

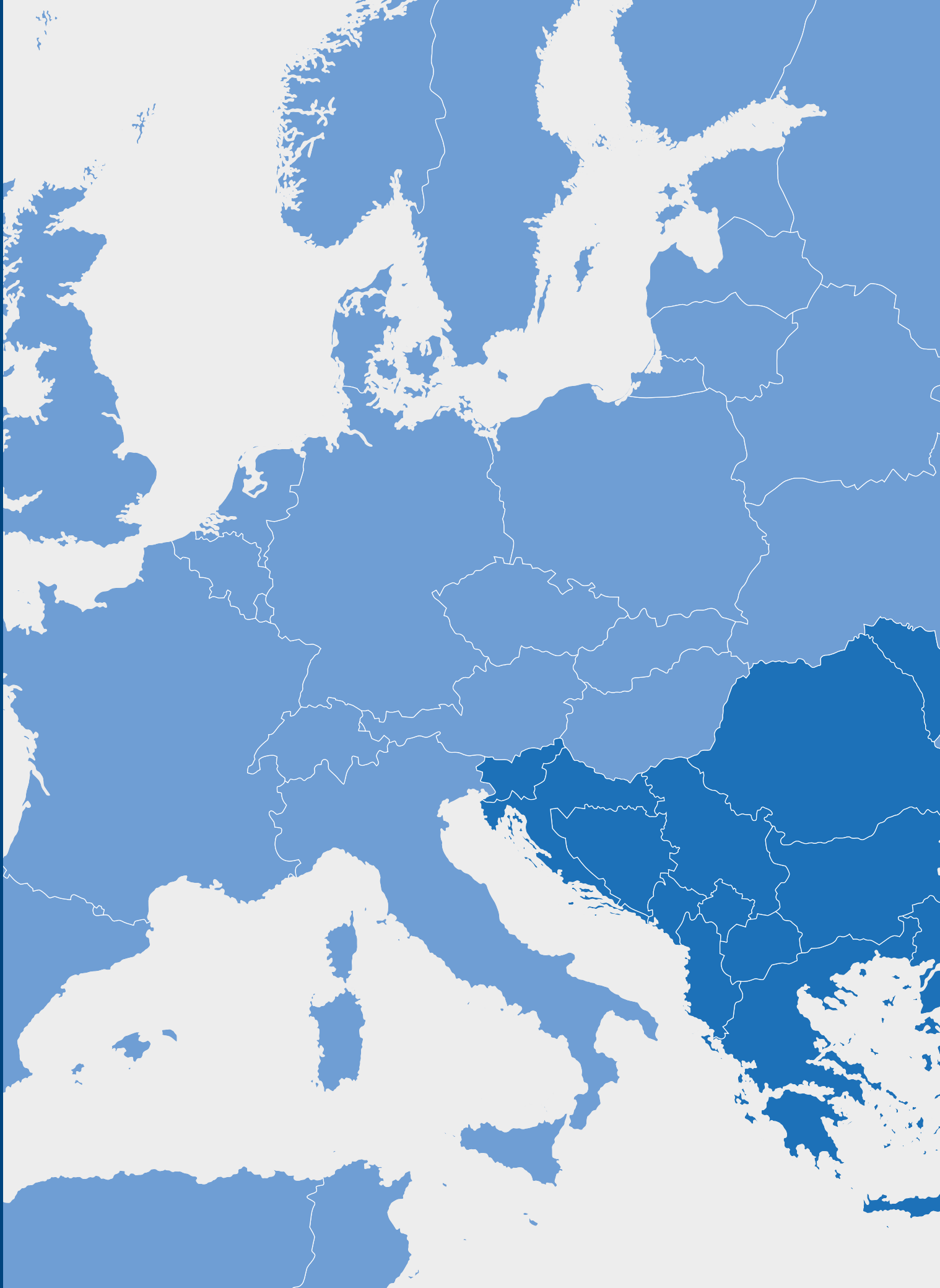
# POLITICAL TRENDS & DYNAMICS



**WHY WE SHOULD CARE ABOUT DEMOGRAPHY –  
POPULATION TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE**

**BRIEFING**  
Volume 2 | 2022

**SEE**  Dialogue  
South-East Europe



## EDITORIAL



Is demography destiny? Probably not, reassures Ivan Krastev in this issue of *Political Trends and Dynamics in Southeast Europe*, which focuses on the topic that has recently made a big comeback to the minds of policymakers and scholars in Europe. Thinking about population dynamics is surely as old as human civilization. The planning of adequate social policies in response to demographic trends has been part and parcel of modern Western policymaking, and yet, for decades demographic issues have not been given much attention. Demography has sometimes been associated – needless to say unfairly – with a discredited Malthusian approach to the study of human populations. As a result, concerns over demographic pressures have for some time been associated primarily, if not exclusively, with ethno-nationalist and nativist politics.

In fact, emigration and changes in population are central to understanding the worrying ethno-populist and nativist political trends in Central Europe, as argued by Ivan Krastev. This “demographic anxiety”, the debilitating feeling that in “a world in which there are too many people, ... there are [only] few of us”, has been a source of frustration and political radicalisation in many post-Communist member states of the EU. Krastev discusses the impact of demographic change on economic policies. But what is less visible, though equally, if not more threatening, are the negative consequences of demographic change for the resilience of democratic institutions. We are accustomed to the study and analysis of democratic transition, but that process cannot be understood without reference to the “demographic transition” of the last thirty years, as Krastev argues. In fact, it is impossible to understand the current phase of modern European – one would argue, global – societies without reference to population dynamics and demographic change. And yet, scholarship and policymaking does not always adequately appreciate the way that complex policy problems in Europe today are linked to demography.

The numbers presented by Tim Judah in this issue are staggering. His collected data and statistical evidence showcase a population decline in many European countries that is probably unseen in peacetime, at least in modern times. In a period of thirty years, former Communist Central and Southeast Europe have lost millions of people; in some countries, 25 to 30 percent of

their population. In the Western Balkans, which are yet to join the EU, 1.3 percent of the total population legally moved to the EU in just the year of 2018. Many others have also moved temporarily, as the visa-free regime enables travel (except for Kosovars) and irregular employment in EU countries for up to several months each year.

The ‘triple trouble’ is the combined demographic effect of low fertility rates, mass emigration to the EU, and lack of inward immigration. Many countries in the wider region face labour shortages, as their own labour force is moving West in search of more opportunities, higher wages and better public services. And yet, it would be also misleading to think that the straightforward answer is inward immigration from non-European regions. As manifested in Western and Eastern Europe alike in the last thirty years, obstacles and resistance to hybridity and integration of immigrants are rife.

In addition, it is essential to note that the demographic challenge described above is linked to “gender inequality, gender discrimination and the social norms and practices that reproduce them”, as Gabriela Alvarez Minte and Marie Toulemonde argue in this issue. Gender inequality and discrimination remain pervasive in European societies while “gender-responsive family policies can have a significant impact” in addressing the root causes of demographic pressures. In other words, gender analysis points to the fact that policy responses to the demographic challenge are not mutually exclusive to progressive social policies. To the contrary, effective policymaking in response to population problems can only be linked to a progressive social policy agenda. But with our European societies increasingly polarised, developing a progressive social policy agenda for an issue that has for decades been dominated by the (far) right is easier said than done.

All the above point to the fact that demography is central, not only to contemporary policymaking, but also to understanding modern socio-political malaise in European societies. And, importantly, the answers are not straightforward and solving the policy riddle of economic and democracy implications of population change may push European societies to test the limits of their own declarative commitment to liberal values and confidence in the so-called European values. Demographic changes will also put to test broad aspects of future economic planning, which will affect the monetary and fiscal policies of governments, as well as many other aspects of everyday life over the coming decades.

