

Other

Committee on Demographic Studies,
the Polish Academy of Sciences

Scientific Conference
“Understanding Demographic Change”

Warsaw, June 13–14, 2022

The “Understanding Demographic Change” conference,¹ organised in Warsaw by the Committee on Demographic Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences on June 13–14 as part of the Third Demographic Congress 2022, brought together leading researchers working on population issues in Poland and Europe. Its programme focused on the main problems addressed in research on population processes. The presentations and discussions in the individual sessions constitute an important contribution to the knowledge about the ongoing demographic change in Poland and in Europe, its determinants, and its consequences. This knowledge is essential for understanding demographic transformations both in European countries and in other regions of the world. This conviction led the Scientific Committee of the conference to developing a message containing the most important findings and conclusions of this important event.

This message is a synthesis of the summaries of the presentations and discussions in the individual sessions as prepared by their organisers – the members of the Scientific Committee of the conference. We consider it a voice in the discussion on demographic change initiated by the *Demographic Studies* journal.

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¹ <https://knd.pan.pl/pl/k>

**The message of the “Understanding Demographic Change”
conference organised by the Committee
on Demographic Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences
in Warsaw on June 13–14, 2022,
as part of the Third Demographic Congress**

Understanding demographic change, as Dubravka Šuica, Vice President of the European Commission, Commissioner for Democracy and Demography rightly emphasised in her opening remarks, is crucial for formulating political and social strategies. The fundamental transformation of the population reproduction process in Poland after 1989 is the result of changes in fertility, transitions to partnerships and their dissolution, mortality and life expectancy, as well as internal and external migration. They are related to changes in population stocks: a population size and structures, population ageing, declining labour resources and their ageing, as well as shifts in family and household composition. These developments are part of the demographic trends observed in European countries since the 1970s. Both their course as well as demographic, economic, and social consequences create new conditions for socio-economic development that are fundamentally different from those known so far.

The importance of these changes is so enormous that it has found its expression in numerous programmes of the European Union. It is reflected also in the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals, which take into account the diversity of the demographic situation around the world. The key commitment ‘*leave no one behind*’ calls for actions aimed at eradicating poverty in all its forms, ending discrimination and exclusion, and reducing the growing inequalities that limit the growth potential of individuals and humanity as a whole.

Demographic change and its consequences are a key factor shaping the development perspectives of the entire world, including Europe and Poland. We call for both the **diagnosis** covering all population processes and the **proposed response** to demographic change to be an integral part of a **comprehensive sustainable development strategy for the country**, to be taken into account in all actions, programmes, and documents, as they touch upon every aspect of our lives at the societal and individual levels. It is also important to account for the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine as well as the economic recession, and to provide support to all people over their life course, focusing on places they reside, and promoting intergenerational solidarity.

The demographic change in Poland is the result of a **lasting and profound transformation of the population reproduction**. Identifying new trends and new

factors shaping population processes is essential for its diagnosis. Such a diagnosis provides a basis for reflection on how to respond to the profound shifts in demographic structures (age, spatial distribution, health status, education), intergenerational relations, the population ageing advancement, depopulation and decreasing labour resources, transformations of family life and family structures, the Poland's transition from a country of out-migration to a in-migration country, and the growing ethnic diversity of the population in Poland. A constructive response requires, above all, **adaptive actions in many areas of the economy and in institutions** (labour market, care, education, health, transport, social security, spatial planning, environment and climate), which **shape the living conditions and quality of life of people**. In all undertakings to influence demographic processes, it is necessary to take into consideration the ongoing societal transformation in Polish society and the needs of specific social groups. Moreover, there is a need **to shape social awareness regarding demographic change in Poland and its consequences, as well as the demographic situation in Europe and the world**.

The results of the scientific debate undertaken by the Committee on Demographic Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences at the "Understanding Demographic Change" conference authorise us to draw attention to population developments and their consequences in the following main thematic areas.

