Google Maps across

dozens of threads.
Prime Minister
KP Oli resigned

the same day. Forty-eight hours, start to finish.

FROM DISCORD TO POWER

What came next has no real precedent in democratic history. The army had taken operational control of the country to prevent further violence and imposed restrictions. Its chief met with Gen Z representatives and posed a question as simple and staggering as the situation itself: Who should lead the country? The question went back to the server, which by now had 160,000 members, up from 217 on the night it was created. It had sub-channels for fact-checking, constitutional law, and candidate research. It had absorbed the same parliament it helped to burn and was now attempting, in real time, to replace it.

The irony accumulated: Discord, a banned platform, was hosting Nepal’s constitutional convention. Anonymous avatars – small coloured bubbles scrolling past in the sidebar – were debating the future of a nation of 30 million people. The proceedings were mirrored on YouTube and picked up by local television, so that Nepalis who had never heard of Discord could watch their new parliament conduct its business.

After hours of deliberation, five names were shortlisted to serve as interim prime

minister. Then a live vote. The winner, with more than 50 per cent (3833 of 7713 total votes), was Sushila Karki, a 73-year-old former chief justice known for her fierce independence and anti-corruption rulings. Karki became Nepal's first female prime minister and the first head of government anywhere on Earth to be selected by a public poll on a social media platform.

There are lingering questions about representation. The vote that selected Karki was cast by a few thousand people – a tiny fraction of the nearly 20 million registered Nepali voters. Half of the population does not even have access to the Internet. The digital democracy that swept away one elite heralded another elite, not one of land and party and inheritance but of smartphone connectivity, of the fluency that allows a teenager to navigate a Discord server and a protest simultaneously. Still, Shaswot thinks the Discord polls helped legitimise Karki. “After that, you could give an answer to why she was appointed and on what basis. It was absolutely improvised and needed at that time”.

Six months later, in March this year, Balen Shah was elected prime minister. Sudan Gurung, who had replied to Shaswot's message the previous September and helped build the Discord just before the protests began, became home minister. The Rastriya Swatantra Party – the digitally native and relatively

new political formation the movement aligned with – won the majority in the elections, trouncing entrenched political patronage.

Nepali citizens made a choice that their counterparts elsewhere did not. Bangladesh's Gen Z briefly attempted to form their own political party but secured just six seats in the 300-member parliament. Nepal's youth chose instead to work with an existing party – relatively new but with structures, candidates, and a relationship with the electoral system. Whether this is pragmatic adaptation or the beginning of co-optation is a question the next election will start to answer.

TikTok's content filtering during the protests deserves its own reckoning. The platform that remained online because it complied with government regulations demonstrated, in real time, what compliance looks like in practice: protest feeds disappearing without notice, live streams cutting, videos of police shooting teenagers failing to load. Using automated systems, TikTok removed 2.82 million videos in Nepal in the third quarter of 2025 and 1.9 million in the fourth, 98 per cent of them within 24 hours.

Discord's role is equally double-edged. In the first 12 hours, it functioned as the organisers had hoped: structured, role-assigned, guided by a field manual. After the killings, when grief arrived and membership swelled beyond

**"ALMOST A HUNDRED PER CENT
OF PROTESTS FAIL. NEPAL WAS AN
EXCEPTIONAL CASE"**

any possibility of moderation, it became a megaphone for the most destructive political emotions, treating the coordinates of a minister's house with the same neutrality as advice about swimming goggles to protect against tear gas.

AFTER A REVOLUTION

When asked whether there is a template – whether young people across the region, watching what happened in Nepal, could replicate it – Shaswot is careful. "There are no hard and fast rules to making a revolution successful. Almost a hundred per cent of protests fail. Nepal was an exceptional case."

He is right. But in the same way that people who have lived through something are rarely able to see it from the outside, he understates what Nepal demonstrated: that a state's attempt to control information can be the very thing that destroys it; that a generation with no party, no leader, and no organisation can dismantle a government faster than any organised opposition; that the time between a social media ban and a burning parliament can be measured in hours.

Yet it has not demonstrated what comes after. The work of governance, negotiation, institution-building – the ordinary, unglamorous management of a country with 30 million people – cannot run on Discord. It does not have a QR code. It cannot be deployed in two hours

on a free hosting platform. It requires the very things the movement was defined by its rejection of: hierarchy, compromise, patience, the willingness to work within systems that are imperfect and slow. That is the test Nepal's youth now faces. Not whether they could take down a government – they proved that, in 48 hours – but whether they can build something stable to replace it.

For now, the server is still open. The old conversations have been archived as historical documentation. Whether what was assembled in those first frantic hours contains the seeds of something durable is a question that the next few years of Nepali politics will answer – slowly, in ways that will not trend and will not go viral.



SAMIK KHAREL

is an award-winning journalist and researcher based in Kathmandu, focusing on digital governance, tech ethics, and the societal consequences of innovation. His work has appeared in *Al Jazeera*, *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, *The Diplomat*, *The Kathmandu Post*, and *The Record*, among others.