*Alida Vračić and Ioannis Amrakolas*

# CONTENTS OF THIS ISSUE

01

EDITORIAL ..... 2

02

INTERVIEW ..... 6

*Ivan Krastev*

03

DEMOGRAPHY BY NUMBERS:  
WHAT IS ACTUALLY HAPPENING IN  
SOUTH, EAST AND CENTRAL EUROPE ..... 8

*Tim Judah*

04

DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGES  
IN EASTERN EUROPE:  
WHY ADDRESSING GENDER INEQUALITY  
AND DISCRIMINATION IS NECESSARY .....14

*Gabriela Alvarez Minte and Marie Toulemonde*

05

POLITICAL TRENDS & DYNAMICS OVERVIEW ..... 20

# INTERVIEW



## Ivan Krastev

Ivan Krastev is a political scientist, the chairman of the Centre for Liberal Strategies in Sofia, permanent fellow at the IWM (Institute of Human Sciences) in Vienna, and 2013-4-17 Richard von Weizsäcker fellow at the Robert Bosch Stiftung in Berlin. He is a founding board member of the European Council on Foreign Relations, a member of the board of trustees of the International Crisis Group and is a contributing opinion writer for The New York Times.

**It is fair to say that demography has very much become the center of many recent discussions both in terms of politics, and geopolitics. Why should we care about demography so much?**

The change of population, the number of people, the change of family structures, generational changes, this is what drives a lot of economic policies. It also changes the way democracy functions. Imagine a society in which 20% of people

are under 25 years old, and imagine a society where 60% of people are under 25 years old, are they going to be the same society?

For a long time we have talked about democratic transition, but demographic transition is also extremely important. It's a general trend, not just in one country. Demographic transition is very much related to the fact that we have a better health system, that infant mortality has de-

creased. As a result, you have families with a much smaller number of children and we also have much better educated women, which is one of the major explanations of demographic change. But as a result of it, our society is culturally becoming very different. The major argument about why we should care about demography is that if we aren't aware of these trends, we can end up not understanding that many of the political problems that we face today are very much rooted in demography.

For example, there are fears that a smaller generation of young people will be unable to sustain a welfare system, and that we are going to have a democracy in which a huge percentage of people are of retirement age. The question of how this is going to impact relations between the labour market and political participation is very much related to our understanding of demography. This is why demography matters. And while probably I'm not going to subscribe to the idea that demography is destiny, it is true that you cannot make sense of a modern society without understanding the major demographic changes that we're facing.

**There are two schools of thought related to the size of the population. One is that a shrinking population is a real threat to society, while the other suggests that we focus more on the quality of life rather than sheer numbers. What's your take on that?**

One thing has dramatically changed in our understanding of demography. Traditionally, starting in the 19th century, the biggest fear was that there will be too many people, and that there wouldn't be enough jobs or enough food for them. The sentiment was that the population is too large. Now, we have suddenly ended up on the other side of the story, where there are too few people, and we have to consider how to deal with demographic shrinking. I agree that the quality of life matters a lot. We are also renegotiating everything, including what it means to be young, and what it means to be old. Even 20 years ago, a 60-year-old was a person of re-

tirement age. Now for many people, 60 years old is a period where they felt more productive than ever. There are also political changes. It is quite interesting to see to what extent population numbers matter, particularly in democratic societies. Normally, we believe that a government changes because people are changing their mind. But quite often governments change because the structure of the population changes. For example, the large baby boomer generation of the 1960s very much re-created democracy. Large populations of young people change the way we feel about many things, including gender, labour, and war.

The question now is how a relatively small younger generation will shape the world. In a certain way, people younger than 25 years old are one of the most neglected minorities in Europe nowadays. This issue is important for many parts of the world and particularly for Central and Eastern Europe for several important reasons.

The relationship between fertility rates and life expectancy is a common issue. The fertility rate in Central and Eastern Europe is not particularly different than most Western European countries. The major story of course, is the level of outmigration.

Another issue is the ethnic homogeneity of societies which are not prepared for migration. In Eastern Europe, while you have relatively low birth rates, people tend to fear immigration more than in Western Europe due to the ethnic homogeneity in those countries. What's more, many young people leave these countries, leading to a general decline and decay. Historically, demographic decline was always strongly connected to the idea of cultural decay. We cannot understand the successes of the far-right parties if we don't understand demographic anxieties about "there are many people but too few of us." From this point of view, this really matters because it determines how our politics and our democracies are shaped. This is not simply about numbers; it is how people feel about numbers.

**Southeast Europe not only experiences low fertility rates, which is not that different from Western Europe, but also has high levels of emigration and very little immigration (if we discount people returning to their home countries). Given this trend, how realistic is it to expect these countries to prosper if they remain so closed to immigration?**

They will have to open, and this opening is going to be very selective. It is quite interesting to see how differently most Eastern European societies responded to Ukrainian refugees compared to the refugees coming from the Syrian war. Societies are never equally open to everybody. We're always selective when we are opening our societies, and this selection can be based on cultural proximity. It can be based on education and economic capacities - this is a different way to select people. Political communities always have mechanisms of inclusion as well as for exclusion; they always decide who's in and who's out. In my view, what is going to be interesting is not to what extent we're opening but to what extent we're going to be ready to give political citizenship to the people coming into our countries. I can easily see countries in Southeast Europe becoming increasingly open to labour migrants from outside simply because our industries need it (and they need it desperately).

Contrary to the discourse that prevailed in Europe during the refugee crisis that we are open for real refugees, but not for labour migrants, here it is just the opposite. We're interested in labour migrants, but we're not particularly interested in refugees. It is likely that there will be temptation to allow people to work and have social rights without giving them political rights. In some of the small Central and Eastern European countries, in 15 or 20 years, you can end up with the following societal structures: 20% of the people very active in the labor market without the right to vote, 50% of voters are already at retirement age and therefore not in the labour market, another 10 or 15% live outside of the country and have the right to vote but do not pay taxes in the country. The question arises about how polit-

ical participation will relate to economic participation. To what extent is this type of an electoral body adequate to solve the economic problems of a society?

For example, in Vienna, 40% of people who live and work in the city cannot vote in Austrian federal or municipal elections. They can only vote at the district level. If some of these people were allowed to vote, the election results would probably be quite different. This type of opening for labour immigration is not equally beneficial for everybody, which leads to a lot of vested interest to keep the system as closed as possible.

This is why I believe that the change is going to be great, but our societies cannot survive if we're not ready to open up. Otherwise we're going to see the problem that some of the rural areas are facing. Depopulation means that young people are less interested in staying in rural areas; this also reduces the choices that people have in terms of who to marry, who to date, and where to live. This can lead to a sense of exclusion. Even if you're doing well in material terms, living in a place which feels abandoned can be depressing. During the 2019 elections, there was some interesting research done that showed that the regions in which the far-right parties in Europe did best were not the regions in which the economic situation was worst. Instead, they had experienced the sharpest decline in population over the last ten years.

On the other hand, there are new population dynamics partly due to COVID. We saw people moving from urban to rural areas; for example, almost 200,000 Bulgarians came back in the early days of the pandemic. Depopulation does not need to be a one-way street. The problem is to try to understand why people are leaving and, what is much more interesting, why people would come.

**The last question is a reflection on the effects of the war in Ukraine on demographic changes. We have heard about some Russians fleeing to other countries, some of them highly skilled, and we have also**

**heard stories about Ukrainian children being kidnapped and fostered into Russian homes. What does this mean? Is it too early to offer demographic projections on this?**

Because the war is still going on, we don't know when it's going to end, and we don't know how it will end. But still, several things can be said immediately. First, demography can also explain certain things about how a war happens. In American history, sometimes the Iroquois would start wars in order to capture people from another tribe to replace the people that they lost in the previous war. They were not interested in territory or destruction; they needed these people in order to replace the members of their tribe that they had lost.

In many respects, Putin's war in Ukraine was meant to help Russia compensate for the demographic losses that the country has experienced. The Russian president has repeated several times that if it was not for the Bolshevik Revolution and World War II, there would be 500 million Russians in the world today. So, because they are not there, they want to force Ukrainians to be Russians. This explains why we are seeing the aggressive adoptions of Ukrainian kids and sending them to Russia. But on the other hand, also, the war is producing a major movement of people.

The biggest movement, of course, is happening in the Ukraine itself. There are probably about six million people outside the country and most of them are young. The latest figure that I saw is that more than 50% of Ukrainian children are out of Ukraine. If we have a protracted war which goes on for two or three years, many more kids will begin school somewhere in Austria, in Poland, and Bulgaria, and the chances that them and their families would return to Ukraine are very much reduced.

We know this very well from the experience of Bosnia, where the majority of the people now live outside of the country. How is the Ukrainian reconstruction going to look if the country is

totally depopulated? I think we should really put much more effort to make sense of these demographic changes. Human capital is the most important capital for any type of development. This is not simply the quality of people in terms of their level of education, how motivated they are, but also the number of people. This is why when we try to imagine the post war world, it's quite interesting and important to know how many people there are, where they are going to live, and their average age and education level.

