



DISCOURSES ON EUROPE

THE AGING OLD CONTINENT



European
Commission

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Europe’s population is aging. Therefore, demographic issues have risen to one of the European Union’s priorities. In June 2020, the European Commission presented the [report on the impact of demographic change and its potential effects](#). It showed long-term demographic trends in the individual European regions, such as longer life expectancy, lower birth rates, aging of societies and progressing urbanisation. The report also highlighted Europe’s declining share in the global population: [by 2070, Europe will be home to only about 4% of the world’s inhabitants](#).

In March 2021, the European Parliament published [Demographic Outlook for the European Union](#), which shows that “the demographic situation in the EU-27 has an important influence on a number of areas, ranging from the labour market, to healthcare and pension systems, and education” as well as the shrinking working-age population. The report’s authors note that [“according to research, the coronavirus pandemic has led to slightly higher mortality rates and possibly lower birth rates, mainly owing to economic reasons such as increased unemployment and poverty”](#).

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An important EU event in this context was the [Porto Social Summit](#), which took place on 7 May 2021. It gave a political impulse to the implementation of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#), stressing its central role in the revival of Europe and adaptation to, *inter alia*, demographic changes.

What is the response to these changes of the Old Continent's societies? What actions are taken by the EU, national and local government institutions? What solutions for social policies are proposed by experts? How can the efforts of all stakeholders be combined and how to distribute the tasks? What role should the European Union play in this process? These were the topics discussed by the participants of the [on-line debate](#): **Magdalena Czarzyńska-Jachim** – Deputy Mayor of the town of Sopot, **Jowita Michalska**, President of Digital University, **Marzena Rudnicka**, President of the Polish Institute of Silver Economy, and **Dr. Adam Wroński**, Senior Eurostat Expert. The discussion was moderated by Dr. Małgorzata Bonikowska – President of THINKTANK, and a member of Team Europe. The debate was held on 2 December 2021, as part of the “**Discourses on Europe**” series organised by THINKTANK and the Representation of the European Commission in Poland.



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1. Aging of societies, solidarity between generations and new technologies

Good news for the Europeans is that we live longer. For example in Poland, in statistical terms [women live 6.5, and men almost eight years longer, respectively](#). It has led to quite significant changes in the functioning of the EU's societies. At the same time, the majority of the European Union Member States face the challenge of low [fertility rates](#). At the beginning of 2021, the European Commission published a [Green Paper](#) devoted to this issue, seeking to start a broad debate on the consequences of the aging of the Old Continent's population and actions that should be undertaken by public institutions to address this process. The EU supports analytical work on these themes as well as creation of new social policy solutions to respond to the changes.

Comments of the debate participants

Dr. Adam Wroński, Eurostat

Since about 2010, Poland experiences a very rapid growth of population above 65 years of age. Europe forecasts that from 2025, the number of people above 80 years of age will be growing fast, too. The process will reach Poland within the next 15 years. Senior citizens of this age are frequently in need of long-term care, which calls for the creation of a system of access to such services, their adequate quality, and provision of properly qualified personnel. There is also the challenge of the impaired mobility of the elderly and the fact that they are lonely and socially isolated.

Until 2011, the ratio of working-age people to the retired was 5:1; at present, it is only 3:1, and the ratio will continue to fall in the next decade down to 2.5:1. In other words, the number of pensioners is growing, and the number of working-age people is falling – to the extent leading to shortages of workers in some branches of the economy. It means that many changes are needed, for example a new approach must be taken to the pension system which requires to be based on greater solidarity between generations and a new redistribution logic. Furthermore, employment must grow,

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especially of women, whose pensions in the European Union are on average 30% lower than those of men.

Marzena Rudnicka, Krajowy Instytut Gospodarki Senioralnej (Polish Institute of Silver Economy)

At present, we are facing two overriding trends: aging of the society and low birth rates. As individuals, we are not able to influence population processes at large, however we can take care of our own physical fitness and quality of life in older age, which is defined by three types of resources: health, social relationships, and financial resources. These are the factors underpinning the longest living independence of mature people. Therefore, today's 40- and 50-year-olds should already now think about their future in the long-living society. The classical division into three generations is out of date, because the Europeans not only live longer, but are fitter as well. As a result, changes in public policies must be coupled with changes in language. In Polish, the word "senior" is not really applicable to 50-year-olds, who should rather be referred to as "mature persons" or "mature workers". In English these concepts are captured by the terms "power generation" or "silver generation".