1. Fertility and family life forms

Declining fertility is a widespread phenomenon in developed countries. Europeans, including Poles, declare a desire to have an average of two children. Polish women of both high and lower education levels express such desires, but the first group of women more often fails to realise them. In Poland, the mean of women at first birth is increasing, as is the percentage of births outside of marriage, although these indicators are still significantly lower in our country than in many other European countries. Similar factors are responsible for low fertility in Poland and Europe: the labour market uncertainty (risks of losing a job and low pay, unstable employment contracts), limited access to housing, difficulties in reconciling work and family as well as professional career aspirations. In these conditions, a career is becoming competitive with family and procreative decisions. The key task of public policies is to influence positively the labour market participation and human capital, especially of young generations constituting demographic and economic potential of Poland. The best solution is a set of public policy measures that support coherently the possibilities of reconciling lifelong education and professional work with family life (also responding to the needs of women with higher education, partnership relationships, single

parents), provide financial support to families in worse financial or housing situations, and improve access to both care and medical services in various living environments.

Family policy should, therefore, be aimed at the general population, not excluding certain groups of people, and also be stable and coherent. However, it should be remembered that it has a limited impact on fertility, but simultaneously it can have a positive impact on the labour market participation and the human capital growth.

It is necessary to monitor systematically the implemented policy instruments to improve the living conditions of families and prospects to realise fertility intentions, taking into account diverse forms of family life, their variability over the life course, and the growing complexity of family relationships. This also calls for continuous improvements in statistical data to reflect the actual forms of family life and the complexity of family relationships as such.

2. Health and life expectancy

Since the socio-economic transformation in the 1990s the life expectancy of Poles has been increasing systematically for 25 years. This was mainly due to the improvement in the residents' health resulting from both changes in lifestyle and services provided by the healthcare system. These changes have been reflected in decreasing mortality due to cardiovascular diseases, responsible for the highest share of deaths, and in a significant drop of infant mortality. Unfortunately, after 2015, we have observed a halt in these positive developments. Additionally, there has been an increased death risk of respiratory and digestive system diseases. As a result, the upward tendency of life expectancy of Poles stopped, and even the decrease of this indicator was observed. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic worsened this situation, in particular affecting death risks of older adults. Between 2019–2021, the life expectancy of people aged 65+ decreased by two years. The pandemic affected all countries in the world, but Poland belongs to those that felt it particularly acutely.

The recent unfavourable changes in mortality have widened the gap between Poland and the countries where the lifespan is the longest. They are driven by deteriorating health among Poles and inefficiencies in the healthcare system. Keeping in mind that the most important determinant of people's health is their lifestyle, better awareness that healthy behaviours matter is crucial. Therefore, promoting education on proper nutrition, physical activity, and health deterioration due to alcohol consumption, smoking, and drug use is considered fundamental to reduce health threats.

In this context, the state responsibility for public health should be emphasised. It is a state duty to shape people's health awareness and develop healthcare services that meet the population's needs, taking into account the latest achievements in medical

and health sciences. Moreover, it is also important to consider territorial inequalities in access to healthcare. In addition, resistance to opinions and behaviours that harm health (such as those related to vaccinations) in which scientific arguments are widely used, is of particular significance.

3. New trends in foreign migrations

The dynamics of migration from Poland and immigration to our country result primarily from economic conditions and external factors (including the war in Ukraine in 2014 and the ongoing war), and only indirectly from demographic changes. Until recently, Poland was a country experiencing mainly migration outflows, while in the past seven years Poland has become one of the most important destination countries in the European Union. Immigrants have become a structural element of the Polish labour market, mitigating the negative effects of the shrinking population at working age and making a significant contribution to the GDP in Poland. However, no undertakings have been taken up to determine a long-term vision for the place of immigrants in Polish society.

So far in Poland no migration strategy has been developed. Migration policy is a collection of ad hoc, uncoordinated actions taken by various public institutions. This was clearly evident in both the situation on the Belarusian-Polish border and the massive influx of people leaving war-torn Ukraine. The lack of a clear concept of Poland as a destination country also contributes to the highly politicised debates on immigration. Regardless of the spectacular involvement of various NGOs, local governments, the state government institutions, and ordinary people in providing assistance and support to Ukrainian citizens, the past few months have highlighted painfully how problematic the lack of coordination in the actions taken and deficits in integration are.

Poland is a classic example of a "new immigration country" with relatively weak institutions supporting foreigners' receiving and their integration process. The massive influx we have been experiencing since February 24, 2022 would pose a significant challenge to any system in Europe and the world. However, it is a particular challenge in Poland, where inclusion measures towards immigrants have not been developed so far. Contemporary immigration to Poland includes not only people of working age but also children and older adults. A proper response to needs of these individuals as regards their admission and integration makes it possible to avoid a risk of massive exclusion and a drastic increase in social inequalities.