# DEMOGRAPHY BY NUMBERS: WHAT IS ACTUALLY HAPPENING IN SOUTH, EAST AND CENTRAL EUROPE



## Tim Judah

Tim Judah is the Balkans correspondent at The Economist. Since 2018 he has been working on the subject of demography in a project with the Europe's Futures initiative of the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna.

## ● KEY TAKEAWAYS

All of Europe is facing a demographic crisis, but the situation in the Balkans and most of central and eastern Europe is worse than anywhere else. In recent decades, the region has been hit by a triple whammy of emigration, low birth rates and a lack of immigration. Now a fourth factor, the legacy of Covid, has come into play, though its long-term effect is not clear. To date, no government in the region has found any credible answers as to how to reverse the trends of aging and a shrinking population.<sup>1</sup>

## “Mobility is part of the European Union’s DNA, but ...”

In 2020 Heiko Maas, then Germany’s foreign minister, opened a conference of young people discussing the future of the Western Balkans. In preparation he had been browsing some figures on demography and migration. He was shocked. “Mobility is part of the European Union’s DNA,” he said, but the numbers of people moving to the EU were simply “staggering” and it was no longer possible to “close our eyes” to the problems this was causing.

Maas could well have been talking of emigration from almost all of former communist Europe including EU members. That plus low fertility rates and, in most countries the lack of immigration, have meant that their populations are shrinking and ageing fast. Crucially the numbers of people of working age are also declining, which means that labour shortages are rapidly appearing in countries where the first post-communist years were blighted by unemployment.

The numbers are indeed staggering. For example, about one third of Albanian citizens, including everyone from the doctors to builders now live abroad. In 2018, before the pandemic interrupted flows of people, 228,000 citizens of the six non-EU Western Balkan countries or 1.3% of their combined populations moved legally to then still 28 countries of the EU. The real number is of course much greater if you consider that citizens of all western Balkan countries except Kosovars, do not need visas to visit Schengen zone countries and can stay and work illegally if they wish.

In 1989, the year communism collapsed, there were 8.9 million Bulgarians. According to last year’s census there are now only 6.5 million people in the country. Three decades ago there were 23.2 million people in Romania but according to the last estimate there were only 19.1 million. Moldova has already lost one third of its population, and by 2050 it is estimated it will have 45% less people compared to 1990. There are also projected to be 37% less people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 15% less in Poland, 20% less in Hungary and so on. No one wonder Andrej Plenković, Croatia’s prime minister, has called this “an almost existential problem for some nations.”

In January the results from Croatia’s 2021 census were released. They showed that there were some 3.8 million people in the country, or 10% less than a decade ago. In 1991 there were 4.78 million people in Croatia.

Most countries in south, eastern and central Europe have little or no immigration to make up for their falling numbers unlike Western European countries, so no new taxpayers and bus drivers. Whether the recent influx of Ukrainian refugees makes any long-term difference is of course an element that remains to be seen.

Low fertility rates are also a factor. For a population to renew itself women need to have an average of 2.1 children. The average fertility rate in the EU is 1.50. While Covid may have changed these numbers from 2020 there is no evidence that they will have changed significantly. In Bosnia and Herzegovina for example it is 1.26, one of

# What is important is not the number of people in your country, but what is in their heads

the lowest in the world. Serbia's fertility rate is 1.48, Bulgaria's is 1.55, Albania's is 1.33 while on the higher end of the scale Romania's is 1.79 and Montenegro's is 1.75.

In Slovakia it is 1.59 but lower rates from years past are already having a dramatic effect just as they are elsewhere. In 2008 for example there were 214,309 students in higher education, a figure which had plummeted to 116,124 in 2020. Some students study abroad but the biggest part of the loss, which will mean fewer well-educated workers, is thanks to the fact that there are simply fewer young people than there used to be.

Huge fluctuations in population are not new for Europe. Except in times of war or calamities like the Irish potato famine of the mid-19th century, Europe has never experienced such a demographic drama. Between 1876 and 1910, more than 3.5 million people emigrated from Austria-Hungary mostly – but not only – to North America, and families had five or six children so regions never depopulated. Since the Second World War, parts of western Europe, for example rural areas of Spain or the Massif Centrale in France, have seen massive depopulation. Tomas Sobotka, a Czech demographer, says the difference between that and what is happening now is the sheer speed of change today.

Look at the figures and you might be tempted to ask: "So what?" Indeed, Wolfgang Lutz the founding director of the Wittgenstein Centre for Demography in Vienna,

argues that what is important is not the number of people in your country but what is in their heads. Modern countries need well-educated populations to cope with the challenges of the future. That is true, up to a point. It is clear for example that the sheer number of people in a country is less important than how that number is made up.

Take Slovakia for example. According to last year's census there are 5.45m people in the country, although it is far from clear that that is actually true. Demographers believe that the true figure could be some 200,000 less as so many Slovaks who participated in the online census might have done so even though they actually now live abroad albeit keeping residence back home. Also, compared to the time of the previous census in 2011 the number of people aged 65 and above has increased from 12.78% of the population to 17.05% while the proportion of those of working age has declined from 71.8% to 67%. Compared to the time of the previous census in 2011 the number of people aged 65 and above has increased from 12.78% of the population to 17.05% while the proportion of those of working age has declined from 71.8% to 67%. Today there are 3.65 million people of working age, but according to Branislav Bleha, head of demography at Comenius University, that number will shrivel to 2.66m by 2060 while the number of elderly folks is set to balloon. Even though Slovakia is set to age faster than most of its neighbours, this is a trend that is common across the region.

In recent years Slovakia's economy has boomed. The country's factories make more than a million cars a year. With a declining labour force, the country is importing more workers from abroad than ever before. Just last year, 153,000 workers, especially from Ukraine and Serbia, came to Slovakia to keep the wheels of its economy rolling. The war in Ukraine has boosted the numbers of Ukrainians in Slovakia by another 79,000 although many are women and children as men of working age are not allowed to leave the country. Whether immigration will also be enough to give the economy a boost or politically acceptable, as a long run policy however is far from clear nor is it clear here or elsewhere how permanent Ukrainian refugee settlement will be.

Without immigration most Western European countries would be shrinking too, but in much of south, central and eastern Europe there is either none or it is a touchy subject. The conservative Hungarian and Polish governments have long made their opposition to immigration clear, but what they really mean is that they are opposed to migrants who are either Muslim or non-white or at least mostly, since there are increasing numbers of Indians and Nepalese in Poland and Vietnamese in Hungary. By contrast both countries have welcomed Ukrainian refugees.

In Poland some 2.5m people were estimated by 2015 to be living abroad, the biggest part of them having emigrated in a major wave since 2004 when Poland joined the EU. However, in a classic example of what demographers call cascade migration, some 2.2m foreigners were estimated to be working in Poland by 2020, of which 1.39m were Ukrainians, but by June of this year their numbers had been boosted by another 1.18m refugees.

Hungary has made up for its low birth rate and emigration too with immigration and now some 600,000 people who live there are foreign born. But of them more than two thirds are from Romania and Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine and the overwhelming majority of them are ethnic Hungarians. They have now been joined by more than 25,000 Ukrainian refugees.

In the rest of the region there is little immigration but as countries get richer and begin to experience labour shortages it is starting to happen. Filipinos and Nepalis are

moving to work in Croatia and in June the Serbian government's Ministry of Labour was reported to be finalising agreements on labour with Bangladesh, Vietnam and Guatemala. Sasa Torlaković, the president of the Union of Construction Workers was quoted as saying that these labourers were necessary since Serbian builders would rather work elsewhere in Europe "where they can get between 10 and 15 euros an hour," while "people from Asia are willing to work for 300 euros a month."

Before the Ukrainian war even in Moldova, the poorest country of Europe, Uzbeks and Kazakhs were coming to work in the vineyards as Moldovans do the same in Italy and Portugal. Since the war began more than 85,000 Ukrainians have settled temporarily in the country but it remains to be seen, as elsewhere, how long they will stay.