Jowita Michalska, Digital University

New technologies improve the quality of life of not only young people, but the elderly as well. First of all, technology offers extensive support in medicine. Notably, it is not enough to only respond to disease; we should rather try to anticipate factors of illnesses and accidents and engage in prevention. Diagnostics and prophylactics are of key importance and strongly emphasised in the European Health Union. For example, the key to the treatment of the worst disease of our times, i.e. cancer, is early detection and diagnosis, greatly supported by new technologies. An important discovery in this context is, for example, the so-called [liquid biopsy](#), which looks for DNA and RNA pieces released by the tumour into the blood and thus allows for a majority of cancer types to be detected in a very early stage.

Still very few people realise that there are almost one thousand diagnostic devices available in the market: smart watches, bands and rings, etc. They not only diagnose, but also monitor our health.

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Robotisation is another progressing trend: in countries such as Japan, robots take over some functions of care for senior citizens, including administration of medicines prescribed by the doctor and making sure that the patients indeed take them. It is of critical importance in the context of the data which show that about 80% of deaths among the elderly are caused by improper medication: when left alone, these patients make mistakes or forget the recommendations they are supposed to follow.

Magdalena Czarzyńska-Jachim, Deputy Mayor of Sopot

Local governments and authorities play an important role in the implementation of the state's social policy, especially in a town such as Sopot, where as many as over 36% of the inhabitants are above 60 years of age. Our actions proceed along two paths. On the one hand, we try to prevent digital exclusion of the elderly. To this end, we introduced the [KWIDO programme](#), which distributed tablets and watches to almost 200 senior citizens, enabling them to have access to health monitoring, communication via applications customised to their needs, and cognitive stimulation thanks to hundreds of exercises designed specifically with this age group in mind. On the other hand, the town authorities offer a full range of care services.

Besides the policies addressed to senior citizens, we also try to attract young families with children to our town. In this context, housing policy is of key importance – and frequently a problem in smaller towns like Sopot. The statistics are truly alarming: 44% of adult Poles aged from 25 to 34 still live with their parents, and 52% of them are men.

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2. Promotion of life-long learning as a chance of work and life in dignity for mature persons

In 2017, the European Union announced the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). It sets out 20 principles towards strong social Europe: fair, inclusive and full of opportunity for all age groups, including mature persons and the elderly. [In March 2021, the European Commission presented its action plan for the implementation of the EPSR.](#)

In the plan, the Commission proposed a range of initiatives and set three targets to be achieved across entire Europe by 2030:

- 1) employment rate – at least 78%,
- 2) number of adults participating in training every year – at least 60%,
- 3) reduction in the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion – by at least 15 million.

Comments of the debate participants

Dr. Adam Wroński

Effective response to the issues of aging societies has become one of the priorities of the European Union. Every three years, the balance of EU Member States' finances is assessed, mainly for its impact on pension systems. The European Union identifies problems related to the aging of societies in individual countries and regions and develops programmes designed to address the challenges resulting from this process. One of the critical issues in this context is education, life-long learning, so that mature persons are not forced out of the labour market. Other key matters are social protection (including the fight against cancer) and access to essential public services (including long-term care), also for people with disabilities. During the pandemic, more attention was paid to the situation in care homes, because, regrettably, many of their residents died.

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Marzena Rudnicka

Before the pandemic, Poland had a successful track record for older age education. There were as many as [600 “Universities of the Third Age”](#), used by over 200 thousand retired persons (of whom 83% were women). A large group of these students had been socially active before, as well. At present, the situation is unclear, and the number of such educational establishments is going down. Furthermore, the programmes offered are inadequate, as they fail to fully consider the lack of technological skills in these groups. At the same time, research shows that during the pandemic senior citizens want primarily to learn how to use a smartphone or laptop, how to operate the software for online meetings and undertake web-based activities, such as shopping via the Internet. Noteworthy, the market of many products and services has largely moved into the cyberspace, while every third customer of traditional brick-and-mortar shops is a mature person.

Moreover, Polish educational sector does not have institutions designed to develop professional flexibility of working-age people. New occupations are created all the time, and old ones are phased out. In addition, some people aged above 40 and 50 years find it hard to keep abreast with technological developments. It is important that they get help in this respect. If their skills become “out of date”, their position in the labour market may be at risk.

Jowita Michalska

Young people approach work differently than older generations. Statistically, the average time they spend working in one organisation is about 1 – 2 years, and about 20% give up working altogether. Therefore, we cannot count on young people alone, as they may leave any time. Every company or institution should employ people from different age groups, ideally representatives of all generations, because this allows all human potential to be fully utilised. That is why we should invest in education of people over 50, to keep them in the labour market. Moreover, mature persons with longer work experience are more loyal to their employers.

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Magdalena Czarzyńska-Jachim

What is required are system-based solutions at all three levels: the EU, national and local. We should ensure that the best programmes are continued, and the financial burden is spread evenly – cities and regions may not be able to cover all the costs. Locally, there are significant shortages in some areas, for example social services are grossly underfinanced. It is a segment employing mostly women, and women are also the primary beneficiaries of these services. Our Town Council try to strengthen this pillar, but the state budget sometimes does not provide sufficient funds to cover related costs.

Another important aspect is planning of solutions to be implemented as a part of social policy. It is advisable to involve in this work the potential beneficiaries themselves, i.e. mature persons and senior citizens. They know far better than us what they actually need, and what will fail – even if it looks well on paper. For example, it turns out that seniors do not want to spend time with their peers only, but also seek contacts with young persons. That is why we look for solutions that mix generations, based on, among others, local cultural activities centres. The Town Council also develop volunteering programmes for senior citizens – they are fantastic guides in museums or around town. We strive to create a community that is inclusive for everyone.

3. Conclusions of the debate

- **The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the human dimension of the European community, highlighting what it means to be growing old, being ill, dying.** It is a good moment to search for new solutions in public health, demography, or social policy. The European Union is trying to provide impetus to these processes.
- **The pandemic has also shed light on the serious implications of the fact that healthcare is only a supporting competence of the European Union, and the competences in the area of social policy and demography are shared with particular Member States.** Admittedly however, some

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challenges with an impact on the entire Union – such as the COVID-19 crisis – might be better addressed jointly. This has opened up a discussion on what shared solutions would be acceptable to the Member States, such as the European health Union or strengthening of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

- **Europe’s aging is good news because it means that we live longer. However, the quality of life in older age may vary.** Therefore, the primary challenge is to create conditions to improve this quality, by taking advantage of medical and technological progress and the entire palette of solutions brought by the fifth industrial revolution (the Internet, digitalisation, robotisation, automation, etc.).
- The pandemic has had a strong impact on the elderly, as it deprived them of relationships with other people, restricted their participation in society and hindered access to medical services. **A reduction of the digital exclusion of this group has therefore become an urgent need.**
- **Planning of solutions for senior citizens under social policy is more effective if the potential beneficiaries are involved in the process.** At the same time, younger people should participate in cooperation with representatives of older generations, to understand their needs better. This applies not only to the actions of the public sector, but commercial undertakings (e.g. e-commerce) and non-governmental organisations as well.
- **The language of concepts and ideas is an important driver shaping how people see the world.** It seems that currently it fails to reflect demographic changes and the circumstances of longer human life. We continue to think in terms of the three classical generations, calling people aged above 50 “seniors”, even though it does not correspond to the full meaning of the word. At the same time, we are in need of new concepts and names capturing our reality better. **Therefore, more work is required on language and the context of words we use. It is desirable that this process should restore the associations building respect for the importance of experience and knowledge of older generations, as these were lost at the time of the technological revolution driven by the young.** Those changes will not happen unless additional stimuli are provided, such as social media narration and the right messages propagated in movies and mass culture.