EUROPE'S MIGRATION DEADLOCK

A BACKSTORY

AN INTERVIEW WITH
JUDITH SARGENTINI

Migration features prominently in Europe's demographic debates, whether as a looming threat or as a silver bullet against ageing societies. With the EU's normalisation of border externalisation and the far right's growing emphasis on "remigration", progressives have tried to reframe the debate around economic benefits, class, and inequality. But flawed narratives and a crisis of trust have blocked productive conversation. Former Green member of the European Parliament Judith Sargentini explains how we got to the current impasse.

GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL: Like other demographic debates, discussions about the future of migration tend to evoke extreme scenarios: mass climate-driven displacement on one side, intensifying competition for migrants on the other. Are these framings helpful?

JUDITH SARGENTINI: Both contain a grain of truth. Climate change will drive mass movement; the Syrian civil war was deeply intertwined with the climate crisis, as is the civil war in Sudan. At the same time, ageing societies across Europe will increasingly need labour migrants, whatever the anti-immigration rhetoric says. But rather than dwelling on extreme scenarios that breed fear and anxiety, we should focus on the kind of societies we want to build. Yes, there is a housing shortage, but what caused it, and what policies can fix it? The same goes for climate change: if we fail to stop it, people will have to move because of it. But what we should be focusing on is how to hold to account those who fail to act on the climate emergency.

How did the discourse on migration shift over the years you worked on it in the European Parliament?

As the only member of the European Parliament sitting on both the civil liberties (LIBE) committee – where migration files were handled – and the development (DEVE) committee, I witnessed an enormous shift in the narrative.

Development funding had always been under pressure from the Right but was kept at an acceptable level on the basis that it would discourage migration. This was simply not true: when people are extremely poor, they lack the means to migrate. Successful development cooperation gives more people the opportunity to move. That is not an argument against it, but it shows a flaw in the debate. When that approach failed to deliver, the response was to cut development funds and build fences instead. We deluded ourselves into thinking that training and funding coast guards and police forces in Africa would stem migration flows to Europe. That, too, was flawed.

There has been enormous misunderstanding about what drives migration and what can actually address it. Frontex had a budget of six million euros in 2005; by 2021, it was around one billion. We remain trapped in the idea that better border control will stop people from moving. All it achieves is more irregular migration.

As the EU seeks to diversify its partnerships in response to the collapse of the “West” as a normative power, what part can migration policy play?

I would question whether Europe has ever upheld the values it professes. Returning people to countries that are not even their own has always been a deeply unilateral approach – and one that has left Europe vulnerable to blackmail by autocrats who weaponise the threat of mass immigration. Deals like the one Italy struck with Albania function as propaganda tools until a judge rightly rules them illegal.

Our entire approach to migration has been about sweeping dust under the carpet. We need to learn to listen instead. And this goes beyond migration: How do we engage with Global South countries? Are we treating them as equal partners? Are our trade agreements mutually beneficial? The Global South is not Europe's wasteland.

How did we get to today's debate, with its growing focus on externalising border management and the far right openly calling for “remigration”?

In 2019, my final year as an MEP, I was rapporteur on the Returns Directive. Even then, there were debates about “return hubs” outside the EU, readmission agreements

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with countries like Nigeria and Ethiopia based on supposedly voluntary returns, and discussions with Tunisia about externalising asylum procedures. These weren't new discussions: the EU had already signed a readmission agreement with Ukraine in 2007 and one with Pakistan in 2010. Underlying all of it was the idea that beyond EU borders lies a kind of terra incognita – unused space where we can place the migrants we don't want.

What is happening now is the logical continuation of that trajectory. The kind of agreement Giorgia Meloni is pursuing with Albania has been normalised by what happened years ago with other countries. The direction of travel has been consistent.

As a member of the LIBE committee, you were also rapporteur on the erosion of the rule of law in Hungary under Viktor Orbán. What was the role of migration in his illiberal project?

Orbán used migration – the Syrian crisis and the refugees coming through the Balkans – as a way to convince his fellow European People's Party members that he was on the right track.¹ For many years, he succeeded in making others believe he had found a way to keep his country free of migrants. And he did – by locking people up at the border in deeply inhumane conditions or pushing them through to Austria, making Hungary unattractive to migrants and leaving neighbouring countries to deal with the consequences. It also helped convince his own citizens – you may recall the photos of Budapest's central station filled with migrants waiting to move on – that he was keeping Hungary safe from people it couldn't shelter.

This narrative proved remarkably effective elsewhere, too – including in my country, the Netherlands. Many social democrats were comfortable with the 2016 EU-Turkey deal. Part of the deal was a “one-to-one”

¹ Viktor Orbán's far-right Fidesz party left the European People's Party (EPP) in March 2021 to avoid being expelled.

mechanism: Europe would return all new irregular migrants to Turkey, including Syrians, arriving on the Greek islands. For every Syrian returned, the EU committed to resettling one Syrian refugee from Turkey. It was a way to “educate” people not to come to Europe uninvited. Even within the Greens, it took a long time to grasp what was clear to some of us from the start: that the deal would lead to pushbacks and serious human rights abuses.