No one has done more in Europe to put the issue of demography on the political agenda than Victor Orban, Hungary's prime minister. While most governments in central and eastern Europe have little idea of what to do about the issue of population decline and ageing, Orban has made family policy a key plank of his government's policies since 2010. According to Katalin Novak, Hungary's president but until last December the Minister for Families, last year's budget allocated a sum equivalent to 5.2% of GDP to encourage Hungarians to have more children, via grants, subsidies and low-cost mortgages.

Hungary's fertility rate has certainly increased in recent years, but it has done so in lock step with those of neighbours like Czechia and Slovakia which have no comparable policies. This begs the question of whether such policies work. The answer seems to be, maybe a little, but not in the long term. In every year since 1981 more Hungarians have died than have been born and that is not about to change anytime soon. In 2019, the last year before Covid inflated the annual number of deaths beyond the normal, there were 89,193 births and 129,603 deaths and those numbers are almost identical to those of 2010 when Orban's current period in power began. In terms of births, they mean a smaller cohort of women of child-bearing age is having a few more children.

Even if such pro-natalist policies don't make much difference what is clear is that they serve an important political purpose. In 2019, Orban opened a conference on

# “ In the Western Balkans the issue of demography is also an ethnic issue ”

demography in which he said that it was hard for German and English speakers to understand “how a nation like Hungarians could disappear from the face of the earth,” but for Hungarians “it is not too difficult to mathematically predict that with the continuation of negative demographic trends...we would face potential extinction.” When he talks like this he taps into a deep-rooted Hungarian fear. According to Attila Melegh, a sociologist, in the 1930s Hungarian politicians were already fretting about low fertility and national decline.

Ivan Krastev, a Bulgarian political scientist talks of the fear of “ethnic disappearance” and in the case of his own country “the horror that in 100 years nobody will speak Bulgarian or will remember that there was Bulgaria.”

In the Western Balkans the issue of demography is also an ethnic issue. Huge changes in the ethnic proportions of Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo and between Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina helped contribute to fear and ultimately war in the 1990s. Those fears have not gone away. In 2020 Serbia created its first Ministry of Demography to tackle the topic of national shrinkage and ageing, (though what it actually does is unclear) but trying to boost the numbers of ageing Serbs against those of younger Albanians in the region is clearly another unspoken aim.

Scratch the data and you will find that such ethnic issues often lurk beneath the surface with politicians fretting about ethnic proportions of their nation be it the number of Serbs in Montenegro or Hungarians in Slovakia.

But numbers are often problematic. It is common to assume that censuses and national statistical agencies are serving up reliable data. In fact, much of it may be less reliable than ever before. For example, in Slovakia demographers are raising doubts about the country’s latest census figure. They think that there could be as many as 200,000 less people in the country than the number suggests. As the census was online, and no longer done by people knocking on doors, who could see if you were at home, many might well have filled in the form because they retain an address even though they might be living in Austria. There they might rent apartment, so they must register residence there. Hence, they may not only be counted in Slovakia where they don’t live but double counted too. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, across the region are distorting official numbers like this because they don’t de-register in their home country.

The more you look at the data then the more you realise how unreliable it often is. “Bad migration data,” says Miodrag Pantović, a Serbian demographer, is “the biggest problem, everywhere,” for anyone who needs to know how many people are where.

For years the Moldovan authorities had no idea how many people were in the country, not least because most Moldovans are eligible for Romanian EU passports making it hard to know how many citizens were coming and going and so figures were calculated adding births and subtracting deaths from old data. That gave it one of the lowest fertility rates in Europe. When new and far more reliable data was finally produced to show

that the number of people living in the country was far smaller than the old estimates suggested, that divided by the number of births produced a new fertility figure of 1.77 which is one of the highest in Europe.

The end of communism had two immediate demographic effects. First, the economic turmoil of the 1990s led to a crash in the number of births but these figures slowly began to recover, though they declined again after the world economic crash of 2008 but then recovered again but not to what they had been in the 1980s. Beset by poverty, people also began to migrate, though often illegally, to work in countries like Greece, Italy and Germany. As most of central and eastern Europe began to join the EU, that led to many of these people then legalising their situations and to a new wave of emigration. Today, as the economies of the former communist countries, with the exception of the western Balkans, are so much stronger, the era of the great waves of emigration are tailing off over and some people are even returning.

What is not yet clear however is how much of a legacy Covid leaves. The beginning of Covid saw large scale returns but it is not yet clear how many of those people subsequently stayed. Pantović also notes that Covid saw a huge increase in excess mortality in all Balkan countries followed in some but not all of them by “a kind of small baby boom.” It won’t be enough to change the underlying trends though. Excess mortality in Serbia in 2021 was of the order of 35,000 and the number of extra babies born in 2021 compared to 2020 was 488. To put this in context, last year 74,442 more people died in Serbia than were born. Even before Covid the number was alarming. In 2019, that figure stood at 37,059.

As Pantović puts it, for Serbia like elsewhere, in terms of depopulation, Covid simply “accelerated” existing trends.

In the past, emigration was the biggest challenge facing governments because if their people had no work at home, then it was better that they were employed abroad and sending remittances rather than unemployed (and cross at the ballot box) at home. Today fertility rates and the issues associated with ageing dominate the agenda and there is little evidence that any governments have yet found the answers of how to deal with them. While cash payments for extra babies can boost numbers by a small amount, the evidence from elsewhere suggests the increase will only be temporary.

## References

- 1 Figures and background for the countries discussed can be found in Tim Judah’s series on demography in SEE / CEE published by Reporting Democracy / Balkan Insight and from national statistical agencies.

# WHY ADDRESSING GENDER INEQUALITY AND DISCRIMINATION IS NECESSARY



## **Gabriela Alvarez Minte and Marie Toulemonde**

Gabriela Alvarez Minte is the Regional Gender Advisor for UNFPA's Regional Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia. She is an international development practitioner that has worked extensively in the United Nations System at national and country level.<sup>1</sup>

Marie Toulemonde is a Gender Specialist at the United Nations Population Fund for Eastern Europe and Central Asia and manages the regional project, *Expanding Choices: Gender-Responsive Family Policies for the Private Sector in the Western Balkans and Moldova*.<sup>2</sup>

## ● **KEY TAKEAWAYS**

This article highlights how gender (in)equality is linked to Eastern Europe's demographic challenges, in particular its low fertility rates. Persistent gender inequality, gender discrimination and the social norms and practices that reproduce them affect all aspect of people's lives, including people's decision on how many and when to have children. As countries and societies have not solved the problem of the unfair burden of unpaid care and domestic work that is rooted in gender inequalities, many times women must choose between having a career, i.e. their own independence and economic autonomy, or having the number of children that they want.

## As demography sometimes relies on biological imperatives, it leaves the social and aspirational character of fertility decisions out of the analysis ...

Many countries in the European region are starting to get smaller populations, and this is accompanied by a great deal of concern. These concerns are mainly about how a smaller and older population will affect the economies, social systems, and infrastructure of each country. Public discussions have centered around the topics of low birth rates across most of Europe, where the total fertility rate is 1.6 children per woman<sup>3</sup>

The problem in addressing these concerns starts with traditional demography being unable to fully include and understand social phenomena such as gender. Feminist scholarship faces challenges to making inroads in mainstream demographic thinking.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the contribution of gender analysis is vital: the gendered institutions, gender roles, gender power imbalances, and gender discriminations are an intrinsic part of how people make decisions and the choices they have available to them regarding their own fertility. The choices and decisions on how many children, and when and why to have children are affected by peoples' own life expectations, the institutions and systems in place that support these choices, and social expectations about motherhood mainly, as well as fatherhood.<sup>5</sup>

McDonald (2000) noted that fertility cannot be understood in a one-dimensional manner, and one must con-

sider the impact gender (in)equality has on childbearing and childrearing, as a lifelong endeavor which affects woman's future. As demography sometimes relies on biological imperatives, it leaves the social and aspirational character of fertility decisions out of the analysis,<sup>6</sup> and women's agency can be absent from demographic narratives.<sup>7</sup> Here is where we start making the link between demographic challenges and gender equality. In order to address why people are not having more children, we also need to ask ourselves who would be taking care of these children and how this influences the choices that women make.

