

The EESC conference in Zagreb: tackling demographic issues will be crucial for the EU's survival



On 14 November, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) held a conference on demographic challenges in the European Union. As announced by the Croatian government, demographic revitalisation will feature high on the agenda of the upcoming Croatian presidency of the Council of the EU.

Opening the conference, the EESC president **Luca Jahier** drew attention to some alarming indicators showing a rapid decrease in the EU population. These indicators suggest that by the end of the century the EU's share of the total world population will be a meagre 4.1%. Half of the countries in the EU currently have a negative birth rate and life expectancy is rising, which necessarily leads to the ageing and shrinking of the working-age and reproductive-age population. As a result, by 2060, for every elderly person there will be two people of working age, compared to four currently.

This will change the position of the EU in the global economic and geopolitical environment and affect its influence in the world. The EU needs to address this challenge if it wants to maintain its role as a global player in the future. Therefore, I deem it very important that this issue features on the agenda of the future Croatian presidency, Mr Jahier said, adding that he was happy that the Commission had for the first time included demographics among the core priorities of its next five year mandate and nominated a vice-president for demography and democracy, Croatia's Dubravka Šuica.

The Croatian Minister for Demography, Family, Youth and Social Issues, **Vesna Bedeković**, gave the opening speech on behalf of the Croatian government.

Demography needs to be put in the focus of EU policies in order to preserve the development of all Member States. The birth rate currently stands at 1.59 on average and almost half of the children in the EU are the firstborn in their families. This is why Croatia has recognised demographic revitalisation as a key question for its further development, Ms Bedeković said.

She added that her ministry was currently preparing a strategic document that will introduce a series of measures aimed precisely at demographic revitalisation.

Some of these measures have already been implemented. The amount of maternity allowance for the second six months of maternity leave has been increased and a further rise is expected meaning that more than 60% of parents will be paid their full salary until their child's first birthday. Another measure passed prolongs the length of service of parents by six months for every child born or adopted for whom they had taken maternity or paternity leave. This will increase their pensions by 2% once they retire.

Effective measures supporting family policies and recognising the potential of migration as a remedy for labour shortage on Europe's labour markets are some of the possible solutions to demographic challenges, the EESC president said. Fostering intergenerational solidarity and fighting age discrimination on labour markets in order to use the potential of older workers to help spur the growth of Europe's economy could also be among the solutions.

On top of negative birth rates and an ageing population, the countries of central, eastern and southern Europe also face increased emigration of people, particular younger and well-educated people, to wealthier Member States.

Although free movement of workers within the EU, a fundamental principle of the Union and one of its greatest achievements, should ideally encourage a "brain exchange" among Member States, their social and economic differences make the reality much different.

According to the figures shown at the conference, there were 17 million people moving within the EU-28 in 2017. Most of them looked for a job in the UK, Germany, Spain, Italy and France, whereas most of movers arrived from Poland, Romania, Bulgaria and Portugal. Departure of workers also became a burning issue in Croatia.

A total of 175 135 people have left Croatia in the past five years, compared to just 79 753 who immigrated into Croatia. Since 2011, 105 103 more people died than were born. Every year the number of primary and secondary school students drops, Croatian demographer **Stjepan Šterc** said at the meeting.

Today Croatia does not have a single positive demographic indicator. Demographically speaking, we are disappearing, yet we have no national development strategy, Mr Šterc said.

*When such a large number of people emigrate, a country faces an existential risk. This is a universal problem for all eastern European countries, said the EESC member and Croatian trade unionist **Vilim Ribić**. Croatia does not implement any active economic measures that could respond to this problem. Measures introducing allowances in the framework of pro-natalist policies may result in more children being born, but after we invest in their education, these children will leave, to the benefit of the richest countries and at the expense of the poorest ones. This calls for urgent and strong action. Without adequate government economic policies, nothing is possible.*

Agnieszka Chłóń-Domińczak, associate professor at the Institute of Statistics and Demography, Warsaw School of Economics, said the statistics showed that the biggest decline in population by 2080 was expected precisely in the countries of central, eastern and southern Europe.

The EESC president stressed the need to reduce economic disparities among Member States as a precondition for the political sustainability of the European project and of all the benefits this project has already brought. He said that tackling demographic challenges could be seen as an opportunity to enhance the competitiveness of the European economy.

The EESC member **Marina Škrabalo**, head of Croatia's NGO Solidarna, said demographic challenges represented a chance to create a society built on democratic values that are enshrined in the foundations of the EU vision, such as the values of freedom, security, peace and sustainable development.

How can we create a society in which people want to live and raise their children? **Ms Škrabalo** asked, stressing the importance of the UN 2030 sustainable development goals, gender equality, proactive measures of pro-immigration policies and the European pillar of social rights, which secures some key rights and social protection for citizens.

We can build societies in which people come first and in which administrative structures are there to create conditions for development. Demographic challenges are a chance to confirm our democratic model, **Ms Škrabalo** concluded.

At the request of the Croatian presidency of the EU, the EESC will draft an opinion on *Demographic challenges in the EU in light of economic and development inequalities*. The rapporteur will be **Stéphane Buffetaut**, who was also one of the speakers at the conference.