In the Netherlands, two coalition governments have collapsed in recent years over asylum and migration policy, and these issues continue to be highly divisive. How do you make sense of this obsession?

In April, the Dutch Senate voted on asylum legislation proposed by the previous government, in which the far right was the dominant coalition partner. One proposal would have effectively criminalised undocumented migrants – making it a criminal offence simply to be in the Netherlands without papers. It was struck down at the last minute because the far right withdrew its support, deeming it was not harsh enough.

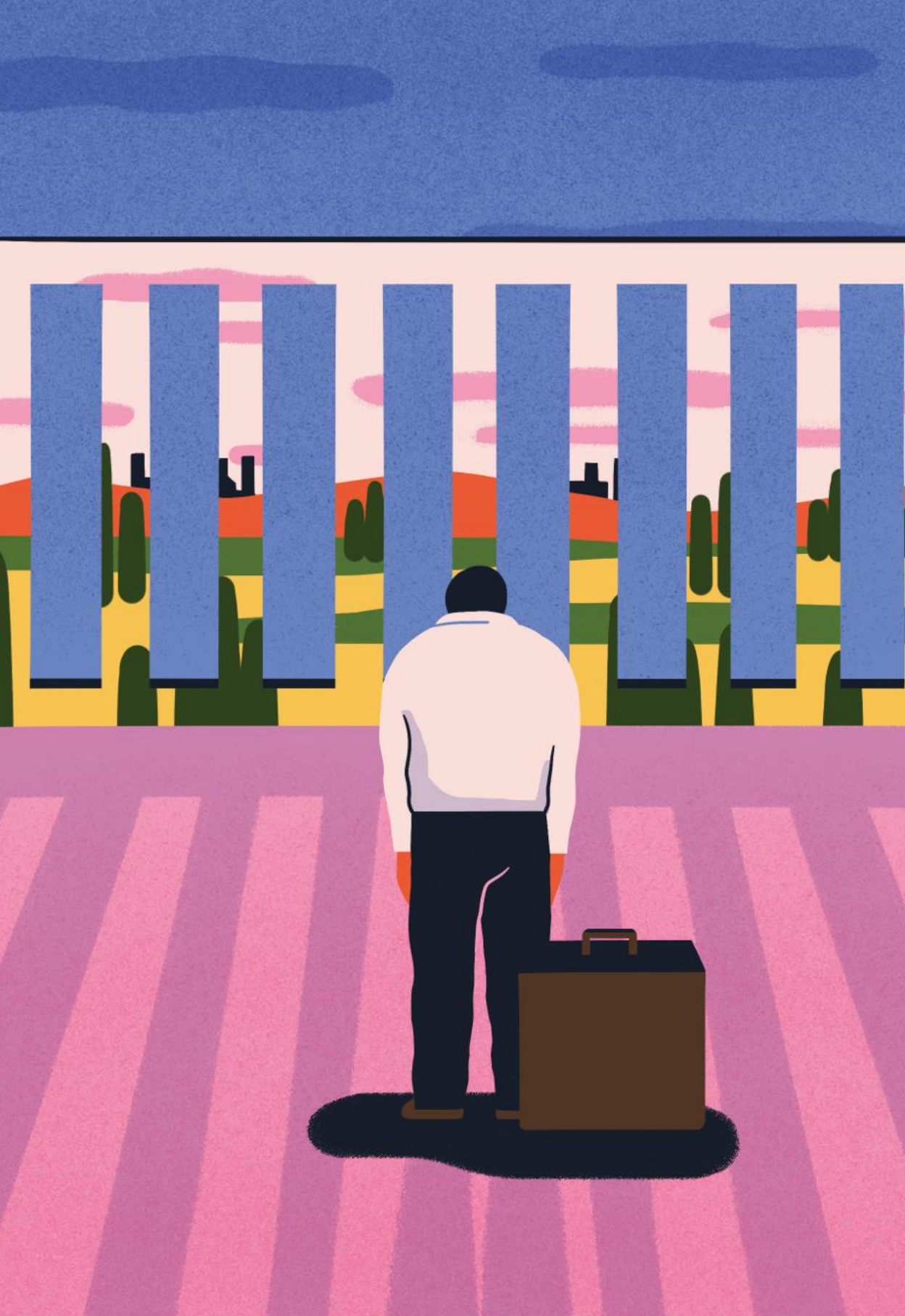
This shows how dramatically the terms of the debate have shifted. Ten years ago, it would have been unthinkable to be where we are now. This applies at the local level, too: there is legislation requiring that asylum seekers awaiting their procedures be housed

and distributed across municipalities, but some city councils are refusing to comply with the law. Also in April, riots broke out in a town ordered to receive 110 asylum seekers. Demonstrations turned violent, and the building designated to house these people was trashed, forcing the police to intervene.