As in most of the world, across Eastern Europe, gender inequality and discrimination remain pervasive, influencing family relationships and dynamics and reflecting across societies and at the workplace. These stem from harmful social and gender norms, stereotypes and practices that diminish the value of women and girls compared to men and boys, including their roles in the work force and economy. Gender inequality undermines social and economic progress and limits women's participation in the labour force, with low levels of employment among women recorded across the region, at only 14.1% in Kosovo, and high gender gaps in labour force participation rates, up to 47.2% in Turkey.<sup>8</sup> In Southeast Europe and Central Asia, one in three women are employed in a vulnerable job, and women are up to three times more like-

# Statistics show that many fathers want to be more involved in the lives of their families

ly to be employed part-time compared to men in Eastern Europe. Not only does this contribute to the gender pay gap, with women in Europe and Central Asia earning on average 21.6% less than men per month and up to 42% less in Azerbaijan, but also to the pension gap, where women's pensions are 20% lower than men's in both Moldova and Albania.

Traditional and harmful gender norms, roles, and stereotypes are pervasive. For instance, 76% of people in Moldova agree that women are better at caring for children. Such norms and roles are not void of consequences. Seeing women as caregivers means that in 66% of households with children in Moldova, women are the ones who stay home when a child is sick. In general, women in the region can spend up to three hours more per day than men on unpaid care work.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, a majority of men in Armenia, Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, and Azerbaijan<sup>10</sup> agree that it is better for preschool children to have a mother who does not work.<sup>11</sup>

Reciprocally, men's breadwinner role limits their ability to actively engage in the caregiving of their children, even if many of them desire to. Statistics show that many fathers want to be more involved in the lives of their families. For example, in Moldova, almost 59% of men stated that they would rather work less in order to spend more time with their children. In Armenia, more than half of men recog-

nize that they spend too little time with their children because of their work, with a 51% of men expressing a desire to work less in order to spend more time with their children.<sup>12</sup> Even when paternity leave is provided, a lack of adequate compensation rates and fear of backlash from employers and peers limit men's uptake. Anecdotal evidence from UNFPA showed that men understand the value of taking paternity leave, from being closer to their children to removing barriers to their partners' careers, but many have not taken paternity leave due to legal provisions not existing, a lack of knowledge of such provisions or not feeling allowed or empowered to do so. These norms and stereotypes are not limited to individuals but are then replicated in policies at the public and private sector levels. For instance, in Albania, only 21% of businesses consider it reasonable to apply family-friendly policies for men.<sup>13</sup> More equal social and gender norms would ensure that rigid and harmful gender roles and stereotypes are addressed and would provide a supportive environment for unpaid care work to be more equally distributed between men and women.

The result is that many families either end up with fewer children than they want, or women are unable to reach their career potential. In fact, in Albania, 88% of employees find it difficult to raise a child, with 60% of women perceiving becoming a parent as a risk to their career.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, this pushes many women in the region into

## Gender-responsive family policies can have a significant impact on such demographic changes

part-time, flexible, low-paid, and vulnerable jobs with little career advancement opportunities which, in combination with increased life expectancy, adversely impacts demographic resilience, and significantly increases the risk of women facing poverty in their old age.

Gender-responsive family policies can have a significant impact on such demographic changes by removing such barriers to women's labour force participation and to family's fertility intentions. However, for gender-responsive family policies to be effective, they need to respond to the realities of families and not to traditional ideals of heteronormative, nuclear families.<sup>15</sup> With populations ageing, emigration, and family formations and structures evolving beyond the nuclear family, policies must be designed to cover these changes and new realities in order to avoid the exclusion of those who may need the most support. However, such demographic concerns have also been used to push a conservative narrative that promotes a traditional, idealized version of the heteronormative, nuclear family and to further constrain women to child-bearing and unpaid domestic work while upholding the male breadwinner model.<sup>16</sup>

National legislative and normative framework can play a significant role in ensuring gender equality and demographic resilience. However, limited policies around parental and career leave or flexible work arrangements,

lack of childcare and eldercare services and infrastructure, compounded by gender-blind and maternalistic policy solutions to the COVID-19 pandemic has made it nearly impossible for women to combine a career and a family. For instance, in Kosovo, the majority of parental leave such as maternity and paternity leave is paid for by the employer with no compensation levels mandated for paternity leave. This leads to both gender discrimination in recruitment as employers see female workers in the age group most likely to have children as a cost to the company, while low paternity leave uptake is due to inadequate compensation levels.

There is also some evidence that when employers and companies adopt and implement gender-responsive family policies and practices (through family friendly workplaces for instances), this allows their employees to better balance their work and life responsibilities. The burden of unpaid care work is a barrier to women entering and remaining in the labour force; for instance 32% of women (15–29 years) in Albania are neither employed nor at school due to unpaid care work responsibilities.<sup>17</sup> In Moldova, 13% of the total inactive population are homemakers, often forced into this position due to lack of nursery and preschool services especially in rural areas – of these, 95.7% are women.<sup>18</sup> It's important to note that unpaid care work is not limited to childcare, but often includes care for other family members or peers.<sup>19</sup> In Alba-

nia, 15% of employees reported taking care of other sick relatives or persons with disabilities. Studies have shown that the returns of investment of family-friendly workplaces to companies are non-negligible – from increased productivity, to reduced absenteeism, reduced health and recruitment cost, and overall greater business incomes.<sup>20</sup>

In summary, as people decide how many children they desire and how to create the families they aspire towards, the vision of their own, personal future is important. This is where the institutional enabling environment must catch up with women's aspirations and address gender inequality and traditional gender roles, which still drive some of the legal framework, and some of the mainstream demographic scholarship. Societies are composed of people with different interests, levels of power, and status, and the burden of unpaid care and domestic work has been far too long on the shoulders of women. If we want to have peaceful and thriving populations, it is time we think of what is limiting women's opportunities and choices.

## References

- 1 Gabriela Alvarez Minte is the Regional Gender Advisor for UNFPA's Regional Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia. She is an international development practitioner that has worked extensively in the United Nations System at national and country level. She specialises in gender and development and has more than eighteen years of experience in the international cooperation system in Latin America, Eastern Europe and Central Asia and globally, working on women's empowerment, gender norms and the promotion and protection of the rights of women and girls. She has a PhD in development studies from Birkbeck, University of London, and she has been part of international academic seminars guest lecturer and has published academic papers. She holds a Social Anthropology degree from Universidad de Chile, a Masters degree in Sociology from the University of Oxford (Green Templeton College).
- 2 Marie Toulemonde is a Gender Specialist at the United Nations Population Fund for Eastern Europe and Central Asia. She manages a regional project, *Expanding Choices: Gender-Responsive Family Policies for the Private Sector in the Western Balkans and Moldova*, which works with governments, the private sector and civil society to expand choices for women and men through policies that support more equal redistribution of the unpaid care work, better work-life balance, and removes barriers to people's careers and fertility aspirations. Prior to that, she has served with a number of NGOs and UN Agencies to support women's economic empowerment, gender equality, social inclusion, including through private sector engagement and through strengthening the accountability and capacity of development actors. Marie holds a Master's degree in International Development and Gender from University College London and a Bachelor's degree in Economics from Bristol University.
- 3 Alanna Armitage What to do about Eastern Europe's population crisis? 22 October 2019 <https://eeca.unfpa.org/en/news/what-do-about-eastern-europes-population-crisis>.
- 4 McDonald, P., 2000. Gender equity in theories of fertility transition. *Population and development review*, 26(3), pp.427–439.; Riley, N.E., 1998. Research on gender in demography: Limitations and constraints. *Population Research and Policy Review*, 17(6), pp.521–538.; Williams, J.R., 2010. Doing feminist-demography. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 13(3), pp.197–210.; Presser, H.B., 1997. Demography, feminism, and the science-policy nexus. *Population and Development Review*, pp.295–331.; Riley, N.E., 1999, September. Challenging demography: Contributions from feminist theory. In *Sociological Forum* (Vol. 14, No. 3, pp. 369–397). Kluwer Academic Publishers-Plenum Publishers.; Goetz, J., Höft, S., Oláh, L. and Pető, A., 2022. Discourses on demography in the EU institutions.
- 5 Alvarez Minte, G., 2020. Resistance to sexual and reproductive rights: Maternalism and conservatism. In *Motherhood, social policies and women's activism in Latin America* (pp. 123–144). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
- 6 McDonald, P., 2000. Gender equity in theories of fertility transition. *Population and development review*, 26(3), pp.427–439.
- 7 McCann, C.R., 2017. Figuring the population bomb: Gender and demography in the mid-twentieth century. University of Washington Press.
- 8 Kosovo Labour Force survey (2020). Fillo, G.F. & Negruta, A., 2020. Keep The Promise, Accelerate The Change: Taking stock of gender equality in Europe and Central Asia 25 years after Beijing. UN Women.
- 9 Ministry of Health, Labour and Social Protection, National Bureau of Statistics, UNFPA, NIDI-GGP, 2020. Republic of Moldova - Generations and Gender Survey.
- 10 Armenia, 75 percent; Ukraine, 65 percent; Republic of Moldova, 60 percent; Belarus, 58 percent; Azerbaijan 52 percent.
- 11 [https://eeca.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/analitical\\_brief.pdf](https://eeca.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/analitical_brief.pdf).
- 12 [https://menengage.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/180829\\_Gender\\_Fatherhood%20PB\\_ENG\\_WEB.pdf](https://menengage.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/180829_Gender_Fatherhood%20PB_ENG_WEB.pdf).
- 13 UNFPA & IDRA, 2022. Implementing Family-Friendly Policies and Gender Equality in the Public and Private Sectors.
- 14 UNFPA & IDRA, 2022., Implementing Family-Friendly Policies and Gender Equality in the Public and Private Sectors.
- 15 <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2019/Progress-of-the-worlds-women-2019-2020-en.pdf>.
- 16 Goetz, J., Höft, S., Oláh, L. and Pető, A., 2022. Discourses on demography in the EU institutions.
- 17 [https://eeca.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/expanding\\_choices\\_data\\_analysis\\_ff\\_policies\\_eng.pdf](https://eeca.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/expanding_choices_data_analysis_ff_policies_eng.pdf).
- 18 [https://eeca.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/summary\\_in\\_en.pdf](https://eeca.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/summary_in_en.pdf).
- 19 Ministry of Health, Labour and Social Protection of the Republic of Moldova, National Bureau of Statistics, UNFPA, NIDI-GGP, 2020. Republic of Moldova - Generations and Gender Survey.
- 20 [https://ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_emp/---emp\\_ent/---multi/documents/publication/wcms\\_756721.pdf](https://ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_ent/---multi/documents/publication/wcms_756721.pdf).