The dynamics of changes in the contemporary world, including growing inequalities, the climate change crisis, or local and international conflicts, contribute

to predictions about a significant increase in international mobility. For the first time in modern history of Poland, it is possible to discuss impacts of immigration on the demographic situation. The key task, therefore, is to initiate a dialogue between all involved social actors, including the community of demographers and migration researchers, to define the Polish integration model. It should take into account the specificity of the influx (a large proportion of immigrants from culturally close countries), possible ethnic diversity of the migration stream in the future (increased inflows from Asia and Africa), and link foreign migration issues with internal mobility and a diverse settlement network in Poland, going beyond the previous immigration pattern dominated by short-term foreign workers.

In Poland, the debate on international migration is still lacking reliable and comprehensive data. We also express a clear demand for increased activity of public institutions in designing migration policy.

4. Changes in the patterns of internal migration

Since 1990, the main directions of internal population movements have changed. In 2000, there was a historic shift in net migration between urban and rural areas in favour of the latter. In the following decades, the main directions of population flows were determined by the centre-periphery axis: there was an increase in outflows from peripheral areas, inflows to medium-sized and some larger cities weakened, while inflows to attractive agglomerations (cities and their suburban zones) became more concentrated.

An increasing number of counties and boroughs show negative net migration, while the age-selective outflows from peripheral areas reinforce the spatial differences of the population ageing. The National Population Census of 2021 confirmed estimates regarding depopulation in spatial terms. As compared to 2011, when the previous census was carried out, the population decreased in 71% of boroughs, with the decline exceeding 5% in almost half of them. The intensity of depopulation and changes in age structures, especially population ageing, differ remarkably by regions. These differences deepen the spatial diversity of the population stocks and the developmental disparities between regions, especially in the axis of large urban centres – peripheral areas.

The depopulation and slowdown of development in Poland's peripheral areas are strongly influenced by the migration of young people after completing higher secondary education, especially associated with starting tertiary education. This is not only determined by the scale of this outflow directed to the country's five major academic centres, but also by its definitive character, as declared in surveys.

Contemporary urbanisation refers to the city's links with its suburbs and population movements between the central city and the suburban zone. Strong spatial decentralisation processes, especially internal and external suburbanisation, occur in Poland. Peryurbanisation is more pronounced primarily in metropolises, while reurbanisation associated with the return of suburban area residents to the central city is poorly developed. As a result, two types of systems have emerged: metropolitan areas with dynamically developing suburbanisation and peryurbanisation as well as areas of influence of medium-sized and smaller towns, where the scale of these processes is smaller, and their intensity weaker.

Mitigating development disparities resulting from suburbanisation, especially as regards large urban centres versus peripheral areas, calls for a policy based on integrative actions rather than competing for territorial, human, and financial resources. Development policy needs to be strengthened so that urban and rural policies function in parallel, while development strategies at all administration levels provide incentives for inter-municipal cooperation and also - using a functional approach - promote urban-rural partnerships (beyond administrative boundaries, including Metropolitan Functional Areas). This will make it possible to integrate more urban and rural boroughs through better access to services, jobs, and amenities.

The key issue is to improve statistical data on migration flows. The lack of a registration regime contributes to the gap between the official population moves as reported in population registers and the actual flows. Therefore, the continuation of efforts to integrate data from different sources is needed to minimise errors of estimates on the population and its structures at the local level (in boroughs).

5. Population ageing

In Poland, as in other European countries, below-replacement fertility coexists with increasing life expectancy and a growing role of international migration. The period and cohort total fertility rates show that Poland has fallen into the low fertility trap. As a result, the population started to decline and remarkable shifts in the age structure were in place: along with the decreasing number and share of children and the youth, also the working age people is shrinking while the size and share of elderly people are growing significantly. It should also be noted that the number of women at reproductive age is decreasing.

The 2021 National Population Census provide new estimates of population changes in the recent decade. According to the national definition of place of residence, the population of Poland decreased by almost 0.5 million people. The group of children and the youth under the age of 17 was smaller by only 200,000, while the remaining

population groups underwent stronger changes. The working age group decreased by 2.2 million people (9%), while the number of women at reproductive age (15–49) decreased by almost 700,000. Moreover, in the last decade almost 1.9 million people joined the age group of 65 and over. This older population numbered almost 7 million, accounting for almost 19% of the total population. Every fourth inhabitant of Poland is already at the age of 60 and over.

Among older people the number and share of the oldest-old people (80 years and more) is steadily on the rise, illustrating the double population ageing. Women continue to be a dominant share of older adults. Also single-person households still prevail when looking at living arrangements of older population. In addition, successive cohorts of older people are better educated than the previous ones and show better health. Moreover, their consumption aspirations and preferences for leisure time are changing. These developments, together with more time spent at old age and the changing duration of particular phases of this life course stage, require appropriate reorientation of public policy, especially with regard to the labour market, social security system, social care services, and healthcare.

Population ageing and its advancement are increasingly important for the labour market. The growing role of older workers is not reflected in the systemic implementation of age management – a policy recommended by international institutions to influence older workers' propensity to remain in the labour market. Instead, public authorities leave to individual entrepreneurs how to encourage older workers incentives to continue employment. Moreover, in response to changes in family structures reducing informal care resources as well as the growing pressure to more efficient use of the shrinking labour force it is necessary not only to develop care services for dependent old persons but also to introduce policy measures to reconcile paid work with care obligations over the life course.

Population ageing will continue. Its lasting character and a relatively high predictability create premises to recommend appropriate actions based on to alternative scenarios of the mid- and long- term future.

6. Spatial diversity of the changes in population stocks and their demographic composition

Since 1990 the population of Poland (according to the national definition of place of residence) has undergone minor changes, although the 2021 Population National Census showed visibly a decline. However, there have been significant shifts in the population distribution throughout the country, observed in the administrative units, which have a significant impact on population changes in these units. Currently, two

spatial orders define changes in the demographic and socio-economic structures of the population: the centre-periphery continuum and the east-west divide. The areas serving as hinterlands for cities and urban agglomerations are gaining inhabitants, and population ageing is slower there than in the cities themselves. In contrast, in the areas distant from cities and more connected with agriculture, both ageing and depopulation are relatively the most advanced. These developments clearly depict that the historically determined division into the demographically older eastern regions of the country and the western part is still relatively stable.

Spatially diverse demographic changes require a timely response, especially from local authorities, whose tasks include providing basic public services. The scope and scale of needs in depopulated areas differ markedly from those in areas where the population is concentrated. Adapting strategies for providing public services to the specific needs of particular places (boroughs) can be achieved by encouraging the use of innovative practices such as flexible service delivery models. It is also essential to identify which public policies and regulations create additional barriers to providing public services in smaller communities and to respond to them with innovative solutions.

When considering the evolution of the age and socio-occupational structures at the country level only, there is not adequately captured role of spatially diverse demographic processes that determine these transformations. And public policies (e.g. labour market, education, care services, healthcare, transport) still do not take into account the differences in capabilities of local communities and the limitations of their socio-economic potential.

Development policies should significantly reduce the emphasis on sectoral support in favour of supporting the territorial dimension, including areas within cities or areas with low population density. Therefore, conducting population censuses in such a way that appropriate data on population structures are available in local aggregations (boroughs, districts, statistical regions) is necessary. Such data are essential for implementing effective development policy and working on diagnoses and evaluation, especially regarding assistance to local governments.

7. Social solidarity

Changes in the population age composition, especially the upward trend of Poles in post-productive age, particularly intense in certain areas of Poland, are irreversible. Depopulation is permanently associated with these changes at the country and regional levels. At this stage of the demographic transformation, the qualitative change in human resources – the growth of human and social capital – becomes particularly

important. Public policies, taking into account the quantitative dimension of demographic change, should focus on how to guarantee access to resources important for the development of individuals, social groups, and society as a whole, as well as how to improve the quality of life in the face of ongoing social transformations: changes in relations between different generations, differences in the needs and aspirations of individual generations, growing diversity and complexity of family relationships, evolving social roles of women and men, and increasing ethnic diversity of the population. The basis for these policies should be the building blocks of intergenerational solidarity, which determines both the functioning of the economy and social transfers and supports the growth of social capital of social groups and local communities. Moreover, a life course perspective should be adopted – by enabling actions to be targeted at the appropriate needs of life course stages; that approach supports the development potential of individuals and contributes to improvement of the quality of life among different population groups. Strong voices for taking into account the spatial dimension result in another key postulate: solidarity cooperation to reduce development inequalities across regions, which requires more autonomy in the decision-making of local authorities. This will enable better adaptation of their actions to the needs of residents and more effective support for the development potential of individual areas.

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