The old narrative – that migrants steal our jobs – has largely faded. Nowadays, much of the discontent is about housing. The housing shortage is real, but it is the product of decades of neoliberal policy and chronic underbuilding – not immigration. Yet this narrative has been deliberately cultivated and amplified. It is a form of disinformation that centre-right parties have helped spread.

This disconnect between rhetoric and reality is not uniquely Dutch. For example, Italy's population remained stable in 2025 for the first time in 12 years thanks to net immigration, even as Giorgia Meloni's government remains committed to keeping migrants out. If facts and figures have no hold, is the migration debate one that can only be won through narratives and emotions?

I've wrestled with this question for a long time. We are not lying; we know the other side is. But a lie is extraordinarily difficult to dispel, whether with facts or counter-narratives. You are permanently on the defensive, because if you dedicate your time and energy to dismantling



a lie, you are not telling your own story. Every left-wing politician struggles with this, even though we have become skilled storytellers. I've taken courses on crafting better narratives, but I'm not convinced there is a winning formula – certainly not in a TV debate, where the incentive is often spectacle rather than truth.

After five years away from politics, I'm now an alderwoman in the city of Gouda. I have found that there is a profound crisis of trust – not only between citizens and politicians but also among politicians themselves. When I was group leader of [the Dutch Green-Left party] GroenLinks in the Amsterdam city council years ago, we disagreed fiercely with our opponents, but we shared procedures and maintained a working relationship. The same was largely true in Brussels: those of us who took the European Parliament seriously respected each other and shared common rules. Once that is gone, there is no basis for common ground and compromise.

Back in 2015, I kept insisting there was no migration crisis – only a governance crisis. Now there is a trust crisis, and it runs through politics itself. That is the hardest thing to overcome.

The growing salience of immigration in public debate has clearly favoured the Right. Does that mean progressives would be better served by taking migration off the agenda altogether rather than trying to win the argument?

I think so, and the numbers support it, since asylum migration in particular is falling. In recent Dutch elections, we tried not to put emphasis on these topics, but they keep resurfacing because others drag them back in, and then everyone piles on.

In fact, the absence of migration from the political debate used to be the norm. When I started working on migration in 2009, nobody paid much attention to the issue, and nobody in my party wanted to touch it, because there was nothing to gain. Do it well and no one notices; make a mistake and you lose votes. It was only with the Syrian crisis that I suddenly had competition from within my own party, because the issue had become exciting. You could shine and make your name through it.

Progressives in Europe are trying to win the migration argument in different ways, from the Danish Social Democrats shifting to the right, to Pedro Sánchez in Spain making an economic case for regularising migrants and UK Green leader Zack Polanski trying to reframe the debate around class and inequality. If you were a progressive leader today, which approach would you take?

It is easier to say this from outside government, but I think Polanski is right: “the boats” are not the problem. The real issues are affordability and housing and their root causes. But for that narrative to take hold, others need to

EVERY TIME MIGRATION RETURNS
TO THE SPOTLIGHT, PROGRESSIVES
DRIFT RIGHTWARD WITH IT

follow, and what we see instead is the opposite. Every time migration returns to the spotlight, progressives drift rightward with it. Which, in turn, shifts the debate further to the right. It is a vicious circle. I witnessed this in my own party. I recall colleagues arguing that we should only accept skilled asylum seekers. But that is not how asylum works.

The ongoing merger between GroenLinks and [the social-democratic] Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA) worries me on this front. As a Green, I believe in system change – in addressing root causes. But this is not the case for social democrats. If you are in a party that does not believe in system change, you take the current situation as a given, and all you can do is sand down the rough edges.

What would you identify as the key elements of a green approach to migration?

Today, labour is a stronger driver of migration than asylum. A guaranteed minimum income and strong social security benefit both migrant and local workers: giving people the power to refuse jobs with poor conditions, while giving newcomers a real chance at integration. Less neoliberalism, in short.

The second element is flexibility. Right now, we are effectively locking people in. You arrive in Europe, you get your papers if you are lucky, but if you leave, you lose everything. We should

turn migrants into expats. Expats can move, go home, and resettle elsewhere without bureaucratic walls blocking their way.

Third, we need to look at migration in context and not as an isolated issue. Global redistribution of wealth, fair trade and investment, and decolonisation – these are not necessarily going to reduce migration numbers, but the point is giving people a choice to stay where they are if they so wish.



JUDITH SARGENTINI

was a Green member of the European Parliament from 2009 to 2019.

She currently works in the non-profit sector and serves as deputy mayor of the Dutch city of Gouda.

EARTH WITHOUT PEOPLE?