# POLITICAL TRENDS & DYNAMICS

## OVERVIEW

This section aims to provide a comprehensive analysis and understanding of human security, which includes structural sources of conflict such as social tensions brought about by unfinished democratization, social or economic in-

equalities or ecological challenges, for instance. The briefings cover fourteen countries in Southeast Europe: the seven post-Yugoslav countries, Albania, Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Romania, and Moldova.

During the late spring and early summer of 2022, countries in Southeast Europe remained focused on the war in Ukraine. The main discussion, however, has slowly shifted from the immediate security and humanitarian consequences of the Russian aggression to its energy and economic repercussions. Most countries have introduced measures to tackle the rising fuel prices, while the leaders of Greece and Bulgaria inaugurated a new Bulgarian-Greek pipeline on July 9<sup>th</sup> that will supply natural gas from Azerbaijan.

Prime Minister of Greece Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Prime Minister of Bulgaria Kiril Petkov open a new pipeline between the two countries  
Source: Government of Bulgaria



Despite the economic consequences, no country has introduced major foreign policy changes during this period, with the member states of the European Union and most of the Western Balkan countries continuing to impose sanctions on Russia. Turkey, on the other hand, kept its role as a mediator between Moscow and Kyiv, while Serbia still refuses to join the common EU position and introduce restrictive measures.

Political events unrelated to Ukraine have also started to make a comeback. The new Government of Slovenia started tackling domestic issues, while the reformist Government in Bulgaria was toppled in a no-confidence vote in June and the country is set up for the fourth parliamentary election in two years.

Issues of rule of law and corruption, the dominant topics in the region before the war, have also returned to the public eye to a certain extent. In Moldova, former Presi-

dent Igor Dodon was placed in house arrest in May for multiple corruption allegations, including unjustified enrichment. Meanwhile, in Cyprus, four people will face a criminal trial over their suspected role in apparently giving naturalizations to foreign investors with a criminal record through the so-called “golden passport” schemes.

## REGIONAL SECURITY: TRANSNISTRIA AND KOSOVO REMAIN FRAGILE

The most fragile parts of the region have seen multiple incidents and heightened tensions, but the security situation has not deteriorated dramatically.

In the Moldovan breakaway region of Transnistria, several bomb explosions have taken place, but the observers have interpreted them to be false flag operations by Russia, which still keeps around 1,600 troops there. Nevertheless, there are currently no serious indications that the area, sandwiched between Moldova and Ukraine, will become directly involved in the war. In July, Moscow accused Chisinau of sabotaging the rotation of the troops in Transnistria, which the Government of Moldova denied, claiming that Russia had not complied with the established criteria.

Tensions once again rose between Serbia and Kosovo on July 31<sup>st</sup>, as the latter's Government moved to implement the decision on the reciprocity of the use of Serbian ID cards and license plates. Serbia recognizes neither Kosovo's ID cards nor license plates with state symbols of Kosovo and the Government of Albin Kurti announced at the end of June that Kosovo will adopt the same policy towards Serbia from August 1<sup>st</sup>.

On the last day of July, following the weeks of extremely heated rhetoric from Belgrade, Serb residents of the north of Kosovo once again set up roadblocks in the area, while air raid sirens were set off in Serb-populated North Mitrovica. Following meetings with European and American officials, Kurti's government announced it would postpone the implementation of the decision to September 1<sup>st</sup>. Serbia did not make moves to deploy its armed forces to Kosovo, while NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) stated it was prepared to intervene if stability was jeopardized.

The episode is expected to represent a further challenge for the successful continuation of the EU-facilitated Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue, which in June yielded a roadmap for the implementation of the Energy Agreement between the two sides, the end goal of which is the complete integration of the Serb-populated North in the energy sector of Kosovo.

Many Ukrainian refugees are still in the region of South-east Europe, though their numbers have decreased since the first weeks of the war as other European countries have offered accommodation. As of the last week of July, according to the data of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), Moldova, Romania, and Bulgaria each record between 80,000 and 90,000 refugees. An additional 48,000 of people in Romania and 124,000 people in Bulgaria have been registered for national protection schemes. Bulgaria went through political controversy as it decided to end the seaside housing program for refugees as it was preparing for the summer tourist season.

## EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION: BETWEEN HOPE AND PESSIMISM —●

The calls for accelerating the region's integration into the European Union had already begun during the early days of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, framing it as a geopolitical investment in European security. Five months later, some steps have been made, but the results have been regarded as mixed at best.

On June 23<sup>rd</sup>, Ukraine and Moldova were granted EU candidate status. President Maia Sandu stated that, as a candidate country, Moldova can advance with changes faster given that it will enjoy the EU's support and the resources provided by Brussels, while Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilă described the candidacy as a chance that should not be missed. Pro-Russian former President Igor Dodon, on the other hand, stated that he did not expect the country's EU membership any time soon. Georgia itself was not given candidate status but offered a "European perspective" which places it among the potential candidates for EU accession.

The speed with which the EU made the decision on the candidacy of Ukraine and Moldova, less than four

months after their formal application, was contrasted with the state of the EU enlargement policy to the Western Balkans. On the same day that the decision on Kyiv and Chisinau was made, an EU-Western Balkan leaders' meeting was held, but no formal progress towards membership was made with any of the countries. The dissatisfaction of the Prime Ministers of North Macedonia and Albania, Dimitar Kovačevski and Edi Rama respectively, who were once again denied the opening of accession talks, was clearly communicated by the two leaders in a joint press conference with the President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić. The three of them even publicly considered not accepting the invitation to come to Brussels on June 23<sup>rd</sup>, knowing that no decision will be made – the step would have been unprecedented. Additionally, Bosnia and Herzegovina was not granted a candidate status, while Kosovo was not granted visa liberalization with the EU.

The EU managed to, at least partially, rectify the decision on North Macedonia and Albania several weeks later, finally opening the accession talks with the two countries on July 19<sup>th</sup>, after Bulgaria had lifted the veto on the adoption of the Negotiating Frameworks with Skopje and Tirana. The countries began their screening processes the same day, which is a necessary precondition for the future opening of the negotiating clusters.

Opening of EU accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania, July 19<sup>th</sup> 2022. Source: EC AV Portal



Nevertheless, the circumstances in which the negotiations with North Macedonia were opened left a sour taste in the mouth of multiple observers. The decision came after the parliaments of both Sofia and Skopje accepted the compromise solution of the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union. It stipulates that North Macedonia will not be able to proceed to the next phase, including the opening of negotiating cluster, before it changes its Constitution to include the rights of the Bulgarian national minority. Also, North Macedonia will have to “reflect good relations with Sofia” during the accession negotiations, which many interpret to mean further concessions regarding the history and identity issues. In addition, the proposal states that Bulgaria does not recognize the Macedonian language.

While it enabled Skopje and Tirana to advance to the next stage of the accession process, many citizens of North Macedonia, including pro-European public figures, criticized the French compromise as requiring too many concessions from North Macedonia, which already made significant sacrifices by changing its name to end a decades-long dispute with Greece. Meanwhile, members of the right-wing and Eurosceptic opposition organised protests against the French proposal in Skopje, which at several points turned violent. It is unclear whether a two-thirds majority for the required change of the Constitution, which will have to involve members of the opposition VMRO-DPMNE party, will be achieved.

Other developments in the area of deepening the region's integration into the Euro-Atlantic community included the July 12<sup>th</sup> final decision of the EU Finance ministers to approve Croatian membership in the Eurozone, meaning that the country will start using the single currency from 2023. In May, Kosovo submitted its application for membership in the Council of Europe, following the expulsion of Russia from the organisation. The country has been recognised by the necessary two-thirds majority of members needed to become a member, but it remains to be seen if the candidacy is politically viable.

Meanwhile, on June 12<sup>th</sup>, party leaders of Bosnia and Herzegovina signed a “Political agreement on principles for ensuring a functional Bosnia and Herzegovina that

advances on the European path”, pledging to organise the 2022 general election efficiently and to adopt priority legislation.

EU-Bosnia and Herzegovina leaders' meeting, June 12<sup>th</sup> 2022

Source: Council of the EU



The largest Croat party, HDZ, did not sign the document owing to the presence of the Croat Member of Presidency Željko Komšić, whom the party considers illegitimate. In its conclusions adopted on June 23<sup>rd</sup>, European Council expressed willingness to grant Bosnia and Herzegovina candidacy status and called the European Commission to swiftly report on the state of the implementation of 14 priority reforms outlined in its 2019 Opinion.

## FOREIGN POLICY AND REGIONAL RELATIONS

The majority of the countries in the region continued to support Ukraine in the war against Russia, with almost all non-EU member states also aligning with the restrictive measures on Russian Federation. In mid-June, Prime Minister of Montenegro Dritan Abazović and Prime Minister of Albania Edi Rama visited Kyiv to express support for Ukraine's candidacy for EU membership. They were followed several days later by President of Romania Klaus Iohannis, who accompanied French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, and Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi, with all leaders pledging further support to Ukraine in a meeting with President Volodymyr Zelensky.

Serbia, on the other hand, continued not to impose sanctions on Russia. The public opinion in the country has remained strongly pro-Russian, with the majority of citizens blaming the West for the conflict, according to multiple polls. On May 29<sup>th</sup>, President Aleksandar Vučić agreed on a much-publicized gas deal with Russian President Vladimir Putin, allegedly on favorable conditions. During the subsequent week, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov was scheduled to visit Belgrade, but was ultimately unable to arrive when Bulgaria, North Macedonia and Montenegro closed their respective air space.

Serbia has also remained active in its regional policy, especially promoting the Open Balkan initiative, which it launched in 2019 (as “Mini-Schengen”) with Albania and North Macedonia. The leaders of the three countries jointly consulted on the participation in the EU-Western Balkans leaders meeting on June 23<sup>rd</sup>, hinting at the possibility of the Open Balkan being not only an economic but also a political initiative. Earlier in June 2022, another Open Balkan summit was held in Ohrid, North Macedonia, with Prime Minister of Montenegro Dritan Abazović and Chairman of the Council of Ministers of BiH Zoran Tegeltija participating as guests. Despite this, opposition to the initiative is still present in both countries, as well as in Kosovo. The critics have pointed at its limited results thus far and have continued to interpret it as a *de facto* alternative to EU membership, even though Edi Rama and Aleksandar Vučić have denied this.

In addition to openly supporting Montenegro’s membership in the Open Balkans, Dritan Abazović has made steps of improving relations with Serbia in another area, by agreeing to a so-called Fundamental Agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church, something which the previous Government of Montenegro tried but ultimately failed to achieve. The Agreement however, caused a rift in the ruling coalition, and the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), which supports Abazović’s minority Government, announced a vote of no-confidence if the Agreement is signed. On the 19<sup>th</sup> of August, a no-confidence vote toppled Montenegro’s government, led by Abazović.

Meanwhile, Turkey continued to act as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine, achieving the first significant result since the start of the war. On July 22<sup>nd</sup>, two agree-



Signing of the agreement on grain export from Ukraine in Istanbul, July 22<sup>nd</sup> 2022; Source: Presidency of the Republic of Turkey

ments, brokered by the United Nations and aided by Turkey, were signed at Istanbul.

The first agreement guarantees the safe passage of commercial ships from the Ukrainian port of Odessa and two other ports, which are currently cut off by a Russian naval blockade. A parallel agreement is supposed to facilitate Russian grain and fertilizer exports. The agreements will be in force for a period of 120 days and are renewable.

A couple of days earlier, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan participated in the trilateral meeting with Russia and Iran in Tehran, which marked the first visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin abroad since the start of the aggression on Ukraine. Erdoğan made the case for a further Turkish incursion into north-western Syria. He cited Kurdish forces in two towns in north-west Syria where Russian and Iranian forces are present, as justification for Turkey extending its zone of control in the country.

The Kurdish question was also in focus in June, when Erdoğan threatened to veto the accession of Sweden and Finland into NATO. The two Nordic countries submitted their applications in May, but were not given a green light by Turkey before Erdoğan agreed on the terms which many analysts described as a diplomatic victory for him. This was a welcome development for the authoritarian Turkish leader, given that his popularity has suffered in recent months ahead of the 2023 elections, mostly due to the devastating inflation which reached 80% in July. The agreement involved the Nordic coun-

tries lifting arms embargoes they had previously imposed on Turkey, toughening their laws against Kurdish militant activists that Ankara deems to be terrorists, and addressing Turkish extradition requests for suspected Kurdish fighters.

The relations between Turkey and Greece have also tightened, as Erdoğan announced on June 1<sup>st</sup> his country would no longer hold bilateral talks with Athens, accusing the Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis of trying to block sales of F-16 fighter jets to Turkey during a visit to the United States, where the Greek Prime Minister spoke with President Joseph Biden and addressed a joint session of both houses of Congress. Turkey's foreign ministry has also characterized the decision by the UN Security Council to extend the mandate of the UN peace-keeping force in Cyprus on June 28<sup>th</sup> as "unfair and unrealistic". Greece, meanwhile, accused Turkey of violating its airspace and resorting to heated rhetoric, though Mitsotakis stressed that the relations had not deteriorated to where they had been in 2020.

## CHANGES AT THE HELM

Following the election on April 24<sup>th</sup>, new left-liberal Government of Slovenia headed by Prime Minister Robert Golob was sworn in on June 2<sup>nd</sup>. Golob, following in the footsteps of Miro Cerar in 2014 and Marjan Šarec in 2018, swept the election polls with a new-founded political organisation, Freedom Movement, which subsequently formed a governing coalition with the Social Democrats (SD) and the Left party.

Long-time Member of the European Parliament and the leader of SD Tanja Fajon became Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister for Foreign Affairs, while the leader of the Left party Luka Mesec was given the portfolios of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Labor, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities. Former liberal parties that failed to cross the electoral threshold, the List of Marjan Šarec and the Party of Alenka Bratušek soon merged with Golob's party.

Golob's Government took office after a two-year right-wing populist rule by Janez Janša. It has attempted to distinguish itself from it, with the moves such as the adop-

tion of an "omnibus" act in July repealing eleven laws adopted under the previous Government. The law was drafted with the cooperation of non-governmental organisations, and the current ruling coalition has pledged further partnership with them. The situation in Slovenia is not without political challenges for the incumbents – journalists at the public broadcaster, RTV Slovenija, for example, went on strike on several occasions in May and June over longstanding problems of political interference in the editorial policy.