ECOLOGISM'S SHIFTING DEMOGRAPHIC IMAGINARY

ARTICLE BY

EDOUARD GAUDOT

The link between planetary limits and demography, portrayed in numerous works of fiction, has haunted modern ecological thinking since its origins. While ecologism has freed itself from its Malthusian heritage, focusing instead on our ways of inhabiting the world, it has done so by relegating reproduction to the private sphere, treating it as a political taboo. Between these two extremes lies a conceptual void that is yet to be explored.

I I'd like to share a revelation that I've had during my time here. It came to me when I tried to classify your species. I realised that you're not actually mammals. Every mammal on this planet instinctively develops a natural equilibrium with the surrounding environment, but you humans do not. You move to an area, and you multiply, and multiply, until every natural resource is consumed. The only way you can survive is to spread to another area. There is another organism on this planet that follows the same pattern. Do you know what it is? A virus. Human beings are a disease, a cancer of this planet. You are a plague, and we are the cure."

This scornful observation, addressed by Agent Smith to his prisoner Morpheus in the first film of the *Matrix* trilogy, serves to legitimise the "technological rationality" of the machine civilisation and its dominion over a humanity reduced to energy slavery. Such arguments are often among the grievances voiced by fictional characters. The most powerful of these is Thanos, the mythical supervillain of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Traumatized by the collapse of his homeworld's ecosystem due to demographic pressures, the Mad Titan sets off in search of the "infinity stones" that will enable him to save the universe from human proliferation – and safeguard the balance of nature – by wiping out half of the living population with a click of his fingers.

Certain misanthropic figures and schools of ecological thought share this conviction that, in order to save the planet, we must rid it of its most burdensome inhabitant. But since none of them are willing to sacrifice themselves to make more room, it is always other people – especially the poorest among us – who are surplus. Jean-Christophe Rufin's 2007 novel *Le parfum d'Adam*¹ provides a telling illustration. The book features a radical environmentalist organisation that devises bioterrorist plots – one involving a strain of cholera – to tackle the global threat of overpopulation, beginning with regions such as the favelas of Brazil. These are worthy disciples of English economist Thomas Malthus (1766 - 1834), who thought it fit to “court the return of the plague” to naturally control the poorest populations.²

THE CHILDREN OF MALTHUS

Ironically, it seems that progress – technological or otherwise – has begun to answer the Malthusians' morbid prayers, albeit more indiscriminately than they might have hoped. Besides 4 million deaths globally each year due to air pollution,³ including 180,000 in the EU,⁴ we are collectively subjected to “universal

poisoning” that directly attacks our reproductive systems.⁵ Endocrine disruptors including phthalates and BPA – found in food packaging, cosmetics, and children's toys – reduce sperm quality, bring about early infertility, and cause genital malformations in newborns. Heavy metals such as lead and mercury from our diet and environment accumulate in human tissues, disturbing ovulation and impairing spermatogenesis. Microplastics, ingested through food and water, infiltrate ovaries and testicles, while PFAS – baptised “forever chemicals” – may well shrink the ovarian reserve and increase the rate of miscarriages. To this apocalyptic list we can add highly toxic dioxins, persistent environmental pollutants that, in addition to damaging the immune system and causing cancer, lower the overall fertility rate and increase the risk of complications in pregnancy, thus endangering future generations.

These concrete effects on our biological functions – and therefore also our lives – reveal an ecology of the body itself, in which the environmental crisis becomes a reproductive crisis, intimately connecting demographics and environmental health. It is this conjunction, exploited by a cunning and violent fundamen-

1 Jean-Christophe Rufin (2007). *Le parfum d'Adam*. Paris: Flammarion.

2 “Instead of recommending cleanliness to the poor, we should encourage contrary habits. In our towns we should make the streets narrower, crowd more people into the houses, and court the return of the plague. In the country, we should build our villages near stagnant pools and particularly encourage settlements in all *marshy and unwholesome situations*.” Thomas Robert Malthus (1826). *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. [6th edition]. London: John Murray.

3 World Health Organization (2024). “Ambient (outdoor) air pollution”. 24 October 2024. Available at <[https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ambient-\(outdoor\)-air-quality-and-health](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ambient-(outdoor)-air-quality-and-health)>.

4 European Environment Agency (2025). “Premature deaths due to exposure to fine particulate matter in Europe”. 30 November 2025. Available at <<https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/indicators/health-impacts-of-exposure-to->>.

5 Fabrice Nicolino (2014). *Un empoisonnement universel*. Uzès: Les liens qui libèrent.

talist revolutionary movement, that Margaret Atwood presents as a key catalyst for the Republic of Gilead's patriarchal totalitarian theocracy in her bestselling book *The Handmaid's Tale*.⁶ Pollution and plummeting fertility lead to the replacement of democracy with a regime of total population control, in which the bodies of women are literally nationalised in the name of perpetuating society and fulfilling the biblical injunction to go forth and multiply.

The political link between ecologism and demography tragically portrayed here has haunted ecological thinking since its origins – not only as a matter of numbers but as the intimate nexus between body and world. Born in the 1970s from the dual realisation of the limits and contradictions inherent in the industrial-consumerist mode of development, early ecological movements were imbued with the tension between resources and populations.

In the “Meadows report” published by the Club of Rome in 1972,⁷ the fragility of the ecological balance was brought into sharp relief by scientific proof that pollution and resource depletion were inevitable consequences of this model. With the illusion of an infinite planet dispelled, the capitalist promise of universal abundance began to look increasingly shaky.

Material growth was more finite than we thought, while the number of people it must be shared between was only going to increase.

It was out of this double crisis of finitude that the modern ecological worldview took shape. When René Dumont ran for the French presidency in 1974, it was the first time an environmentalist had entered politics. During his campaign, he denounced not only the waste inherent in consumerism but also demographic pressures. “It would be possible,” he wrote, “to only authorise a birth rate that precisely offsets the mortality rate, bringing us quickly to zero growth if we used authoritarian methods – which the global threat would justify.”⁸

A powerful imaginary was unleashed. Demographics had become the revelatory symbol of a metaphysical threat. The rising number of humans on Earth stood as a metaphor for all the anxieties of the era – hunger, depletion, resource wars, pollution, congestion, urban sprawl, and the disappearance of the countryside – and the collapse of the Promethean certainties at the base of the modern psyche. Conscious of its mortality in the aftermath of Hiroshima, humanity now felt endangered by its own vitality: first the A-bomb, then the H-bomb, and now the “P-bomb”,⁹ a term coined by neo-Malthusian

6 Margaret Atwood (1985). *The Handmaid's Tale*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart. Also a TV series created by Bruce Miller (2017 – present).

7 Donella Meadows et al. (1972). *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind*. New York: Universe Books.

8 Alexandre Moatti (2014). “René Dumont : les quarante ans d'une Utopie”. *La Vie des idées*. 11 July 2014.

Available at <<https://laviedesidees.fr/Rene-Dumont-les-quarante-ans-d-unes>>.

9 Paul R. Ehrlich & Anne H. Ehrlich (1968). *The Population Bomb*. San Francisco: Sierra Club & New York: Ballantine Books.

EARLY ECOLOGICAL MOVEMENTS WERE IMBUED WITH THE TENSION BETWEEN RESOURCES AND POPULATIONS

Paul R. Ehrlich, a Stanford University biologist and co-founder of the Zero Population Growth movement – a man with close ties to the beginnings of the environmentalist movement and organisations such as Friends of the Earth.

This obsession with overpopulation left a deep impression on early ecological movements and yielded an abundant crop of catastrophist literature and cinema. John Brunner's 1972 dystopian novel *The Sheep Look Up*¹⁰ depicts a world saturated with toxins, trash, and systemic violence, where collapse is no longer an unfortunate accident but a way of life. Not only is the population too large; its members are trapped in a hostile, poisoned environment – as if the species itself is imprisoned in its own externalities. Ursula K. Le Guin's more subtle 1974 novel *The Dispossessed* offers a confrontation between proprietarian material abundance and a frugal, egalitarian, and compassionate anarchist society.¹¹ Le Guin's novel can be read as a response to the question that lies at the heart of ecologism: In a world of finite resources, how should life be organised?

A SENSE OF SCARCITY

Very quickly, these apocalyptic prophecies were confronted by the need for an ethical and political rethinking of economic devel-

opment. Greens were all too aware that the economic system would not “collapse under the weight of its own contradictions”. Instead, it would reinvent itself by exploiting scarcity itself. It is this logic that Brunner explicitly anticipates by depicting a society trapped in a self-perpetuating scarcity loop. Here, exhaustibility does not put a stop to accumulation but transforms it into ever more voracious and dystopian forms. Ultimately, the challenge first arises in relation to individual behaviour – and thus the representation of the world, humanity, and its place in the universe.

However, reading the 2019 short essay *Limits* by economist and degrowth theorist Giorgos Kallis,¹² we discover that, contrary to what his heirs may have thought, Malthus was not in fact hostile to population growth. Like Adam Smith and liberals throughout history, he even saw it as the true wealth of nations. But given specific problems of supply, he was plagued by an overwhelming doubt: while our appetites (sexual and alimentary) are unlimited, our material resources are subject to limits. The answer to this contradiction lies in growth. As such, rather than an apostle of degrowth as certain greens and many racist pronatalists obsessed by the “Great Replacement” would have you believe, Malthus was in fact one of the founding fathers of the Church of Growth.

10 John Brunner (1972). *The Sheep Look Up*. New York: Harper & Row.

11 Ursula K. Le Guin (1974). *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*. New York: Harper & Row.

12 Giorgos Kallis (2019). *Limits: Why Malthus Was Wrong and Why Environmentalists Should Care*. [Stanford Briefs]. Redwood City, California: Stanford University Press.

The cornerstone of this Church is a sense of scarcity. The dynamic of economic growth is rooted in the same sentiment, yet this is nothing more than a projection, a preconception of the world. As Kallis underlines, it is a performative vision. In other words, when we hitch our economic growth to future scarcity, whether real or imagined, we end up organising it around the management of that scarcity. That which is scarce is expensive, therefore it pays to organise scarcity. Then there is nothing left to do but stimulate desires and provide the products that can (temporarily) satisfy these cravings. The circle is complete; the economy of limitless desire has found its formula.

ECOTOPIAS

Awareness of limits is at the heart of ecological thinking. And while one of the first limits it imposes is on material desires – a central point in the work of Austrian-French social philosopher André Gorz, for example – there are also limits to those that are immaterial. Published in 1975, American author Ernest Callenbach's novel *Ecotopia* is a classic of utopian ecological fiction that offers a mellow counterpoint to totalitarian or catastrophist interpretations of the P-Bomb. The society of the Republic of Ecotopia has stabilised its population, mastered fertility, and organised a form of demo-

graphic restraint compatible with its ecological balance – all without trampling on individual freedoms. Unlike the puritan United States from which it has seceded, Ecotopia has also managed to avoid the pitfalls of a deceptive sexual liberation/liberalisation that only perpetuates existing relations of sexual domination – an ambivalence that is central to the work of writer and poet Michel Houellebecq.¹³

When the book's narrator and protagonist defects to the West, his new ecological homeland, he does so out of love. He is not drawn to Ecotopia by its successful agroecological sustainability, impressive circular economy, or soothing lack of advertising – or even by the beauty of its natural landscapes. Instead, it is the wealth and depth of human relationships, specifically romantic relationships, that can be found there that underpin his decision.

The distinction between love and sexuality and reproduction is one of the anthropological foundations of ecologically restrained societies. Yet this is not always self-evident, for it touches on one of the most intimate aspects of the human condition. French author Camille Le Boulanger's novel *Eutopia* sheds an original light on this political dimension of family and human reproduction.¹⁴ Eschewing the conflict-driven narrative devices often seen in the “utopias

13 Especially *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (published in English as *Whatever*) (Maurice Nadeau, 1994) and *Les Particules élémentaires* (*Atomised*) (Flammarion, 1998).

14 Camille Le Boulanger (2022). *Eutopia*. Rennes: Argyll.

exposed” genre, the novel depicts a world that, in many regards, broadly corresponds to the ideal forms of human relationships and relations of production dreamed of by degrowth theorists.

Eutopia (the “good place” rather than a “non-place”, as the author explains)¹⁵ is first and foremost a work of speculative fiction about a fundamentally egalitarian society that is freed from both labour commodification – in line with sociologist and economist Bernard Friot’s “salary for life” concept¹⁶ – and the dictates of productivity. Yet even under these comfortable and ideal conditions, certain characters remain troubled by existential doubt, suggesting that it is possible to be unhappy in an ideal society. This unease centres around family ties and attachment to one’s lineage, calling into question a key pillar of this degrowth society – namely the reduction of its “human impact index” by, among other things, limiting births to “half a child” per person.

While the point is never Malthusian and the demographic question is not even central, the story raises something deeper. Within the intimacy of human selfhood, this “eutopian” society emancipated from the dictates of productivity comes face to face with an anxiety that transcends the material condition of the species while placing it within its own limits: time.

REPRODUCTION AS “THE UNTHOUGHT”

Demography is an inscription in time itself. It is that we can trace the source of the moral panics currently engulfing the Western public sphere, fuelling martial language and reactionary politics.¹⁷ Fear of civilisational erasure, loss of territory, loss of relevance, the fading away of the marks we leave behind: demographic anxiety calls into question our relationship with time as much as space.

While such demographic concerns were once a defining feature of ecologism, “green” and “Malthusian” are no longer synonymous. There are three main reasons for this. The first relates to Greens’ definitive entry into the political arena. Since becoming a potential force of governance, Green parties have been unable to reasonably advocate for policies that limit births without coming up against a major objection: bodily and reproductive autonomy (especially for women) and respect for family life and structure are fundamental rights.

The second reason is deeper still. As ecologism becomes more refined in its outlook, the focus has shifted from the number of the world’s inhabitants to our ways of inhabiting that world. Resource pressures do not arise from population growth alone. First and foremost, they stem

¹⁵ Camille Leboulanger (2023). “À propos d’*Eutopia*”. 7 November 2023. Available at <<https://camilleleboulanger.fr/a-propos-deutopia/>>.

¹⁶ Bernard Friot (2014). *Émanciper le travail*. Paris: La Dispute.

¹⁷ Such as the French president’s call for “demographic rearmament” on 16 January 2024. See Solène Cordier (2024). “Emmanuel Macron annonce un congé de naissance et un plan contre l’infertilité en vue du « réarmement démographique » du pays”. *Le Monde*. 17 January 2024. Available at <<https://bit.ly/49nfzev>>.

**A SOCIETY WITHOUT CHILDREN
HAS NO WAY TO PROJECT
ITSELF INTO ITS FUTURE WITH
HOPE AND IMAGINATION**

from the ways societies produce, consume, transport, heat, build, eat, and dispose. Evidently, more frugal countries and lifestyles will have a lesser environmental impact than hyper-consumerist ones. Added to this is the fact that social inequalities are also ecological inequalities. Very rapidly, the focus has shifted to reducing material flows, transforming infrastructure, and creating less wasteful systems rather than targeting demography as such.

The final reason is the political and moral corollary of the previous reasons. The debate over birth rates is a minefield where misogynistic, classist, racist, colonial, and anti-Global South tropes can easily surface. Instead, contemporary ecological discourse focuses on transforming the societal model. It speaks as if social life were solely conceived in terms of its visible cycles – extracting, producing, distributing, consuming – but ignores the most fundamental way in which humanity renews itself. Reproduction has become the unthought, a non-object – relegated to the private sphere, the intimate, and quite the political taboo. This is clearly one of the paradoxes of contemporary ecologism: we aim at rebuilding our relationship with the world while setting aside the question of biological and generational transmission.

A FUTURE WITHOUT CHILDREN?

This is a problem. While demography is no longer front and centre of ecological concerns, it is no less real. With some rare exceptions, societies around the world are getting older, fertility is falling, the desire to raise children is dampened by material constraints, and horizons are shrinking. Added to this are the consequences of eco-anxiety, especially in the younger generations,¹⁸ who experience the future as an emotional weight that is almost impossible to bear.

For some, the decision not to have children has even become an intimate protest against the very idea of reproduction in a world in crisis. In certain green circles, especially in the UK, the US, Australia, and Canada, people are no longer simply decrying overpopulation or pleading for demographic restraint. They are personally refusing to have children in a world deemed too degraded, too uncertain, and too unjust to bring a new generation into it.¹⁹ The fear of being too many has been superseded by one of birthing more children into a world where the future already seems compromised.

This political gesture of a militant minority has legitimate motives, moral force, and power

18 Louis Jehel & Mathieu Guidère (2024). "Les jeunes générations atteintes d'éco-anxiété : que faire ? Addressing eco-anxiety in young generations: What can be done?". *Médecine de Catastrophe-Urgences Collectives*, Vol. 8(2), pp. 149 – 156.
Available at <<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1279847924000314>>.

19 Mark B. Brown (2024). "Birth Strikes, Climate Responsibility, and Hannah Arendt". *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 86(4), pp. 438 – 461.
Available at <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S003467052400024X>>.

as a form of protest. But the “birth strike” movement also has its limits. Caught in an awkward tension between critique of and retreat from the world, it shifts the responsibility for collective transformation to the level of personal choice, putting little pressure on the structural causes of the crisis.

Ecologism has managed to find solutions to the problem of finite resources by considering emissions, flows, infrastructure, and systems but has paid less attention to what the environmental crisis does to the desire for parenthood, to life choices, and to the ability to see oneself in terms of generational continuity. Between the fear of being too many and the dread of being too few, between the anxiety of overburdening the planet and that of populating it with children doomed to uncertainty, there is a conceptual void that is yet to be explored.

This question must be revisited. Not to rehabilitate a regressive Malthusianism, but rather to cultivate a more comprehensive approach that is able to address the conditions of both social and human reproduction and the affections involved. One that does not stop at transforming the world, but which also considers the ways in which this world is passed on, populated, and renewed – the story it tells itself. Because ultimately, the link between demography and ecologism is a question of the future: Who will come after us, in what kind of world, and with what hopes of making a home in it?

A society without children has no way to project itself into its future with hope and imagination. It renounces the very essence of life, and without the possibility to transcend itself, it risks succumbing to entropy or getting lost in an eternal present devoid of all meaning. It is the entire significance of the human adventure that is brought into question here – in a deeply metaphysical way. What meaning might life on Earth have without human consciousness to bear witness to it?

Translated by Ciarán Lawless | *Voxeurop*



EDOUARD GAUDOT

is a historian and political scientist who has worked at the College of Europe in Warsaw and in the European Parliament. He is a teacher, consultant, and writer. His latest book is *Les 7 Piliers de la Cité* (Plon, 2022).

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Amir Hashemi
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Green European Foundation
Avenue des Arts 7-8
1210 Saint-Josse-ten-Noode
Brussels, Belgium
info@gef.eu | www.gef.eu

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NAVIGATING DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS

In just a few years, panic about overpopulation has given way to its mirror image: fear of demographic decline. Indeed, with falling birth rates and longer lives, Europe is ageing rapidly. Can societies guarantee wellbeing as the labour force shrinks and fiscal pressures mount? And as older cohorts outnumber the young, is intergenerational conflict inevitable? Reactionary forces have their answers, stoking fears of “ethnic replacement”, rolling back gender equality, and curtailing women’s reproductive freedom in the name of demographic revival when in fact the opposite is needed. But demographic trends cannot be reversed – only navigated. That means pivoting economies towards care and fundamentally rethinking our relationship with one another and the planet.

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