New Government of Slovenia; Source: Government of Slovenia



Meanwhile, in Serbia, the formation of the new institutions was delayed to an almost absurd extent, and the country is yet to receive a new Government, even though its elections took place three weeks before Slovenia. The voting at one polling station, in Albanian-population Veliki Trnovac in the southern part of Serbia, had to be repeated five times. Each time, the results were overturned by the Administrative Court due to irregularities, following an extended complaint procedure. Ultimately, the Republic Electoral Commission announced the final results of the parliamentary election on July 5<sup>th</sup>, more than three months after the original election date (April 3<sup>rd</sup>).

While the President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić was sworn in for a second term on May 31<sup>st</sup>, the new National Assembly of Serbia was only convened on August 1<sup>st</sup>, triggering the 90-day deadline for the election of the new government. It will again be formed by Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which has been left six seats short this time of an overall majority and will have to co-operate with at least two minority parties, a deal that ac-

cording to the announcements, has already been secured. It is still unknown whether the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), which has been a junior partner to SNS since 2012, will remain in the governing coalition, though it seems likely as the two parties already formed a small ruling majority in the capital of Belgrade (57 to 53 seats). Aleksandar Šapić, a former water polo player who entered local politics in 2009, became the new mayor of the Serbian capital.

Other countries in the region have also seen changes at the top of the government. On June 5<sup>th</sup>, Albania's Parliament elected General-Major Bajram Begaj for the country's next President with 78 out of 140 votes in favor. The governing Socialist Party nominated and voted for Begaj after failing to reach a compromise with the opposition on a candidate to replace President Ilir Meta, and no independent candidate was nominated. Most of the opposition boycotted the voting. The five-year presidency has a largely ceremonial role, and the chosen candidate is expected to stand above partisan divisions.

Ilir Meta, whose term officially ended on July 24<sup>th</sup>, immediately returned to active politics, renaming his Socialist Movement for Integration party to Freedom Party and announcing opposition work against his former partners, Edi Rama and the Socialist Party. On the other side of the Albanian opposition scene, former President, Prime Minister, and co-founder of Democratic Party Sali Berisha (77), has been elected its leader once again after nine years of taking a back seat role.

Several changes in the party politics of other regional countries also took place in recent months. In Montenegro, Miloško Spajić and Jakov Milatović, ministers in the 2020–2022 government of Zdravko Krivokapić founded a “Europe now” political movement, named after the economic program they launched while in office. In Serbia, opposition presidential candidate Zdravko Ponoš, who won 18% of the vote in April, launched his own political movement, “Serbia Centre”, while in Romania, former Prime Minister Dacian Cioloș broke away from the liberal USR and founded a new political party, REPER. In Greece, centre-left KINAL party, currently the country's third largest political force, revived the name of PASOK, which dominated Greek politics for decades before collapsing in the wake of the 2009 financial crisis.

## UPCOMING ELECTIONS ALREADY SHAPE POLITICAL DYNAMICS

Bulgaria is set to hold its fourth parliamentary election in less than two years this fall, as the reformist Government of Kiril Petkov, formed in December 2021, lost the confidence vote on June 22<sup>nd</sup>. Troubles for the Government began several weeks earlier when the populist party “There is Such a People” left the four-party ruling coalition. The party officially left over disagreements concerning the budget and policy vis-à-vis North Macedonia, with Petkov's Government preparing to lift the veto on Skopje's EU accession process, which the Parliament ultimately authorized it to do two days after toppling it in a no-confidence vote. Petkov, who came in office on the anti-corruption platform and was reliably pro-Western in the wake of the war in Ukraine, blamed Russian influence, as well as the country's mafia for the fall of his government.

Following three unsuccessful attempts to form a new ruling coalition in a fragmented parliament, all designated parties returned the mandate to President Rumen Radev, who is expected to formally dissolve the parliament and once again appoint a caretaker cabinet as the parties have already started to campaign for the new parliamentary election, which is expected on October 2<sup>nd</sup>. Following three elections in April, July, and November 2021, it will be yet another face-off between the established GERB and BSP parties, that once held a virtual duopoly over the country's politics, and the new reformist and populist parties formed more recently.

The general election on the same date of October 2<sup>nd</sup>, is scheduled to take place in another country in the region – Bosnia and Herzegovina. The process is taking place in the context of a political and institutional crisis, with political parties failing to agree on the electoral reform. The holding of the 2022 election itself was put into question at one point, with the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) blocking the decision on the release of funding for the process due to its dissatisfaction with the current electoral rules which, according to the party, put the Croat community in a disadvantage. This view has been strongly opposed by Bosniak and civic-oriented parties. In the end, the High Representative of the International Community for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Christian Schmidt, officially ordered the allocation of funds for the election.

Several weeks later, another decision of the High Representative regarding the election caused public outrage. From July 25<sup>th</sup> to July 27<sup>th</sup>, thousands of citizens protested in Sarajevo against the apparent changes Schmidt was intending to make to the electoral legislation, which were leaked to the public. Critics pointed out that they would help entrench ethno-nationalist parties (again, in this case Croat HDZ), but the changes appear to be supported by key Western countries. In the end, the High Representative imposed only technical changes regarding the work of electoral administration and public resources and gave political parties another six weeks in order to agree on the necessary changes.

The October general election in Bosnia and Herzegovina will take place after a period of high tensions and a political crisis. The first weeks of the campaign already saw the United States Embassy condemning “inflammatory comments” made by the leader of the Party of Democratic Action (SDA) and a candidate for BiH Presidency Bakir Izetbegović on “reviewing the numbers” of Bosniaks for “the worst-case scenario”, but also the “irresponsible response” from BiH Presidency member Milorad Dodik, who will not seek another term in that office, instead entering the race to return to his former position of President of Republika Srpska.

Another election campaign in the region has also already begun – the presidential election in Cyprus will take place on February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023, and a number of candidates are vying to succeed President Nikos Anastasiades in the country’s most powerful political office. The three leading candidates are the leader of the centre-right Disy Averof Neophytou, Andreas Mavroyiannis, who is backed by the left-wing Akel, and independent candidate endorsed by the centre-left Diko party Nikos Christodoulides.

## The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Southeast Europe

After more than two decades of engagement in southeastern Europe, the FES appreciates that the challenges and problems still facing this region can best be resolved through a shared regional framework. Our commitment to advancing our core interests in democratic consolidation, social and economic justice and peace through regional cooperation, has since 2015 been strengthened by establishing an infrastructure to coordinate the FES' regional work out of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina: the Regional Dialogue Southeast Europe (Dialogue SOE).

Dialogue SOE provides analysis of shared challenges in the region and develops suitable regional programs and activities in close cooperation with the twelve FES country offices across Southeast Europe. Furthermore, we integrate our regional work into joint initiatives with our colleagues in Berlin and Brussels. We aim to inform and be informed by the efforts of both local and international organizations in order to further our work in southeastern Europe as effectively as possible.

Our regional initiatives are advanced through three broad working lines:

- Social Democratic Politics and Values
- Social and Economic Justice
- Progressive Peace Policy

Our website provides information about individual projects within each of these working lines, past events, and future initiatives:

<http://www.fes-southeasteurope.org>

© 2022

### Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

Publisher: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Dialogue Southeast Europe

Kupreška 20, 71 000 Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

[www.fes-southeasteurope.org](http://www.fes-southeasteurope.org)

Orders / Contact: [info@fes-soe.org](mailto:info@fes-soe.org)

Responsible: Dr Ralf Melzer, Director, Dialogue Southeast Europe

Project Coordinator: Harun Cero

Editors: Vivien Savoye, Alida Vračić, Ioannis Armakolas

Managing Editors: Dr Ralf Melzer, Harun Cero

Editorial Assistants: Tea Hadžiristić, Azra Muftić

Communications: Ema Smolo

Design / Realization: pertext, Berlin

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), or of the organization for which the authors work. The FES cannot guarantee the accuracy of all data stated in this publication. Commercial use of any media published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung is not permitted without the written consent of the FES. Any reference made to Kosovo is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence. Any reference made to Macedonia in this publication is understood to refer to the Republic of North Macedonia.

This publication has been produced in cooperation with:





