Wilfried
Martens Centre
for European Studies

Generations Together

Celebrating 30 Years of the European Seniors' Union's Commitment to a Common Europe

Edited by Peter Hefele, Teona Lavrelashvili and An Hermans

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Foreword

by Manfred Weber, President of the European People's Party (EPP)

As we commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the European Seniors' Union (ESU), it is essential to reflect on the remarkable achievements of this association, which has been a cornerstone of the EPP family for three decades. Since its foundation, the ESU has championed intergenerational solidarity, promoting policies that foster understanding, cooperation and mutual support across age groups. The ESU's work is more crucial than ever as Europe finds itself at a pivotal moment in its demographic journey.

The challenges ahead of us are significant. Europe is ageing. In many regions, young people leave to seek opportunities elsewhere, creating a brain drain that threatens both our economic vitality and our social structures. At the same time, seniors, whose wisdom and experience could still greatly benefit our communities, often find themselves excluded from the labour market and decision-making processes.

These issues are interconnected, and the EPP is determined to tackle them head-on. The erosion of opportunities in rural areas and smaller regions is one of the main reasons young Europeans feel compelled to leave. As the EPP, we have promoted a shift in focus—investing more in these regions to create job prospects and improve infrastructure. This way, young people can build their futures at home, strengthening local economies and family ties. Our policy approach prioritises cohesion and innovation, with the aim of making every region a place of opportunity.

Similarly, the growing number of older Europeans presents both a challenge and an opportunity. We believe in moving beyond outdated views of ageing. Older generations are not a burden but a valuable resource. Through targeted initiatives that promote life-long learning and digital literacy, we can empower seniors to remain engaged and

active participants in our economies and communities. The concept of a 'longevity economy', the economic value generated by older adults, captures this idea - Europe can grow stronger by harnessing the skills, experience and entrepreneurial spirit of its older citizens.

Yet, this transformation requires more than rhetoric. It demands structural changes. We thus have always fought for stronger support systems for families, including affordable childcare, flexible parental leave and age-friendly living environments. It is important to recognise that the burden of long-term care is increasing, which is why we support the strengthening of the European Care Strategy to ensure access to high-quality care services in all communities.

Finally, intergenerational solidarity must become a guiding principle in everything we do. In the face of demographic change, our success will depend on how well we can bring generations together, fostering mutual understanding and cooperation. Thanks to the tremendous work of the late Stefan Knafl, of Bernhard Worms and of An Hermans, the ESU has played a crucial role in promoting this solidarity over the past 30 years. Their work has shown us that Europe thrives when it stands united—young and old, rural and urban, all pulling together towards a common future.

These are not abstract solutions but practical, targeted responses to the real problems faced by millions of Europeans. The EPP is committed to leading this charge, ensuring that our policies not only address today's challenges but also lay the groundwork for a stronger, more resilient Europe for generations to come. The ESU has been instrumental in advancing these priorities, demonstrating that cooperation between generations can be a source of strength and resilience. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to the ESU, its president Stefaan Vercamer and all of the ESU's members for its steadfast commitment and its vital contributions to the EPP's mission.

Manfred Weber
President, EPP

Foreword

by Stefaan Vercamer, President of the European Seniors' Union (ESU)

The founders of the ESU were driven by a shared concern that the age structure of Europe's population was not receiving the political attention it deserved. Their call was clear: politics must address the interests, rights and contributions of senior citizens. With the support of Wilfried Martens, who was then president of the European People's Party (EPP), the first initiatives were taken by Bernhard Worms and Stefan Knafl. On 7 November 1995 the ESU was officially established as a member association of the EPP. The enlargement of the EU to the east enabled further expansion, and today, the ESU is represented in 27 states through 34 organisations, uniting over 1.26 million members.

Over the past 30 years, the ESU has maintained a close and enduring relationship with the EPP. We have consistently taken the opportunity to participate in EPP meetings and we are grateful for the logistical and financial support provided. That bond remains vital to our ability to influence policy. Through the EPP we gain access to EU decision-making processes and are able bring the interests of senior citizens into the heart of the political debate.

Equally important is the combination of innovative political thinking with the development of a strong European network. Through regional conferences, the summer academy, and other events involving experts and policymakers, we not only explore the key policy themes in greater depth, but strengthen ties with member organisations and expand our partnerships across Europe.

The core objectives of the ESU were outlined in the 2004 Magna Charta: upholding human dignity for all; promoting Christian understanding and values such as liberty, solidarity and responsibility as guiding principles; advocating for senior citizens by raising public awareness and influencing policy in favour of a positive senior agenda; fostering intergenerational dialogue; encouraging a positive approach to ageing; and firmly opposing all forms of discrimination against old people. These fundamental principles continue to serve as the guiding compass for our organisation in addressing the challenges of an ever-changing society. Under the leadership of former president An Hermans, the 2016 Leuven Declaration reaffirmed these core values and translated them into concrete policy orientations.

I am undoubtedly expressing the sentiment of many in conveying our deep gratitude for what our predecessors have built—entirely on a voluntary basis, with remarkable commitment and perseverance. We owe them our lasting recognition and sincere appreciation.

I would also like to express my special thanks to the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies for its collaboration and dedicated efforts to making this publication, marking the ESU's thirtieth anniversary, possible.

Stefaan Vercamer
President, ESU

Introduction

An Hermans and Peter Hefele

Global ageing marks the pinnacle of medical, social and economic progress, but it also comes with unprecedented and tremendous challenges for modern societies. Longevity societies require innovative ways to address the potential and challenges of ageing. In the EU, member states still bear most of the responsibility for responding to demographic transition.

However, the Union can provide encouragement, coordination, and the opportunity for the exchange of knowledge and best practices. More than ever, we need new, innovative solutions to ensure that the European economic model and welfare systems support a healthy longevity society—and vice versa, as the future of this model, and even its political systems, rests on successfully managing this transition. And we will not succeed through intergenerational confrontation—quite the contrary. Young and older generations must jointly unlock the large untapped potential within our societies. Citizens of all ages have to develop a better understanding of these complex processes. Engaging in and shaping this development is a lifelong opportunity and an obligation for all.

It is precisely this spirit of innovation, solidarity, and intergenerational cooperation - as well as the many experiences of knowledge-sharing and collective problem-solving - that we have observed in the European Seniors' Union (ESU) since our foundation in 1995 as an umbrella organisation for seniors' associations across Europe. Our thirtieth anniversary is a very appropriate opportunity to reflect on what has been achieved; how we have created spaces for the exchanges of experiences and opportunities for mutual learning; how we have ensured that the voices of older people are heard;

and how we have fought across social, cultural and regional differences for equal rights and opportunities for all generations. That has always been and remains the ambition and *raison d'être* of the ESU.

The ESU could never have achieved its goal alone; many like-minded organisations have provided fertile ground. Leading politicians have always understood that Europe is constructed not just by government leaders and heads of state, but also by the daily involvement of citizens.

We take this vision and obligation from our past and look ahead to explore new challenges. This volume combines reflections on the past with new ideas on innovative approaches to age-related challenges, such as health, digitalisation, social care and work. But we always include options for better intergenerational cooperation, which should be the guiding principle for an integrative political movement based on Christian and conservative values, such as the European People's Party.

Our authors have a wide range of backgrounds and experience in politics and academia on the European and national levels. Their contributions clearly show that the challenges of an ageing society need a European answer, too. If not managed well, a failing demographic transition will undermine the foundations of the EU and its unique way of life. In recent years, the European Commission has stepped up its efforts to address the challenges of the demographic transition. It has developed a holistic 'toolbox' that aims to support people throughout their life cycle. This comprehensive strategy builds upon and streamlines existing policy tools and helps member states to manage the social and economic impacts of demographic change.

The Commission has identified four main domains for this work, which requires a strong transgenerational approach: supporting the parents of young children, empowering the younger generations, enhancing the well-being of the older generations and managing migration effectively. The geographical aspects of demographic trends matter, too, such as internal migration and the rural–urban divide. This political vision regards demographic change as an opportunity for societal renewal and economic prosperity rather than as a threat or burden. From the local to the European level, we

can already see many creative solutions, reflecting the rich and enriching diversity of European societies.

But one thing is also clear: we need organisations such as the ESU, deeply rooted in national societies but also neatly embedded in European politics, to create the momentum for change. We are entering a new phase of humanity, where ageing is a crucial factor. However, we are not simply doomed to suffer from this development. It is still in our hands to shape our - intergenerational - future!

Supporting Inclusive Societies for All Generations

Dubravka Šuica

When I assumed the role of vice-president for democracy and demography in late 2019, the European Commission was breaking new ground. Never before had there been a portfolio specifically dedicated to understanding and addressing the demographic challenges facing our Union. Taking on this challenge, I sought to create a comprehensive approach to support all generations across Europe. We had a clear mission: *to ensure that Europe is prepared and resilient in the face of demographic change.*

We had to start almost from scratch, relying on the established expertise of Commission services, including the Joint Research Centre (JRC) and Eurostat, to take a data-driven approach, which was essential to tailoring our policies and actions to meet the unique and diverging needs of our citizens.

Charting the path: understanding Europe's demographic shifts and a call to action

In 2020 we published the first European Commission report on the impact of demographic change.[1] It was a comprehensive examination of the drivers of demographic transformation in the EU. The report provided an understanding of the impact of factors such as longer life expectancy, fewer births and an ageing population on our societies, social market economy, public health and regional disparities. Its added value lay in placing demography firmly on the EU's political agenda. For the first time, demographic change was no longer treated as a purely statistical matter delegated to Eurostat, but as a strategic issue with direct implications for policymaking. The report marked a turning point: it revealed that while demographic trends themselves are not directly within the EU's remit, their consequences permeate many areas of EU competence—requiring targeted adaptation, forward-looking policy responses and the creation of synergies.

1 European Commission, *Report on the Impact of Demographic Change* (2020).

Building on this foundation, our second demography report[2] in 2023 incorporated the effects of a rapidly evolving environment, including Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic and growing geopolitical tensions. It demonstrated the importance of addressing the demographic differences that can exacerbate economic and social inequalities. At the same time, it recognised the opportunities that demographic transitions can bring, such as increased life expectancy and active ageing.

The next step was the publication of a *Green Paper on Ageing*,[3] which launched a wide-ranging policy debate about the opportunities and challenges posed by longer life spans, from enhancing lifelong learning and improving work–life balance to ensuring sustainable pension systems and addressing growing healthcare and long-term care needs. It served as a call to action for stakeholders across Europe to engage in shaping policies that support a society where people of all ages can thrive.

Strategic initiatives: supporting member states and regions to address demographic challenges

Published in 2021, *A Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas*[4] was pivotal to our strategy to bolster the sustainability and vitality of Europe's rural communities: to make them stronger and more connected, resilient and prosperous by 2040. It addresses the unique demographic challenges faced by rural areas, such as depopulation, ageing populations and limited access to services. The progress report,[5] published in March 2024, highlights the substantial advances made since the vision's inception. Key achievements included the launch of a rural revitalisation platform, the initiation of 60 rural research and innovation projects, and the establishment of a European Rural Mobility Network. The report also noted the successful earmarking of €23.5 billion in

2 European Commission, *The Impact of Demographic Change in a Changing Environment* (2023).

3 European Commission, *Green Paper on Ageing: Fostering Solidarity and Responsibility Between Generations* (2021).

4 European Commission, *A Long-Term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas* (2021).

5 European Commission, *The Long-Term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas: Key Achievements and Ways Forward* (2024).

grants and loans for underserved areas, alongside improvements in rural connectivity and mobility. It concluded that strong engagement is essential locally, regionally and at member state level, to deliver positive outcomes. As the needs of rural communities evolve, continued support and adaptation is essential.

In 2022 we introduced the European Care Strategy,[6] a landmark initiative of which I am particularly proud. The strategy is designed to ensure that care services across the EU are not only accessible and affordable but also of high quality. Its primary objective is to improve conditions for those receiving care and for those looking after them, whether they are professionals or informal carers, by addressing the pressing issues of the accessibility, availability and affordability of care services.

The Harnessing Talent Initiative[7] is another cornerstone of our efforts to address demographic challenges in the EU, supporting areas that are experiencing a decline in their working-age population by fostering the development, retention and attraction of skilled individuals. Its primary objective is to mitigate the risk of a talent-development trap in certain regions, where a shrinking labour force and a low share of tertiary-educated individuals could worsen geographic disparities across the EU. The initiative introduced the Talent Booster Mechanism, which is designed to equip regions with the tools they need to thrive in the face of demographic changes.

Equipping member states with the tools for sharing knowledge and best practices

Alongside publications and policy measures, we have also developed tools to support member states in navigating demographic challenges. The Atlas of Demography,[8] for instance, provides detailed demographic data and insights across the EU. Initially designed as a data-visualisation tool, the atlas is now being transformed into a dynamic

6 European Commission, *A European Care Strategy* (2022).

7 European Commission, *Harnessing Talent in Europe's Regions* (2023).

8 Atlas of Demography, Knowledge Centre on Migration and Demography.

platform that not only offers critical information but also facilitates the exchange of knowledge and best practices between member states.

Demography Toolbox: sustaining progress across Commission mandates

The Demography Toolbox[9] represents the culmination of our efforts in the previous mandate to address the multifaceted challenges posed by demographic change. It is designed to ensure continuity and provide a comprehensive framework for future work in this area.

The toolbox equips member states with a coordinated set of policy tools and resources to manage demographic transitions. It integrates regulatory instruments, policy frameworks and funding mechanisms to enhance the long-term competitiveness and resilience of the EU. It is structured around *four central pillars*: families are supported to balance work and personal aspirations, young people are empowered with skills and opportunities, older people are ensured welfare and active participation, and labour shortages can be addressed through managed legal migration. To operationalise this toolbox, the Commission offers a range of concrete instruments spanning regulatory, policy and financial domains. Key tools include EU-level funding such as the European Social Fund+ and the Recovery and Resilience Facility, as well as targeted programmes such as the Youth Guarantee, the European Child Guarantee and the Talent Booster Mechanism. Member states can also draw on the Work–Life Balance Directive, the Blue Card Directive, and the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion to address specific aspects of demographic change.

The toolbox sets the stage for continued progress by fostering synergies between EU and national policies. It ensures that demographic concerns are mainstreamed across all levels of governance, underscoring our commitment to the welfare and well-being of all citizens.

9 European Commission, *Demographic Change in Europe: A Toolbox for Action* (2023).

Evidence-based policymaking

Throughout my time as vice-president for democracy and demography, evidence-based policymaking was at the heart of our work. Building a comprehensive knowledge base, we were able to evaluate the impacts of demographic change across the EU. Our work also demonstrated the importance of integrating demographic factors into European policy more widely. The JRC's report on *Demography and Climate Change*,[10] for example, revealed how demographic factors - such as age, education level and geographic distribution - significantly influence attitudes towards climate change and the capacity for adaptation.

By leveraging this knowledge, we can implement targeted initiatives that not only address immediate demographic issues but also foster long-term resilience and adaptability within the EU. The integration of scientific evidence into our policymaking process therefore ensures that we are not just reacting to demographic trends but proactively shaping a future where all generations can thrive.

The new mandate: building on a strong legacy

As we embark on a new Commission mandate, I am delighted that demography remains in my portfolio.

The implementation of the Demography Toolbox remains a cornerstone of our strategy, complemented by targeted efforts to bridge gaps in the labour market by activating under-represented groups, including women, migrants and older people. Drawing insights from Mario Draghi's report[11] on *The Future of European Competitiveness* and Enrico Letta's *Empowering the Single Market*[12] *to Deliver a Sustainable Future and Prosperity for All EU Citizens*, these initiatives will help us to address the critical challenges of labour market participation.

10 Joint Research Centre, *Demography and Climate Change* (2023).

11 Draghi, M. (2024). The future of European competitiveness

12 Letta, M (2024) 'Much More Than a Market: Council of the European Union

We will also look at international aspects of demography in order to inspire EU decision-making—fostering resilience, growth and unity within our borders while enhancing our role on the global stage. As part of this, I will promote regular dialogues and exchanges of best practice between EU member states, supported by the knowledge-sharing functions of the JRC's revamped Atlas of Demography.

In the previous mandate, we created solid foundations. Now I look forward to building on this legacy to foster a vibrant and cohesive Europe where every generation can thrive, and where we utilise the potential and the skills of Europeans of all ages for the benefit of our economy and of our society as a whole.

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The Role of Seniors in European Policy and Political Processes

Klaus Welle

The role of senior citizens in European political life is more significant than ever. As life expectancy increases and birth rates decline, older individuals constitute a growing share of the electorate. Their political engagement is not only reflected in their consistently high voter turnout but also in the ways they influence policymaking, coalition-building and legislative priorities. While their participation is crucial to the democratic process, several challenges persist in ensuring that older citizens are not only represented at the ballot box but also more comprehensively included in political decision-making.

The European People's Party (EPP) has long recognised the importance of senior citizens in shaping Europe's future, actively supporting their political inclusion and championing policies that safeguard their rights, well-being, and active and inclusive participation in public life. Over the years, this commitment has been reflected not only in the EPP's electoral strategies but also in institutional support, particularly through the European Seniors' Union (ESU), which has become an essential platform for advocating senior citizens' interests. Having been directly involved in its establishment in 1995, I have seen first-hand, in my capacity as EPP secretary general, the pivotal role that the ESU has played in ensuring that the voices of older citizens are heard at the highest levels of European policymaking.

The political power of older voters

Older citizens are among the most reliable voters in Europe, demonstrating a level of electoral participation that far exceeds that of younger age groups. Their turnout rates are significantly higher than those of younger voters, making them a decisive force in electoral outcomes. For instance, in the 2024 European Parliament elections, voters aged 60 and above showed the highest support for traditional, centrist parties.[13] Furthermore, Eurobarometer data consistently show higher levels of political interest among older age groups.

13 A. Katsanidou, *Stock-Taking of the 2024 European Parliament Elections*, European Parliamentary Research Service, Briefing PE 771.520 (March 2025).

Beyond their influence in elections, the broader engagement of older people in political processes varies. While they demonstrate a strong personal interest and engagement in political affairs,[14] their participation in non-electoral activities such as protests, direct activism and policy advocacy remains lower than that of younger generations. For instance, the European Social Survey[15] found that individuals aged 65+ were less likely to participate in demonstrations or sign petitions than younger age groups. This trend can be attributed to a combination of differing levels of generational political socialisation, institutional barriers and prevailing societal perceptions about ageing.

The EPP has played a particularly instrumental role in shaping policies that respond to the needs of older citizens. As the dominant centre–right force in European politics, the party has consistently defended inclusive pension systems, promoted accessible healthcare and advanced measures to ensure that senior citizens remain active contributors to society. The ESU, founded under the EPP's political umbrella, has been an essential platform for promoting the rights of older citizens and advocating for policies that enhance their quality of life.

At the same time, other political movements—including the Social Democrats and the Liberals—have also attempted to reconcile fiscal sustainability with the preservation of strong welfare provisions, often by integrating intergenerational solidarity into their policy frameworks. However, these efforts have rarely resulted in a lasting or effective balance. It is within the centre–right tradition, embodied by the EPP, that a clear and consistent commitment to safeguarding the interests of senior citizens has been most evident.

Challenges to political inclusion

While senior citizens wield significant electoral influence, several obstacles continue to hinder their full political participation. One of the most pressing challenges is the

14 R. Serrat, K. Chacur-Kiss and F. Villar, 'Ageing Activisms: A Narrative Exploration of Older Adults' Experiences of Political Participation', *Sociological Research Online* 28/1 (2021).

15 European Social Survey, *European Social Survey (ESS) Round 11* (2023/24) (2024).

under-representation of senior politicians in decision-making roles.[16] Despite their strong voter turnout, older citizens remain under-represented in national parliaments, the European Parliament and government positions. This gap between the electoral weight of older voters and their actual political representation can lead political actors to prioritise short-term electoral gains - often aimed at securing votes - rather than pursuing long-term reforms that would genuinely benefit ageing populations. Another growing challenge is the digitalisation of political engagement. Many European governments and political institutions increasingly rely on online platforms for public consultations, political debates and even voting procedures. While this transition has improved accessibility for many, it has also created new barriers for older citizens who may lack digital literacy or access to technology. Without targeted efforts to bridge this digital divide, a significant portion of Europe's senior population risks being marginalised in critical political discussions.

A further issue is the social perception of ageing in the political discourse. In many societies, older individuals are viewed primarily as recipients of welfare rather than as active contributors to political and civic life. This stereotype not only influences public policy but also discourages older citizens from taking on leadership roles or engaging in advocacy beyond voting. Addressing this requires a shift in how political institutions, civil society organisations and the media portray the role of elderly citizens.

Institutional mechanisms for senior participation remain insufficient. While some European governments have created advisory councils or senior forums, these bodies often lack real decision-making power. Too often, older citizens are consulted only on issues that directly affect them - such as pensions and social care - while being excluded from broader policy discussions on economic reforms, digitalisation or foreign affairs - even if those decisions are equally existential. Without more structured participation mechanisms, the political voice of senior citizens risks being confined to a narrow set of policy areas rather than being fully integrated into European governance.

16 AGE Platform Europe, *Age Manifesto Pillar 2: Foster Participation and Active Ageing* (2024).

Strengthening the role of senior citizens in European politics

Ensuring that older citizens are fully included in European politics requires a comprehensive and sustained effort. A crucial step in this direction is strengthening their political representation. We should go beyond acknowledging the importance of senior citizens as voters and actively facilitate their involvement in decision-making structures. This means not only encouraging the nomination of senior candidates for public office but also creating pathways for their continued engagement within party leadership, parliamentary committees and policymaking bodies. Their perspectives, shaped by decades of experience and deep societal engagement, should be reflected in both national and EU-level governance, ensuring that policy outcomes align with the needs of ageing populations while also fostering intergenerational dialogue.

In parallel, bridging the digital divide must be a priority. While digitalisation is an essential part of modern political engagement, it must be accompanied by initiatives that support older citizens in acquiring the necessary digital skills. This includes government-funded digital literacy programmes and ensuring that alternative, non-digital forms of participation - such as in-person consultations and postal voting - remain available.

Beyond technological inclusion, a broader cultural shift is needed to challenge ageist stereotypes in politics. Highlighting the contributions of older leaders, promoting intergenerational political dialogue and ensuring that senior voices are represented in debates on all major policy issues - not just ageing-related ones - will be critical in fostering a more inclusive democratic process. Rather than being limited to advisory roles, seniors should have structured representation within national and European institutions. One concrete step would be to establish senior-focused working groups within existing EU bodies such as the European Economic and Social Committee or the European Committee of the Regions. These representatives would ensure that ageing-related concerns are systematically addressed in policymaking processes. In parallel, platforms such as the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions

Working Group on the Rights of Older Persons - which facilitates expert exchange on ageing policy challenges and best practices - could be expanded or replicated at the EU level to provide a formal channel for older people's input into legislative and policy discussions. The ESU was founded three decades ago with the goal of securing the political representation of Europe's older citizens. Today, its mission remains more relevant than ever. As Europe continues to age, ensuring that senior citizens are not just voters but active participants in political life is crucial to maintaining democratic legitimacy and fostering a society that values contributions across the generations.

The EPP has long recognised the importance of protecting the rights and interests of older citizens, and this commitment must remain strong in the years ahead. Political participation does not end at the ballot box. Older citizens must have a voice in shaping the policies that define Europe's future, from economic reform to technological transformation and social cohesion.

While challenges persist, the solutions are within reach. Strengthening political representation, improving digital accessibility, promoting intergenerational dialogue and ensuring structured senior participation in policymaking will be essential in the coming years. The role of older citizens in European politics is not only a question of inclusion but a fundamental aspect of democracy itself.

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Geopolitics of Ageing:

Europe's Demographic Shift and Strategic Autonomy

Antonio López-Istúriz White

Introduction

Demographic change is reshaping Europe's position on the global stage, raising urgent questions about its political influence, strategic autonomy and economic resilience. As Europe's population ages, its share of the global population will fall to 7% by 2050. The continent faces a fundamental challenge: how to maintain its economic strength, defence capabilities and technological leadership in a world increasingly defined by younger, rapidly growing regions such as Africa and Asia.

While these demographic shifts present undeniable challenges, they also offer an opportunity for strategic reflection and policy adaptation. Europe has long been proud of its governance model, which balances economic competitiveness with social cohesion and fairness. However sustaining this balance requires new approaches to workforce shortages, fiscal constraints and innovation capacity.

Recognising these challenges, the European Parliament has actively pushed for strategic policy responses. For instance, to help reverse demographic trends in EU regions, the Parliament has called for a simplification of cohesion policy instruments and better synergies among various EU funds. Greater weight should be given to demographic aspects in the allocation of cohesion funds, ensuring that investments support quality job creation, work–life balance and economic opportunities in depopulating regions. Parliament has also advocated for stronger protections for maternity, paternity and parental rights to promote a more sustainable demographic structure while reinforcing Europe's economic competitiveness.[17]

Demographic decline and Europe's global standing

Europe's relative demographic decline is no longer a purely statistical trend. It is a geopolitical reality that will shape the continent's influence in global affairs. A

17 European Parliament, *Reducing Inequalities and Promoting Social Inclusion in Times of Crisis for Children and Their Families* (2023).

shrinking share of the global population means that Europe's economic and political weight will inevitably diminish in relation to younger regions. In economic terms, a smaller working-age population puts pressure on growth, innovation and labour market productivity. In political terms, it raises concerns about Europe's ability to sustain its commitments to global governance, trade and security policy.

The challenge of demographic ageing is particularly acute when considering Europe's goal of strategic autonomy. To act independently on security and defence matters is a central objective of EU policy in the face of growing geopolitical uncertainty. However, this ambition is directly threatened by demographic shifts that reduce the workforce available for critical industries, including defence and technology. In the aerospace and defence sector alone, 25% of the workforce is near retirement,[18] with key shortages in skilled roles such as engineering and advanced manufacturing . Without urgent measures to address these gaps, Europe risks falling behind in defence production, military innovation and technological sovereignty. The same goes for the recruitment of military personnel.

At the same time, an ageing society places fiscal pressures on national budgets, forcing difficult trade-offs between age-related social spending and investment in strategic priorities such as defence and research. By 2070 pensions and healthcare costs could consume 25%–30% of GDP in some EU member states,[19] raising concerns about the sustainability of defence budgets and Europe's ability to invest in next-generation security capabilities.

These dynamics show that demographic policy is not just a social issue—it is a question of Europe's economic, technological and geopolitical survival.

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18 Aerospace Manufacturing and Design, 'High Turnover Rate Keeps Growing for A&D Workforce' (2024).

19 European Commission, *The 2024 Ageing Report: Economic and Budgetary Projections for the EU Member States* (2024–2070) (2024).

Defence and innovation: the impact of ageing on strategic sectors

As Europe works to strengthen its defence and security architecture, demographic ageing is emerging as a critical constraint. A shrinking workforce directly affects defence recruitment, research and development (R&D), and industrial capacity, limiting Europe's ability to meet both current and future security challenges.

One major concern is the growing skills shortage in defence-related industries. Around 75% of EU companies report difficulty in finding workers with the necessary skills, while 40% of adults lack basic digital competency.[20] These trends pose a direct threat to Europe's ability to modernise its defence infrastructure, cybersecurity systems and artificial intelligence–driven military capabilities. Moreover, younger workers are increasingly drawn to technological and digital careers, reducing interest in traditional defence roles at a time when geopolitical tensions are demanding a stronger security sector.

Compounding these challenges, demographic trends are also increasing Europe's dependency on external technology suppliers. With a working-age population projected to fall from 64.6% to 54.8% by 2100,[21] Europe must ensure that its shrinking labour force remains at the forefront of innovation. The ability to lead in artificial intelligence (AI), cybersecurity, and military R&D will depend on sustained investment in skills training, research collaboration and technological autonomy.

The European Parliament has a vital role to play in this transformation. As a co-legislator and budgetary authority, the Parliament has consistently called for a forward-looking skills agenda and a defence-industrial policy that addresses labour shortages and promotes technological autonomy.

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20 European Commission, *European Skills Agenda: Strengthening Skills for Europe's Future* (2024).

21 Eurostat, 'EU's Population Projected to Drop by 6% by 2100', Press release, 2024.

Through its resolutions and legislative initiatives, the Parliament has championed measures to enhance workforce mobility across member states, support lifelong learning and reskilling programmes, and create a more attractive environment for skilled migration, particularly in sectors of strategic importance.

Moreover, the Parliament has pushed for increased investment in dual-use technologies, cybersecurity innovation, and AI-related R&D,[22] recognising that sustaining Europe's defence and innovation capacity requires both demographic resilience and a strong talent base.

Balancing social spending and competitiveness

Beyond security, demographic ageing places significant economic and fiscal constraints on Europe's ability to sustain long-term growth. Rising age-related expenditures—particularly in pensions and healthcare—are expected to consume an increasing share of public budgets. This raises difficult questions about how to balance social protection with investments in infrastructure, innovation and industrial competitiveness.

For some Southern and Eastern European economies, the situation is even more pressing. Countries experiencing both ageing and emigration face a double demographic crisis, where shrinking tax bases go together with increased spending demands. These structural weaknesses risk deepening economic disparities within the EU, making collective policy responses all the more urgent.

One approach to maintaining economic resilience is to extend working lives and encourage active ageing. By raising retirement ages, promoting flexible work arrangements and incentivising workforce participation among seniors, Europe can slow the decline in its labour force and productivity. However, these measures must be accompanied by broader reforms that ensure older workers remain competitive

22 European Commission, *European Defence Industrial Strategy*, Communication, JOIN (2024) 10 final (5 March 2024).

in the evolving labour markets, particularly in digital and technology-driven sectors.

Investment in automation and AI-driven productivity tools also offers a potential solution. By embracing technological transformation, Europe can offset some of the economic impacts of a shrinking workforce while maintaining global competitiveness. However, such investments require a stimulating political framework, private-sector engagement and a workforce capable of adapting to new industrial realities.

Europe's ageing population does not just represent a demographic shift—it presents a defining challenge for the continent's future. Whether in terms of economic productivity, military readiness or strategic autonomy, demographic ageing will influence every aspect of Europe's role in global affairs.

Rather than seeing these trends as an inevitable decline, Europe must adopt bold, forward-looking policies that transform demographic ageing into an opportunity. This requires a reassessment of workforce strategies, investment in innovation, and stronger commitments to ensuring that all generations contribute to economic and social development.

The European Seniors' Union has spent three decades advocating for policies that acknowledge the continued contribution of older citizens to Europe's development. This anniversary is a timely reminder that Europe's ageing population should not be seen as a burden but as a key factor in strengthening the continent's strategic autonomy. The way Europe responds to this demographic shift will determine whether it reinforces its economic resilience and global influence or struggles to adapt to emerging challenges.

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Empowering Communities for a Sustainable Demographic Future

Isabelle Le Gallo Flores

Although the EU does not have any competences in the field of demography, the impact of the current demographic trend is of paramount concern. The best way to address it is to act even more urgently on policies that, while primarily under national competence (such as social protection and pensions), are already recognised in the treaties as areas where the EU can support, coordinate, or complement member states - and that are directly impacted by demography.

But one thing is for sure: the EU must act, and act fast.

A consistent and coherent set of measures needs to be prepared and adopted to ensure a sustainable demographic future for Europe. What is at stake is the economic, social and democratic model that Europe has shaped over the past decades. The European Commission is actively engaged in putting forward key policies related to demography, in which we are undoubtedly seeing a transformational change. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), as the voice of European civil society, has adopted bold recommendations in this regard, and wants to be part of this debate and push for adequate responses at the EU level.

Let us be clear: making sure that Europe has a sustainable demographic future is an absolute must. The difficulty lies in addressing this challenge in the right way. The EU has very limited or no competence in demography, and presumably many, if not all, the member states will have already developed national demographic policies, which, unfortunately, do not seem to be working too well.

The demographic figures and trends are clear and they call for a strong and consistent set of measures to address this fundamental and transformative challenge. According to both Eurostat and UN projections, the EU population is expected to peak at 453 million people around 2026, after a long period of continuous growth. It will then begin a gradual decline.

According to Eurostat's reference projection, the EU population will decline slightly to 448 million by 2050. The UN's medium-term projection shows a stronger decline, down to 422 million by 2050, in line with Eurostat's projection based on a lower net-migration scenario. It is also worth noting that although the EU population will probably be relatively stable until 2026, its age structure has profoundly changed, with the working-age population (20–64 years) substantially declining over the last decade. These figures are in line with the expected population decline in most of the 'developed' countries of the world, with the likely exception of the US.

A sustainable demographic future is of paramount importance: it is about making sure that the European model, based on economic growth and solidarity (including intergenerational solidarity), remains sustainable, which is possibly even more important in these geostrategically complex times.

We also know that the EU's population decline will not affect all its member states in the same manner and that, within the member states, demographic trends will differ. The reason for this is simple: population increases are the result of a combination of two factors: birth rates (which have to outstrip mortality rates, which are decreasing because of growing longevity) and immigration policies and trends.

Currently, the average birth rate in the EU is slightly above 1.5 children per woman (while the statistically necessary figure is 2.1) and, while in 2010, 3 member states (France, Ireland and Sweden) were close to having a birth rate of 2 children per woman, since 2019 - before the Covid-19 pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine—even these member states' birth rates have fallen below that level.

So, to maintain the current population level, immigration is the only possible lever.

The European Commission has produced several documents setting out the magnitude of the demographic challenge, notably its Demography Toolbox, which was adopted in October 2023. While reminding the reader of the results of a Eurobarometer survey on demography that reveals that 'seven in ten Europeans agree that demographic

trends put at risk the EU's long-term economic prosperity and competitiveness',[23] the Commission warns that

> in the coming years, in the absence of concerted and decisive action on these issues, the EU population may continue to shrink and age, having a negative impact on the EU's economy, society, and long-term competitiveness. If such trends do continue, they might exacerbate labour shortages and increase pressure on public budgets, while having a profound impact on investments and productivity.

What is ultimately at stake, is the preservation (or not) of the EU's current economic and social model. If the preservation of this model is a priority, then the EU can hardly afford to have a shrinking population, let alone one with an age structure that is not able to finance pensions, healthcare and social protection systems, which require a larger, rather than a smaller, share of workers.

The current EU protection system, which is the cornerstone of our social model, needs more, not fewer, workers in the years ahead. As such, developing a comprehensive strategy for a sustainable demographic future is not only an economic imperative, it is also an act of democracy.

To ensure demographic sustainability, particularly for the labour market, the EU needs to act in three aspects, or, at the very least, to combine improvements in all of them. Simply put, the EU needs more births, more migrants and to activate inactive parts of the labour force. Unlike other regions of the world, Europe has significant untapped potential within its population, notably among women, young people, vulnerable individuals and under-represented groups.

The position of civil society

The EESC is undoubtedly the European home of civil society. Through its 329 institutional members from all walks of life (employers, trade unions and civil society) and 27 member states, it enjoys a unique reach, representing close to 90 million citizens.

23 The respondents also consider the most pressing demographic challenges to be population ageing (42%) and the shrinking of the working-age population and labour shortages (40%).

As such, the EESC has been actively engaged on demographic issues for several years and has published several opinions on the matter. The most recent, from September 2024, tackles the impact of demographic change on social Europe.[24]

The opinion sets out a clear analysis of the demographic challenge and indicates that the demographic trend is another transformative challenge for European society alongside the twin digital and green transitions. It notes that in most member states longevity, high levels of education and prosperity, and good levels of health have been achieved, although not in all regions. At the same time, every member state is confronted by a shrinking population, low birth rates, and a growing imbalance between age groups and regions.

The opinion points to the fact that these demographic developments have far-reaching implications for the labour markets, pension and social protection systems, and Europe's geopolitical position in the world.

The rapporteur, Ms Christa Schweng, recommends that the Commission establishes an appropriate structure for tackling demographic problems and calls for the creation of a European agency for demography.

I would also add that in my long experience as a leader in the field of philanthropy, I have seen that even in complex situations, it is possible to design and implement successful models for collaborative transitions that enhance intergenerational solidarity and demographic resilience. Solutions do exist—and can be found—when participatory and motivational models are applied.

As secretary-general of the EESC, I can clearly see that civil society has the capacity to propose strong solutions and to fight to ensure that a sustainable demography remains at the very top of the EU's agenda.

Of this I have no doubt: a comprehensive set of European policies and measures must be put in place to accompany the demographic transition.

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24 Schweng, C. *The Impact of Demography on Social Europe*, SOC/796, 18 September 2024.

More studies and more refined data on demography are needed so that the EU can concentrate on the real issues. However, the position of the European Commission, the European Parliament[25] and civil society is clear: what is needed is a common European response - but one that allows the space to address national and regional specificities.

One thing is for sure: our future will depend on the decisions that we take (or do not take) today.

25 M. Pape and B. Szechy, 'Demographic Change in Europe: A Toolbox for Action', European Parliamentary Research Service, Briefing PE 762.302 (May 2024). This European Parliament briefing was drafted at the request of a member of the EESC.

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Forever Young?

Older People's Need for Inclusion in an Ever-Changing Digital Environment

Patrick Penninckx

We are all part of the digital society.

Digital technologies are omnipresent in our daily lives. They allow us to connect, learn, collaborate and produce in ways previously unimaginable. New applications continue to change the way we work and live. The Artificial Intelligence Action Summit in Paris, held in February 2025, highlighted the importance of artificial intelligence (AI) for research, innovation and competitiveness. At this high-level event, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen launched InvestAI, a €200 billion initiative, including a €20 billion fund for AI gigafactories.[26]

Policymakers often address these developments at the macro level, focusing on the economic and geopolitical impacts. However, there is also a key question: how do these changes affect quality of life? And how can citizens actively participate in the digital society? In other words: how can one become a digital citizen? Such progress goes beyond acquiring technical skills—it means being able to navigate the digital world safely, responsibly and critically, while protecting one's digital identity and engaging respectfully online.

The European Year of Digital Citizenship Education 2025, a flagship initiative of the Council of Europe, was launched precisely to explore and respond to these challenges. The European Seniors' Union (ESU) has played an active role in this effort, contributing the voice and experience of older generations to the shared mission of fostering a more inclusive and accountable digital society. Both the Council of Europe and the European Commission are working to shape a digital Europe where technological empowerment is matched by social responsibility. Their initiatives promote personal development and active participation, particularly among young people and students, who are often at the forefront of these efforts. However, this focus can unintentionally overlook other segments of the population—especially older people.

26 European Commission, 'President von der Leyen Launches Initiative for AI', 2025.

I brought this imbalance to light at the launch of the European Year of Digital Development on 23 January 2025. As secretary general of the ESU, I emphasised the right of older people to participate fully in the digital society and called for more targeted initiatives to ensure that no generation is left behind.

Ensuring the inclusion of older people's rights in all parts of society

Demographic ageing and digital transformation are megatrends that have gained increasing attention in recent years. They offer opportunities to promote prosperity and well-being for current and future generations and form the basis for building resilient responses to today's challenges. Over time new concepts and action plans with regard to ageing have been developed, with international organisations—especially the World Health Organization—leading the way. The latter introduced the concept of 'healthy ageing' and has given various definitions of age: chronological, biological, psychological, social and functional. In other contexts, ageing is linked to sustainable labour participation or addressed from a human rights' perspective.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, digital technologies became more essential than ever. Across Europe and the world, the Internet enabled access to information, education, work, shopping, entertainment and social connections. With in-person contact limited, digital tools were vital not only professionally but also for everyday life - making digital inclusion a necessity for all. The pandemic showed that Internet access is now a common good, as essential as electricity or water, and that digital literacy is vital. Yet this access and literacy are not the reality for all - especially among older people. While digital tools offer great potential, they also expose growing inequalities. As young people benefit from media and information literacy, many older adults face exclusion from online services. During the pandemic, Internet use rose by 40% to 100%, with Zoom usage increasing tenfold.[27]

27 R. De', N. Pandey and A. Pal, 'Impact of Digital Surge During Covid-19 Pandemic: A Viewpoint on Research and Practice', *International Journal of Information Management* 55 (2020).

Let us dismantle the myth: the idea that younger generations - so-called digital natives - face fewer digital challenges is misleading. The digital world is unstable, fast-changing and often unsafe. Even young people are unprepared as tools evolve rapidly and schools lack proper support. Digital governance is still an ambition and many digital services simply duplicate outdated models. Digital citizenship education must not be a box to tick - it requires a lifelong, intergenerational commitment to resilience and inclusion in a constantly evolving digital landscape.

Empowering older people goes beyond providing access and digital skills - it also requires age-friendly, ethical and secure digital environments. As digital communication becomes essential in later life, it highlights the need for digital literacy as a key to active ageing, inclusion, participation and democracy.

What has been done - and what is missing?

In recent years, measures have been taken at all policy levels, from international to local, and in all sectors to cope with demographic change. This change requires constant attention from political leaders and policymakers, and not least from the citizens concerned themselves. After all, the challenges of demographic change are no longer only about how to deal with a society of longevity and a growing group of older people, but also about the wider consequences for society and the economy.

In January 2025 EU Commissioner Dubravka Šuica explained the implementation of the Demography Toolbox. Members of the European Parliament responded by highlighting a selection of problems and a kaleidoscope of solutions, ranging from promoting birth rates to improving migration facilities and achieving the labour activation of young people in rural areas, while only paying minimal attention to the possible contributions of older people to the workforce.[28] It is encouraging, however, that the UN Human Rights Council has unanimously decided to draft a new international

28 M. Pape, *Addressing EU Demographic Challenges: Implementing the 2023 Demography Toolbox* (2025).

convention to better protect the rights and dignity of older people.[29] The results of a recent EU-wide survey by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights serve as a clear call to action.[30] The report finds that current laws in many member states fail to address the risk of digital exclusion among older citizens. The Agency recommends ensuring equal access to services, involving older people in designing digital tools, investing in digital skills (including via EU funds), combating ageism and collecting inclusive data—especially including data from those over 74. This last point deserves particular attention, as people over 74 are often excluded from surveys and digital research. AI systems trained on unrepresentative data risk reinforcing exclusion, underlining the urgent need for age-inclusive data collection.

We need to think outside the algorithm

'Human rights should not be denied or reduced with age' is the key message of a report authored by Austrian Andrea Eder-Gitschthaler (vice-president of the ESU) titled *Overcoming Age-Based Discrimination Against Older Persons*. The report was adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on 31 January 2025.[31] The Assembly urges the Committee of Ministers to review the implementation of the 2014 Recommendation on the rights of older people, identify existing gaps and explore the feasibility of a European legal instrument to protect the human rights of older people. Additionally, the report calls for a new Recommendation on preventing and combating ageism,and encourages active participation in developing an international legally binding instrument on the rights of older people.

It is time to act!

Guaranteeing equal rights for older people requires commitment from governments, international organisations, local authorities and civil society. Let 2025, the European

29 A. Clarke, 'UN to Draft Convention on the Rights of Older Persons' (2025).

30 EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Fundamental Rights of Older People: Ensuring Access to Public Services in Digital Societies* (2023).

31 A. Eder-Gitschthaler, *Recommendation CM/Rec(2014)2 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the Promotion of Human Rights of Older Persons*, Council of Europe (2014). p.1.

Year of Digital Citizenship Education, be a milestone for citizenship and learning—online and offline—for all generations. May the 30 years of dedication by the ESU continue to support older citizens in the digital era. As former ESU president An Hermans wrote, 'The digital era? Also my era!'[32]

Both the Council of Europe and the European Commission aim to build a Europe where digital empowerment goes hand in hand with social responsibility. When older people are treated equally and can share their experiences with others, society as a whole benefits. Is that not what it truly means to be *forever young*?

32 A. Hermans, *The Digital Era? Also My Era! Media and Information Literacy: A Key to Ensure Seniors' Rights to Participate in the Digital Era*, Council of Europe (2022).

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Redefining Health in an Ageing Society

Cor Spreeuwenberg

In 1946 the World Health Organization (WHO) defined health as 'a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of infirmity'[33]. This famous and often-cited definition is open to criticism as it categorises all humans as unhealthy and focuses on an unrealistic state of functional perfection. It supposes that human beings can reach a state in which they are living without any obstacles to their abilities and that the state of health is independent of factors such as age, life events and resilience. The definition also lacks a spiritual dimension and the influences of both external factors, such as the environment, and internal factors, such as emotions and resilience.

In 1984 the European WHO office revisited and updated the definition, shifting from health being a desirable state of well-being to it being a dynamic set of resources for living well.[34] It has become clear that the WHO definitions do not contribute to a useable working definition of health. Many alternatives have been proposed. The Dutch physician Machteld Huber developed a new, broader and more dynamic vision of health, called 'positive health'.[35] The model consists of finding a balance between six dimensions of health: physical functioning, mental well-being, meaningfulness, quality of life, participation and daily functioning. This chapter is about the consequences for older people of a new view of health in health policy.

Health in an ageing society

Particularly for aged humans, the absence of disease and complete well-being may not fully capture reality. Good health adds life to the years. The opportunities that arise from longevity depend strongly on *healthy ageing*. People who experience these extra years of life in good health participate in their community, form an integral

33 WHO Constitution of the World Health Organization, Preamble, adopted 22 July 1946, entered into force 7 April 1948.

34 WHO, *Health Promotion: A Discussion Document on the Concept and Principles*, Summary report (Geneva, 1984).

35 M. A. S. Huber, 'Towards a New, Dynamic Concept of Health: Its Operationalisation and Use in Public Health and Healthcare and in Evaluating Health Effects of Food', Doctoral thesis, Maastricht University, 2014.

part of their family and strengthen their society.[36] However, although many seniors are socially integrated and work voluntarily, growing older will often be accompanied by an increase in chronic conditions; functional limitations; declining physical, mental and cognitive capacity; and a need for care focused on the person and his or her situation.

Furthermore, good health among older people is not equally distributed across age groups, social status and countries. Previously, people over 60 were said to be in the third (and final) stage of life. However, because many people in the Western world between the ages of 60 and 75–80 are much more vital, active and independent than before, a distinction is now made between the third and the fourth phases of life. A person in the third phase of life often still functions well, has an important role as a volunteer and still participates actively in social life. However, health also varies widely within these phases of life. Therefore, there is a need to translate theories into practical approaches that take into account the personal situations of older people.[37]

Another reason to take a fresh look at healthcare for older people is the 'double ageing process', which is a result of global social, cultural and technical progress. The global share of senior citizens will increase: from 1 in 8 people aged 60 years or older in 2017 to 1 in 5 in 2050. The share of those in the fourth phase of life and of older people in the developing world will grow even more dramatically.[38] This transition will have major implications for society as a whole, as well as for healthcare systems tailored to the needs of its users. Especially for the older population, there is a need for a holistic, multidisciplinary approach to healthcare that transcends the classic boundaries of the current systems and focuses on adding life to the years instead of years to life.

36 WHO, *Report on Ageing and Health* (Geneva, 2015).

37 P. B. Baltes and J. Smith, 'New Frontiers in the Future of Aging: From Successful Aging of the Young Old to the Dilemmas of the Fourth Age', *Gerontology* 49/2 (2003).

38 UN, *World Population Ageing 2017* (New York, 2017).

Healthcare tailored for older people

The general goal of healthcare is to promote, restore and maintain health. In general, most attention is paid to restoring health (cure). People working in the curative sector of healthcare have a higher status than those working in care institutions or social medicine. However, for the ageing population there is a need to shift from an emphasis on restoring health to maintaining health and combating, where possible, its decline in physical, mental and cognitive terms. Healthcare systems must adapt to the ageing population by emphasising those aspects that really contribute to a good quality of life. Adding life to the years requires a holistic approach, not only among healthcare practitioners and institutions, but also among society as a whole. Older people should be approached and appreciated as citizens with their own backgrounds, histories, personalities, views, wishes and needs.

Healthcare for older people must be based on a careful, respectful and holistic evaluation of their physical, mental, social and living situations. With a broad understanding, it can be determined what a person can or cannot do for themselves, what and how their environment can contribute, and what assistance is needed from the healthcare system, society or their faith community.

The essentials for effective and compassionate healthcare systems for older people are:

- Easy accessibility: based on older people's physical capabilities, mental state, proximity of services to where they live and availability of public transport.
- A focus on prevention and health education: regular health screenings; vaccinations for preventable conditions such as flu; education on fall prevention, healthy food and exercise; and access to emergency signalling systems (such as personal alarms or alert devices for older people).
- A context-specific focus on cures: depending on an individual's health, personal preferences and quality of life, a focus on curative treatment for chronic conditions, serious diseases such cancer, broken bones and cataracts, and rehydration.

- Availability of home or residential care and tools such as home automation for those who can no longer manage on their own.
- A context-specific focus on care and reducing suffering: if conditions cannot be significantly improved for an individual, a focus on symptom management, offering comfort and end-of-life care.

Where the focus for a specific older person will lie will depend on a holistic evaluation and not on classified diagnoses alone. In cases of frailty, the risks and burdens of intensive medical intervention may outweigh the potential benefits.

A healthcare system for older people

Originally healthcare was delivered by charities. The roles of doctors and governments were very modest. Their influence increased during the nineteenth century with the growth of scientific knowledge and technology, which resulted in changing views on the role of governments in the organisation of society and increasing prosperity. Healthcare became increasingly institutionalised, dependent on the knowledge and skills of its staff, and expensive. Since the 1970s, attention has focused on quality and accountability. Hospitals have become centres of expertise and the length of stays has decreased dramatically. For recovery, care and rehabilitation, people rely on home care, institutions for long-term care or rehabilitation centres. There is a tendency to provide care at home for as long as possible.

In the home situation, elderly people are often dependent on the availability and attention of a partner, children, family, neighbours and friends. However, due to a variety of social changes, many elderly people have no partner at home, children and other family members sometimes live far way, and neighbours often hardly know each other. Professional help can support but not completely replace these support networks. Professional support may consist of advice, monitoring, care and so on, and can be provided by people from various disciplines. However, such care requires coordination by someone, a care manager, who knows and understands the person involved well and also knows what the carer or society can offer. If the need

for care increases, it may become necessary for an institution for long-term care to take over. Depending on the nature and severity of the reason for such a decision, this institution may be a care or nursing home.

Above the principles of care for the elderly are described in general terms. At a detailed level, the organisation and implementation of care across Europe varies considerably.

Two sides to the growth of healthcare

A well-functioning healthcare system is a driver of sustainable growth. The increasing quality of healthcare, which contributes to people living for longer in good health, has its downsides. Of the years added to life through enhanced quality of care, it is estimated that about two-thirds of these will be lived in good health.[39] The improved quality of care, but also the increase in the number of unhealthy years of life, is leading to greater pressure on the healthcare system in the sense that more and better-educated staff and higher expenditures are required. The shortened length of stays in hospital increases the demand for outside care. And home care and long-term care are suffering from a number of factors that contribute to a growing pressure on the sector. The work of those who provide care to people with serious chronic diseases or dementia requires person-to-person contact and can only be replaced to a small extent by technology. Young people prefer to work in the curative sector rather than in care. The growth in demand, use of increasingly complex technology, need for more and better-educated and trained staff, and the growing need for coordination are increasing healthcare costs in relation to GDP.

Challenges for almost the entire healthcare system

Countries all over the world differ greatly in the ways they organise, monitor and finance healthcare. However, the growing expectations in the field of healthcare, the

39 Netherlands, National Institute for Public Health and the Environment, *Volksgezondheid Toekomst Verkenning 2024. Levensverwachting en sterfte. Trendscenario VTV-2024* (Bilthoven, 2024).

shortage of personnel and the rising costs are challenges all governments are facing. This also applies to long-term care for the elderly. Several initiatives are being taken at both the global and European levels to improve elderly care. The UN has labelled the years 2021 to 2030 'the Decade of Healthy Ageing', and aims to overcome the great inequities in longevity that exist depending on social and economic status.[40] This initiative has highlighted the need for urgency, robust national plans, integrated health and social care, innovative intergenerational partnerships, and the use of new assistive technologies and digital innovations.

The EU was founded primarily to promote economic cooperation between countries, and healthcare is the responsibility is of the participating countries themselves. However, technological developments, scientific progress, cross-border epidemics such as Covid-19, and the need to jointly develop and purchase medicines all increase the call for more cooperation in healthcare. In 2022 the EU formulated its European Care Strategy, which focuses on three priorities: (1) to ensure quality, affordable and accessible care services across the EU; (2) to support care providers in their working conditions and training; and (3) to encourage member states to improve their care infrastructure and development.[41] Within the care strategy, the focus is on young people and long-term care for the elderly.

Consequences for policy

It is undoubtedly a boon that the UN and the EU have both called for the strengthening of care for the elderly and in their implementation are both embracing a broad concept of health. However, the question is whether and how these ambitions can be achieved if, as expected, there is a lack of staff, costs continue to rise and decision-makers have to deal with other costly obligations, such as climate change and defence. Innovations are being introduced in all sorts of areas, but they can only partially compensate for the shortage of personnel and the rising costs.

40 UN, *UN Decade of Healthy Ageing: Plan of Action 2021–2030* (New York, 2020).

41 European Commission, 'Proposal for a Council Recommendation on access to affordable high-quality long term care', COM (2022).

Despite all the ambitions to improve healthcare and adopt a new definition of health, there will come a time when direct or indirect publicly funded healthcare will have to be cut. The pressing question then, is whether this will happen in the cure or the care sector. Given the strong position of the cure sector, care could well lose the battle. However, from a Christian view of caring for those who are suffering, we must ensure that being able to live in a dignified manner takes priority over adding years to life. If the decision to cut healthcare is unavoidable, older people expect policymakers to promote and prioritise care above doubtful cures.

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Beyond the End of Work:

The Demographic Imperative. Innovation, Inclusion and Integration in Europe

Wouter De Tavernier [42]

42 This contribution was prepared by Wouter De Tavernier from the OECD Secretariat and does not necessarily reflect the official views of OECD member countries.

Even if people often still move from full-time work into full retirement, retirement is not a single transition. The transition from work into retirement consists of two parallel processes. The first process is an economic one and refers to the building up of resources that allow an individual to maintain a certain standard of living without having to work. In this respect, individuals are ready to retire once they have acquired the necessary resources to maintain the standard of living they desire. The second process is a social one and refers to a person's changing identity or role in society. People may gradually redefine who they are or how they see their role in society, moving away from being work-centred and towards other sources of identity or purpose, such as grandparenting, community work or pursuing a new interest. The timing and speed of this transition—or whether they make this transition at all—may differ substantially between people. *Successful retirement, then, means that a person can maintain their desired standard of living and has an identity or role outside the labour market to retire into.*

There are many factors that can disrupt these transitions, resulting in retirement occurring when a person is not yet ready, whether financially or socially. Factors such as poor health, job loss or age discrimination can push a person out of the labour market before they are ready to retire, resulting in insufficient resources to maintain one's desired standard of living or a sense of loss of role, and thus lower well-being in retirement.

The role of policy is to facilitate these transitions in a financially sustainable way at the macroeconomic level. This entails providing sufficiently flexible pension policies so that individuals can choose their desired retirement timing without passing on the cost of that choice to society. While governments have little control over the social transition process, they can help people with this transition. This requires policies that reduce the risk of disruption during both transition processes.

Policies to support the economic transition

As pensions are the primary tool to provide income security in old age, regularly *informing people of their pension entitlements* is key for people to estimate whether

they have gathered sufficient resources to maintain their desired standard of living without working. Informing people about their pension entitlements is not easy. In Denmark, one-third of early retirees were unaware of how much their pension would be before they retired.[43] In the UK, 15% of women close to retirement were unaware that they would be affected by an increase in the statutory retirement age from 60 to 65, only a couple of years before they thought they could retire.[44] Actively reaching out to people to inform them about their pension entitlements is important. Still, even then some people may remain unaware: about one-fifth of people building up pension entitlements in Sweden do not open the 'orange envelope' containing information on the value of their pension.[45] Therefore, communication should include multiple tools including public information campaigns involving employers and social partners, pension dashboards and calculators, and easily understandable pension statements providing information on how the individual can take action to improve old-age pension adequacy.

Pension policies should provide the necessary flexibility for people to adjust their involvement in the labour market and to accommodate differences in the timing and speed of the social transition away from being work-oriented. This should happen within the bounds of what is financially sustainable, and with the individual, not society, carrying the financial consequences of their retirement timing. To account for differences in the timing of the social transition requires an early retirement scheme with an actuarially neutral penalty, as well as an actuarially neutral bonus for people deferring pension uptake. On average across OECD countries, a bonus increases a pension by about 5.5% per year of deferral of pension uptake, ranging from around 4% in Luxembourg and Slovenia to 7.5% in Denmark under current pension rules.[46] Partial retirement schemes allow pension systems to provide for a variation in the

43 P. H. Jensen, K. Kongshøj and W. De Tavernier, 'On How the Nature of Early Retirement Is Related to Post-Retirement Life Conditions From a Citizenship Perspective', *Ageing and Society* 40/5 (2020).

44 D. Holman, L. Foster and M. Hess, 'Inequalities in Women's Awareness of Changes to the State Pension Age in England and the Role of Cognitive Ability', *Ageing and Society* 40/1 (2020).

45 OECD, *OECD Reviews of Pension Systems: Slovenia* (Paris, 2022).

46 OECD, *Pensions at a Glance 2017: OECD and G20 Indicators* (Paris, 2017).

speed of the transition. Removing disincentives for people to combine work and pensions would also increase retirement flexibility. Such disincentives may include withdrawing pension benefits in line with income from work or mandating social contributions without supplementary pension build-up.

Automatic adjustment mechanisms are increasingly being used to help ensure that public pensions remain financially sustainable despite population ageing. The latter is being driven by a *combination of increasing life expectancy and declining cohort sizes*, which is the consequence of declining fertility as well as emigration in some countries. Just as price indexation protects pensioners from inflation, automatic adjustment mechanisms can buffer pension systems from these demographic trends by allocating specific risks to specific groups. The impact of increasing life expectancy can be allocated to the cohort that can expect to live longer by linking retirement ages to life expectancy, as now happens in one in four OECD countries.[47] Alternatively, a sustainability factor can reduce the pensions of individuals in cohorts with higher life expectancy who do not delay retirement, as happens in Finland and, to some extent, in Portugal.[48]

The impact of a declining working-age population, among other reasons due to low fertility levels, is more difficult to allocate, as it is hard to argue that a specific cohort either benefits from or is responsible for declining cohort sizes. The Baltic states and Japan distribute the impact of changes in the size of the working-age population across current and future pensioners by indexing pensions in payment and uprating past earnings in the calculation of new pensions based on changes to the wage bill, total contributions or the number of contributors.[6] In Italy and Poland, only new pensions are adjusted to the size of the workforce, as past earnings are uprated based on GDP and wage-bill growth, respectively.[6] Finally, balancing mechanisms are designed to ensure that the pension system's budget is balanced in either the short or the long term. The German mechanism, for instance, ensures that current revenues and

47 OECD, *Pensions at a Glance 2023: OECD and G20 Indicators* (Paris, 2023).

48 OECD, *Pensions at a Glance 2021: OECD and G20 Indicators* (Paris, 2021).

expenditures are balanced—at least within the boundaries of a minimum replacement rate and a maximum contribution rate—whereas the Swedish mechanism balances the pension scheme's revenues and assets, on the one hand, with its liabilities, on the other. Both balancing mechanisms affect new pensions and pensions in payment, and the German one also impacts contributions.[6]

Canada's default provisions function as a backstop: if there is a financial imbalance in the pension scheme in the long term and the politicians responsible cannot reach an agreement on how to rebalance the scheme, a set of default provisions is automatically activated to rebalance the scheme by lowering the indexation of pensions in payment and increasing contribution rates.[6]

Policies to support the social transition

The social transition strongly depends on individuals' personal circumstances, which are outside the control of the government. Nonetheless, the context is shaped to some extent by macro-social trends. For instance, people are becoming grandparents at older ages due to the increase in women's age at first childbirth, and the growing focus on active ageing is facilitating longer working lives and creating opportunities for older people to contribute to society in other ways. *Campaigns normalising older workers and initiatives boosting active ageing*, as well as improvements to the accessibility of public spaces and workplaces could help older workers feel more connected to their employment for longer.

Evidence indicates that *career and retirement planning* can increase the engagement of older workers,[49] and improve employment and well-being in retirement.[50] These processes force people to think about the roles they see for themselves and the goals they would like to pursue, and provide a reality check on their retirement expectations—potentially triggering people to adjust these expectations.

49 J. Vuori et al., 'Enhancing Late-Career Management Among Aging Employees – A Randomized Controlled Trial', *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 115 (2019).

50 M. Wang and B. Hesketh, *Achieving Well-Being in Retirement: Recommendations From 20 Years of Research*, SIOP White Paper Series (2012).

While employers and workers would primarily be responsible for organising or seeking out such planning initiatives, these practices could be encouraged or supported by governments and social partners to make them available to more of the working-age population approaching retirement.

Policies to reduce the risk of disruptions in the transition process

Various factors can force people to leave employment well before they have completed the economic or social transition to retirement. People may have to leave their workplaces, among other reasons, due to bad health, job loss or age discrimination. Reducing the risk of such disruptions to the transition into retirement should be a core objective for policymakers to enable people to stay in the labour market for longer and to retire at the moment of their choosing.

Health and safety regulations are key to preventing poor health and reducing the arduousness or hazardousness of employment.5 Reducing exposure to risks to people's physical or mental health should be the primary way in which policies should deal with occupations with elevated health risks. In addition, people in such jobs should receive clear information on the health risks involved, not just as a moral imperative so that people know the risks to which they are exposed, but also because it allows workers to demand compensation for the risks taken. In this way, the costs of the negative health effects are, to some extent, internalised. Beyond occupational health interventions, wider *preventative care* policies, such as those promoting healthier lifestyles, could reduce the prevalence of poor health around the time of retirement. Even if a person's health declines, accessibility and workplace adaptations can mitigate the impact of this on his or her ability to work.

Life-long learning initiatives can help to reduce health risks as well as the chances of losing one's job. Workers in jobs involving certain health risks that are difficult to mitigate through health and safety regulations can be retrained for less arduous or hazardous roles. Furthermore, continued investment in reskilling and upskilling can increase the retention of older workers and improve their prospects of regaining employment in case of dismissal. Investing in the development of older workers'

knowledge and skills not only improves their employability and productivity, but is also likely to boost their engagement and willingness to remain in employment. By investing in their training, employers can signal to older workers that they value their contributions and are willing to retain them—conversely, once older workers are excluded from participating in training programmes, they may see this as an indication that they are expected to leave the organisation in the short to medium term.

Mandatory retirement practices should be further discouraged in order to reduce the dismissals of older people. Many countries have moved away from mandatory retirement altogether: this is the case for most Anglo-Saxon OECD countries and, within the EU, for Denmark (with the exception of some specific occupations such as judges) and Poland, as well as Estonia, where the Supreme Court ruled in 2007 that mandatory retirement was unconstitutional.3 Several countries, including Belgium, Czechia and Latvia have abolished mandatory retirement in the private sector but maintain such practices for civil servants. Yet some countries, including Finland, Italy and the Netherlands, still reduce employment protections for private-sector workers or even require the termination of employment contracts around or just after an employee becomes eligible for an old-age pension. Mandatory retirement is often used as a workaround for a lack of flexibility in the labour market, if very strict employment protection makes the dismissal of individual employees for lagging performance difficult, or a strong seniority component in wage setting results in older workers being very expensive for the productivity they deliver. While age limits could be defensible in certain occupations or sectors, in particular when evidence indicates that risks to health and safety steeply increase after a certain age, timely enrolment in retraining programmes would be the better way to deal with this—just as in the case of arduous or hazardous work.

Finally, age discrimination can cause people to leave employment earlier than they would like. Ageism can trigger retirement through older workers being made redundant, or through excluding them from certain opportunities such as participation in training programmes. *Positive intergenerational contact* is a good antidote to ageist stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination, particularly if it entails some form of education. Governments and social partners could promote such programmes to tackle ageism in the workplace.

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Europe's Population:

Turning Grey and Becoming More Diverse

Rainer Münz

Europe's annual number of births peaked in the late 1950s and 1960s, resulting in the 'baby boom'. This boom—generating the largest birth cohort of the twentieth century—rejuvenated European societies that had been partly depleted by two world wars and a severe inter-war depression. Six decades later, the baby boomers are still the largest age cohort. And they are about to retire or have already retired. In the 55–65 age group, less than 40% are still gainfully employed. And in the 65+ age group, economic activity linked to work is negligible.[51]

Far too many baby boomers left the labour market long before reaching age 65[52] due to the fairly generous (perhaps even too generous) early retirement schemes offered in the majority of EU countries. Many of these schemes were introduced during the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, targeting workers born between the First and Second World Wars. Facilitating and even incentivising this generation's early retirement was intended to help the baby-boomer generation enter the labour market. A booming economy, with growing wages leading to higher social security contributions, and the relatively small cohorts entering retirement between the mid-1970s and the late 1990s made it easy to lower the statutory retirement age or to design fairly generous pre-retirement schemes.

Today, European societies are rapidly ageing. Twenty-two per cent of the population—or more than 1 in 5 Europeans—is over the age of 60. The median age in the EU27 reached 45 years in 2025,[53] compared to 31 years in 1960. As European societies turn grey, early retirement schemes are still widespread and popular in the majority of EU countries, but they have become totally dysfunctional. They not only require increasing fiscal transfers from state budgets to unfunded or underfunded pension insurance schemes, but they are also contributing to the lack of qualified labour and skills that has become a major obstacle to Europe's economic development.

51 Eurostat, 'Employment by Sex, Age and Economic Activity' (2024).

52 Ibid.

53 Eurostat, 'Population on 1 January by Age and Sex' (2024).

Demographic ageing in Europe manifests itself in an ever-growing number and share of older people, while the numbers of those in the younger age groups are shrinking. Two unrelated trends are driving this dynamic:

- On the one hand, Europeans are having fewer and fewer children, resulting in a declining number of births. In 2023 the average number of children stood at 1.38 per woman.[54] This was the lowest level ever recorded.
- On the other hand, after a short dip caused by higher mortality during the Covid-19 pandemic, life expectancy is again on the rise. In 2023 it reached a new historic high: 81.4 years on average[55]—a gain of almost 4 years since the beginning of the twenty-first century. This is not only increasing the number of senior citizens but also their average number of years in retirement.

Europe's demographic ageing process has also recently gained additional momentum with the baby-boomer generation entering retirement age.

In sum: Europe in general and the EU in particular have entered a stage of demographic extremes characterised by the highest life expectancy and the lowest fertility ever recorded. Since 2013 the number of deaths in EU countries has been higher than the number of births. In 2023, 5.1 million people died in the EU27 while only 3.8 million births were registered.[56] Consequently, over the course of more than a decade, this widening gap between births and deaths has led to the permanent shrinking of native populations, transforming European societies in an unprecedented way.

In the years and decades to come, Europe's adverse demographic dynamics—an ever-growing excess of deaths over births, rapidly ageing native populations[57] and more people transitioning into retirement—will cause massive shortages of labour and skills in a growing number of regions and industries. The overall decline is not limited

54 Eurostat, 'Fertility Indicators' (2024).

55 Eurostat, 'Life Expectancy by Age and Sex' (2024).

56 Eurostat, 'Demographic Indicators' (2024).

57 Eurostat, 'Population Projections by Age and Sex – National Level' (2024).

to the total population. It will also affect domestic workforces. As a consequence of declining or persistently low fertility, the European generation that is currently leaving the educational system and entering the labour market is about 35% smaller than the retiring generation that is vacating positions on the labour market.[58] This is creating a shortage of labour and skills in a variety of sectors across Europe. And the decline of native populations throughout the EU and beyond will continue to increase this shortage.

At the same time, this dynamic will put additional pressure on those unfunded pension systems that are organised on a pay-as-you-go basis, which are facing a rising number of beneficiaries and stagnating numbers of contributors.

While demographic ageing itself can hardly be reversed, a series of policy measures could address and reduce its negative impact in several ways.

- The quickest and most sustainable way to reduce the lack of labour and skills as well as the fiscal burden of ageing would be to promote higher labour force participation among older people. One way to achieve this would be through a substantial rise in the actual retirement age (ideally by first increasing the statutory pension age and then automatically linking it to increases in life expectancy, as is case in Finland and Sweden). The fiscal aspect is particularly relevant for the majority of European countries as they rely on unfunded pay-as-you-go pension schemes. Unfortunately, such changes are extremely unpopular in Europe.

- A second, less stringent reform would allow people to retire, but would create arrangements that allow and encourage them to stay economically active while receiving their pension. This would have a positive effect on labour markets but not on the fiscal burden arising from unfunded pensions.

- Another 'quick fix' could be to increase the weekly or monthly hours that people are working in the formal sector of the economy. This would require a

58 Eurostat, 'Employment Rates by Sex, Age and Citizenship' (2024).

reduction in part-time jobs which have become more widespread (particularly among female workers) in the twenty-first century. This, however, would require investing in care facilities for infants and younger children and making provision for schools extending school opening hours and providing additional activities.

- A totally different 'quick fix' would be the recruitment and/or admission of foreign labour with skills that match the unmet demand in the European labour markets. This would require migration and admission regimes that are much more selective than the ones currently in place in the EU and its member states. It would also require efficient and speedy skills-recognition systems. If implemented, it would be a clear departure from the past 15 years of migration policy, during which humanitarian admission, marriage migration and family reunion have dominated the inflows of third-country nationals in the majority of Europe's net-receiving countries.

In the *medium-to-long term* there are other ways to mitigate the consequences of demographic ageing:

a. Higher labour force participation among people from non-EU migrant backgrounds in general, and among women with such a background in particular, would also help to widen the supply on the labour market and reduce the need for financial support via social-assistance schemes. Such a change could not be achieved overnight as it would require the upskilling of adult migrants, changes in the incentive structure of social transfers and massive investments in the performance of public school systems. The latter would be essential as today many school-leaving (aged 15–18) EU-born children of migrants lack basic competences (literacy in the majority language of the host country, as well as numeracy). As a result, many members of this second generation do not represent a real 'gain' for domestic labour markets.

b. Another long-term project is the decoupling of pension payments from adverse demographic and workforce changes. This requires a transition from pay-as-you-go systems, dependent on payroll taxes/contributions, to fully funded

pension schemes financed through savings, dividends and capital gains. Such schemes with near universal coverage already exist in the (predominantly Protestant) countries of North-Western Europe (the Netherlands, Scandinavia, Switzerland and the UK).

c. Finally, pro-natalist policies could also have a long-term impact. If EU countries could manage to increase the number of children born on their territories during the next 5 years this would increase the number of potential labour market entrants in 25–30 years from now. So far, however, no EU country has been able to develop an effective policy mix with a lasting impact on fertility. In all EU countries, the average number of children per woman is below two, which automatically translates into shrinking native populations.

Obviously, retiring later in life, working longer hours, reducing social welfare payments/incentives which discourage (full) labour market participation and admitting/recruiting more labour migrants are (not mutually exclusive) various options to address the negative effects of demographic ageing and the decline of native populations. It is, however, almost never clearly stated that these are the only available options. The reason for this is obvious: none of these options is very popular among native voters and constituencies. That is why many attempts to address demographic ageing lack policy coherence.

None of the options described above is available for 'free'. Maintaining the status quo in Europe's ageing societies (with pay-as-you-go systems) would ultimately require either higher taxes/social security contributions or lower pension payments. Demographic decline could also lead to smaller economic output, depreciating property values and possibly unsustainable public debt levels.

In most European countries, the majority of citizens and domestic voters oppose both raising the retirement age and reducing pension benefits. And in many cases, raising the retirement age is also not popular with employers, who tend to prefer younger workers.

Establishing fully funded pension systems requires a transitional period of about 35–40 years. During this time, the economically active middle generation and their employers remain burdened with making contributions to the pay-as-you-go system that is being phased out while also starting to save (via asset-accumulating pension funds) for their own retirement.

Admitting more labour migrants (and their dependent family members) inevitably leads to societies with a higher degree of ethnocultural, religious and linguistic diversity. This can deepen the rift between the cities that attract these migrants and the homogenous, but demographically stagnating or shrinking peripheries. Another line of conflict can run between the native electorates, dominated by older and more rural voters, and the tax-paying, but politically unrepresented foreigners.

Many regions of Europe became diverse as a result of migration while the baby boomers were still young or middle-aged. In some cases, these migrants and their offspring formed not only diasporas but parallel societies. Others integrated well. If the retiring boomers are now and in the future replaced by new migrants, their integration will become even more urgent. This should not be limited to linguistic and socio-economic achievements.

As the native core of our societies shrinks, the newcomers also need to be integrated politically through naturalisation.

Without this, liberal democracies risk becoming less and less representative, with a growing share of residents paying taxes and contributing to society but lacking a political voice.

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EU Enlargement:

Shaping a Demographic Future for All Generations

Teona Lavrelashvili

The EU is undergoing a profound demographic transition. Declining birth rates, rising life expectancy and imbalanced migration patterns are reshaping the continent's population structure. At the same time, the EU is preparing for a possible enlargement to include new member states from Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans—regions facing their own demographic upheavals. These twin developments—internal demographic decline and simultaneous expansion—are closely connected. If managed wisely, EU expansion could help to ease labour shortages and reduce demographic imbalances across the Union. This chapter highlights the overlooked link between demography and EU enlargement, arguing that future enlargement strategies must directly address the demographic decline and growing labour shortages across Europe, and puts forward concrete recommendations on how enlargement strategies could tackle these issues.

A demographic crisis with labour market consequences

While demography does not dictate outcomes, it significantly defines the boundaries within which economic policy must operate. The EU's working-age population will contract by over 50 million by the end of the century.[59] Fertility rates will remain well below replacement levels in nearly all member states.[60] In parallel, the old-age dependency ratio is rising rapidly, especially in Southern and Eastern Europe,[61] where ageing is accelerating without the counterbalance of immigration or natural population growth.

Demographic trends are driving labour shortages in both direct and indirect ways. Directly, the shrinking working-age population is reducing the available labour force, especially in healthcare, construction, information and communications technology, and agriculture. Countries such as Germany, Italy and Austria are struggling to replace

59 Eurostat, 'Population Projections in the EU' (2023).

60 Eurostat, 'Fertility Statistics' (2025).

61 D. Pinkus and N. Ruer, *The Demographic Divide: Inequalities in Ageing Across the European Union*, Bruegel (2025).

retiring workers, even with increased labour mobility.[62] Indirectly, ageing populations are increasing the demand for services such as healthcare while reducing the workforce needed to deliver them. They are also shifting consumption patterns and slowing innovation, further straining labour markets.

While migration from within and outside the EU helps to mitigate the effects of demographic ageing, it cannot fully offset the long-term imbalance in the labour market or sustainably compensate for the underlying demographic imbalance.[63]

Enlargement as a demographic opportunity, if managed wisely

The potential accession of countries such as Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and the Western Balkans to the EU introduces new variables into this equation. Many of these countries have younger populations compared to the EU average median age of 44.5 years. For instance, Kosovo has the youngest population in Europe, with a median age of 30. Albania also stands out with a median age of 35.8, followed by Georgia (39), Moldova (38), Montenegro (41.1) and North Macedonia (41.6). Ukraine's median age is 42.1, still below the EU average. In contrast, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina align closely with the EU, each reporting a median age of around 44.5.[64]

However, these countries also face the pressures of intense emigration, brain drain and fertility decline. For example, Moldova has lost nearly one-third of its population since the early 1990s,[65] while Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina face some of the steepest population declines in Europe.[66]

62 T. Lavrelashvili, *Confronting Europe's Labour Shortage: A Strategic Blueprint to Attract Global Talent and Reverse Population Decline*, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies (Brussels, 2024).

63 European Commission, *The 2023 Ageing Report: Economic and Budgetary Projections for the EU Member States (2022–2070)* (2023).

64 Median age figures are drawn from the United Nations World Population Prospects 2024 Revision and Eurostat (2024).

65 K. Całus, *A Disappearing Country: Moldova on the Verge of a Demographic Catastrophe*, OSW Centre for Eastern Studies (2025).

66 P. Wankiewicz, *The Vanishing Balkans: The Region's Demographic Crisis*, OSW Centre for Eastern Studies (2025).

Enlargement could, therefore, reinforce the EU's demographic challenges if it simply triggers new migration flows from poorer to richer regions without addressing the root causes. It risks transforming today's candidate countries into tomorrow's demographic peripheries—ageing, depopulated and economically stagnant.

On the other hand, if enlargement is used strategically, it could become a pillar of Europe's demographic renewal. It could rebalance labour across the regions, stimulate investment in shrinking areas and generate new momentum for cross-border talent circulation.

The demography–labour nexus: three core tensions

The relationship between demography and the labour market is shaped by a series of delicate trade-offs. As the EU contemplates further enlargement, understanding these tensions becomes critical.

One of the most visible dilemmas lies in the movement of people across borders. Labour mobility has long been a cornerstone of the EU project, offering workers the freedom to seek better opportunities and helping to address shortages in wealthier regions. But when mobility becomes a one-way street—from East to West, or from rural to urban centres—it gradually undermines the demographic sustainability of the regions left behind. In countries preparing to join the EU, already grappling with shrinking populations and emigration, this can mean the loss of their most dynamic age groups. If enlargement is to succeed, the EU must transition from a model focused on absorbing labour to one that supports circulation and reinvestment. This requires providing meaningful support for the countries and regions of origin—so that individuals can imagine viable futures at home, not only abroad.

A second, equally pressing tension arises from the interplay between ageing populations and the demand for care labour. Across Europe, the rising number of elderly citizens is placing growing pressure on health and social care systems. Ironically, many of the workers who fill essential roles in this sector—nurses, carers and home

aides—come from countries where demographic ageing is advancing even more rapidly. Georgia, Ukraine and Albania, for instance, are increasingly exporting care professionals while facing growing elderly care needs at home.[67] This paradox risks creating a vicious cycle: just as the need for services increases domestically, the very people trained to deliver them are leaving. Only a coordinated approach—investing in local training, encouraging circular migration and ensuring mutual benefit—can reconcile the needs of both the sending and the receiving countries.

Finally, the demographic map of Europe reveals another fault line: that between urban growth and rural decline. In both existing and prospective member states, young people continue to gravitate towards capital cities and metropolitan regions, drawn by jobs, education and connectivity. Rural areas, by contrast, are often left with ageing populations, limited services and little economic dynamism. This imbalance not only entrenches inequality but also accelerates population decline in regions already at risk. Without targeted investment in infrastructure, housing, education and care services in rural and intermediary areas, demographic renewal will remain an elusive goal—even with enlargement.

Labour shortages in candidate countries: a dual challenge

The notion that enlargement will automatically replenish the EU's ageing workforce ignores the reality that many candidate countries are already grappling with critical labour shortages of their own.

In Ukraine, the war has depleted the workforce across essential sectors. Skilled trades such as mechanics, welders and construction workers are in short supply, and millions of working-age Ukrainians are either displaced or have been mobilised. Even before the war, emigration and demographic ageing were thinning the labour force, and today, health and education services face severe staff shortages.

67 OECD, *Health at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators* (2023).

Georgia faces a similar paradox: despite high youth unemployment, employers in construction, tourism and hospitality report acute difficulties finding staff. Emigration and a mismatch between education and market needs are draining the local labour pool. To fill vacancies, companies are increasingly recruiting workers from abroad, including from Turkey and Central Asia.

In Moldova, vacancies in agriculture, retail and manufacturing are unfilled despite rising wages. Labour deficits have grown so severe that the Moldovan authorities have begun issuing work permits to foreign nationals. The country is simultaneously losing its younger population to migration and struggling to fill jobs at home.

The Western Balkans are perhaps the clearest example of the brain drain phenomenon. In Serbia, entire vocational trades face worker shortages. Bosnia and Herzegovina has to import labour for construction, hospitality and even retail. Albania, despite being predominantly agrarian, has seen its agricultural labour force shrink drastically. Across the region, healthcare systems are losing doctors and nurses to emigration, even as local populations age.

Recommendations for a demography-sensitive enlargement

To ensure that enlargement strengthens, rather than strains, the EU's demographic resilience, a coordinated and forward-looking strategy is essential—one that addresses both the needs of ageing member states and the vulnerabilities of the candidate countries. The EU should:

1. *Invest in skills and retain talent*. Education, vocational training and job creation should be strengthened across the member and candidate countries—especially in regions with high emigration or low fertility. Expanding the Talent Booster Mechanism[68] and Union of Skills could better align education systems with

68 An EU initiative under the European Year of Skills (2023) designed to help regions most affected by demographic challenges retain and attract talent through skills development and labour market measures.

labour market needs, reduce brain drain and support demographic renewal. Platforms such as SKILLAB[69] could help to match skills to local demand and promote re-skilling.

2. *Revitalise rural regions and use the growth plans strategically*. Targeted investments in infrastructure, childcare, healthcare and digital access are vital to reverse demographic decline in rural areas. The Growth Plan for the Western Balkans—through its €6 billion reform fund—as well as the Growth Plan for Moldova and the Ukraine Facility should be used to align national reform agendas with demographic recovery goals, addressing the root causes of emigration and regional inequality.

3. *Encourage circular and managed mobility*. To avoid depleting local workforces in candidate countries, the EU should support circular migration in key sectors such as healthcare and construction. These schemes should allow workers to gain experience abroad while facilitating return, reintegration and skills transfer—ensuring mutual benefits for sending and receiving regions.

4. *Align migration and enlargement with demographic realities*. Migration and integration policies must reflect long-term demographic trends. Young migrants can help to address demographic ageing if effectively integrated into the workforce. Enlargement negotiations should explicitly include demographic goals, thus ensuring mobility contributes to balanced population renewal across the EU.

5. *Harness the 'silver economy' for local growth*. Population ageing should be seen as a driver of innovation and job creation. Investments in care services, assistive technologies and adapted housing could stimulate economic activity, particularly in rural and ageing regions. EU funding and public–private partnerships could help to build a sustainable, inclusive silver economy.

69 A digital platform piloted by the European Training Foundation to improve skills matching, support re-skilling, and connect education with local labour market demand.

Europe's demographic future hinges on its ability to renew its population and labour force. Enlargement offers one of the few tools available to do so at scale. But unless it is accompanied by policies that address the demographic fragility of both existing and prospective members, it could aggravate the very challenges it seeks to resolve. Rather than seeing enlargement and demography as separate files, the EU must fuse them into a single strategy. By linking the accession process with population sustainability, labour resilience and territorial cohesion, the Union could build a more balanced, youthful and resilient Europe. Enlargement, then, becomes not just a political project, but a demographic necessity.

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Giving Seniors a European Voice:

The History of the European Seniors' Union

Teona Lavrelashvili

Founded in 1995, the European Seniors' Union (ESU) emerged as Europe's first politically affiliated organisation dedicated to the interests of the senior generations. Today, the ESU is the largest political seniors' network on the continent and the official seniors' association of the European People's Party (EPP). As the largest political seniors' organisation, whose membership was estimated at 1.2 million members,[70] the ESU works to ensure that Europe recognises the value, dignity and potential of its ageing population. As the ESU marks its thirtieth anniversary in 2025, this milestone offers a timely opportunity to reflect on its origins, foundation and the key developments that led to its creation—as well as its core activities and significant achievements over the past three decades.

The origins of senior representation in the EPP

The ESU traces its roots to the early 1990s, when Christian Democratic senior organisations grew increasingly concerned that the voices of older citizens were not being heard sufficiently in European politics. In the early 1990s, pension reform had become the central issue in European politics that highlighted the under-representation of seniors' voices. As governments across Europe began to address the sustainability of pension systems—often proposing reforms to ensure long-term viability—political debates increasingly focused on the needs and futures of the younger generations. Existing civil society structures, while engaged in advocacy, lacked access to EU decision-making at the party-political level. This concern led to calls for a dedicated seniors' platform within the EPP.[71]

The idea took shape at the 1990 Seniors for a Europe in Peace and Freedom conference in Bonn, where representatives from Germany's newly formed Seniors' Union (Senioren-Union) and the Austrian Seniors' Association (Österreichischer Seniorenbund, ÖSB) began to discuss the creation of a political seniors' organisation. Initial efforts gathered momentum in 1991 under the leadership of German Secretary of State Bernhard Worms.[72]

70 ESU, 'Homepage'.

71 Author's interviews with members of the ESU, February–May 2025.

72 ESU, *Annual Report of the European Seniors' Union* (ESU) 2018.

Support for the initiative expanded. In Belgium, Elisabeth Dispaux-Cornil of the Seniors of the Christian Social Party (Ainés du Parti Social Chrétien) engaged directly with EPP President Wilfried Martens and Secretary General Thomas Jansen, securing early institutional backing for such an organisation. A key moment followed in May 1993, when the EPP Group and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation co-organised a pensioners' conference in the European Parliament, giving further visibility to the project.[73]

By January 1994 the proposal had reached the highest levels, with the German Seniors' Union presenting it to Chancellor Helmut Kohl. A preparatory workshop was held in Aachen on 5 May 1995—symbolically coinciding with Europe Day—bringing together representatives from a small group of countries despite limited national-level structures. The outcome was decisive: an executive committee, chaired by Stefan Knafl (ÖSB), was tasked with organising a founding congress.[74]

On 7 November 1995, during the EPP Congress in Madrid, the European Senior Citizens' Union—later renamed the ESU—was officially founded with financial backing from the ÖSB. Knafl was elected the first president. The political weight of the moment was underlined by the presence of EPP President Wilfried Martens and Secretary General Klaus Welle, both of whom strongly supported the initiative.[75]

On 14 December 1995 the EPP Political Bureau formally recognised the ESU as a member association, granting it voting rights in the presidency elections.[76] As President Knafl would later summarise, the ESU was founded with three core aims: giving seniors a political voice, defending their rights and contributing to the unification of Europe.[77]

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73 J. Teugels, 'Seniors, Party Politics and the European Union: 20 Years European Seniors' Union (ESU)', MA thesis, University of Göttingen/Strasbourg, 2016, 32.

74 T. Jansen and S. Van Hecke, *At Europe's Service: The Origins and Evolution of the European People's Party* (Berlin: Springer, 2011), 182.

75 Author's interviews with members of the ESU, February–May 2025.

76 See 'A Chronology of the European Senior Citizens' Union (ESCU) 1995–2013' in B. Worms (ed.), *Senior Citizens Working for Europe*, European Senior Citizens' Union (Monschau).

77 Author's interviews with members of the ESU, February–May 2025.

The foundational documents of the ESU articulate its guiding vision and enduring commitments. The 'Seniors' Charta',[78] drafted at the organisation's inception in 1995, defines the ESU's core mission: to uphold the dignity, participation and rights of older citizens, particularly by engaging directly with the European Parliament and the EPP. The EPP newsletter described the ESU as an organisation created to represent the interests of older citizens at the European level. This mission was further clarified in 1998 by the ESU's first secretary general, Wilhelm Mohaupt, who explained in a letter to the European Commission that the ESU 'is active in the interest of all senior citizens of Europe. Its political goal is to represent the interests of older people also within the EP, in particular, within the EPP fraction.'[79]

Building on this, the Vienna Declaration[80] of 1996 set the tone for the ESU's early political values, affirming the principles of cooperation, co-determination and co-responsibility, while framing senior engagement as central to intergenerational solidarity and the European integration project.

By the end of 1995, a political space had been created where older Europeans were no longer represented solely through advisory organisations or civil society networks. They now had a political home—an institution embedded within Europe's largest transnational party, capable of translating demographic realities into political priorities.

A changing Europe: the broader context for the ESU's emergence

The foundation of the ESU coincided with a period of profound demographic awareness across Europe. The rapid rise in life expectancy, coupled with declining fertility rates, gave rise to a new sense of urgency in both political and academic circles. This

78 European Senior Citizens' Union, 'Seniors' Charta', in B. Worms (ed.), *Senior Citizens Working for Europe*, European Senior Citizens' Union (Monschau).

79 Teugels, 'Seniors, Party Politics and the European Union', 34.

80 European Senior Citizens' Union, 'Vienna Declaration: Cooperation – Co-determination – Co-responsibility, 1996', in B. Worms, *Senior Citizens Working for Europe*, European Senior Citizens' Union (Monschau).

demographic shift was increasingly understood not merely as a social issue, but as a structural challenge for welfare systems, labour markets and democratic governance.

Public authorities began to respond. International organisations such as the UN and the World Health Organization took early steps, launching the Vienna International Plan of Action on Ageing (1982) and declaring 1999 the International Year of Older Persons.[81] These initiatives called for improved care, active ageing, and the full integration of seniors into economic and public life.

Within the EU, the period between 1991 and 1993 saw the first concerted efforts to engage with older citizens at a continental level. The European Commission funded programmes and research projects on ageing and, in 1993, announced the European Year of Older People and Solidarity Between Generations. At the same time, several senior-oriented non-governmental organisations—though largely apolitical—began advising the Commission. These organisations helped to frame the policy discussion but remained peripheral to the party-political structures of the EU.[82]

In this context, the ESU was unique: it gave seniors a direct political platform embedded within the party system. As one founding member observed, it turned seniors 'from observers into participants'.[83] It was the first initiative to create a seniors' organisation directly affiliated with a European political party. While other organisations focused on technical advice, lobbying or awareness-raising, the ESU explicitly sought direct political representation.[84] Its entry into the political mainstream was not just symbolic—it institutionalised the idea that older Europeans had a rightful place in shaping the future of the European project.

Its integration into the EPP offered a model for addressing seniors' issues not through fragmentation or protest but via constructive engagement. The ESU's formation

81 UN, *Vienna International Plan of Action on Ageing* (New York, 1983).

82 Author's interviews with members of the ESU, February–May 2025.

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid.

helped to depolarise intergenerational issues and inspired other political families to follow suit.[85] Not long after its founding, the Party of European Socialists launched its own seniors' association, and other European political families explored various ways of giving a voice to older members. Yet the ESU remained the most structured and prominent example, thanks to its early legal formalisation, transnational reach and strategic backing from a major European party. By situating itself within a political family, the ESU was able to influence party manifestos, contribute to European election campaigns and submit resolutions at EPP congresses. It did not operate in isolation, but increasingly acted as a relay between national experiences and European decision-making.[86]

Across several member states, political parties had begun experimenting with seniors' branches or even stand-alone pensioners' parties. In Slovenia, for instance, a pensioners' party became a coalition partner in government.[87] In other countries, political space was opening up for similar formations.

As the 1990s gave way to the 2000s, the ESU become a recognised actor within the EPP and a reference point for seniors' organisations across Europe. It was a unique example of how ageing could be addressed not only as a policy issue but as a democratic matter—namely, ensuring the right of older citizens to participate fully in shaping the future of European societies.

Consolidation and expansion: the Knafl presidency (1996–2001)

Under the leadership of its first president, Stefan Knafl, the ESU evolved from a newly established platform into a structured and influential actor within European party politics. The late 1990s marked a critical phase of internal consolidation, during

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

87 European Parliament, *Briefing No. 9: Slovenia and the Enlargement of the European Union*.

which the ESU developed the operational capacity and institutional routines needed to sustain transnational cooperation.

A major milestone in this process was the ESU's second congress, held in Vienna from 6 to 8 September 1996 and hosted by the ÖSB, a key player in the ESU's early development. The congress centred on three core themes: safeguarding peace and freedom in Europe, promoting strong economies as the foundation for sustainable pension systems and advancing cooperation on senior-relevant policies.[88] In its resolutions, the ESU called on EPP member parties to establish autonomous senior organisations and ensure their effective representation within party structures. Knafl led efforts to ensure that seniors gained voting rights in party structures and seats on candidate lists.[89]

Throughout this period, the ESU could strengthen its role within the EPP. It actively encouraged national member parties to create senior branches and secure older citizens' representation in candidate selection, party governance and programme development. Regular engagement with the EPP presidency and secretariat enabled the ESU to submit resolutions and shape key policy platforms, embedding seniors' priorities in broader debates on welfare, employment and social justice.

The Cologne Congress of 1999 further consolidated this strategic orientation. Organised on the theme 'Seniors Shape the Europe of the 21st Century', it emphasised the active role of seniors in shaping Europe's future—calling for intergenerational fairness, a stronger European social model and greater democratic participation.[90] In response to the European Commission's institutional crisis in that same year, which saw the resignation of the entire European Commission over allegations of fraud and mismanagement, the ESU publicly supported calls for greater transparency and accountability,[91] signalling its maturity as a political actor with a stake in the EU's institutional credibility.

88 ESU, *An Unprecedented Year – Annual Report 2020* (2020), 19.

89 Author's interviews with members of the ESU, February–May 2025.

90 B. Worms (ed.), *Senior Citizens Working for Europe*, European Senior Citizens' Union (Monschau).

91 Author's interviews with members of the ESU, February–May 2025.

This evolution culminated in the adoption the 'Magna Charta—Policy for Senior Citizens' of 2001, which deepened the ESU's philosophical foundation. Reaffirming the Christian concept of mankind as a guiding principle for political engagement, the document advocated for an active citizens' society rooted in social justice, subsidiarity, ethical economic governance and intergenerational respect.[92] These values were echoed at the ESU's fourth congress in Brussels (17–18 October 2001), where the organisation reaffirmed its strong commitment to European integration and the Eastern enlargement. Together with the Vienna Declaration and the Seniors' Charta, the Magna Charta forms part of a coherent ideological base that continues to shape the ESU's advocacy across Europe.[93]

By the end of Stefan Knafl's presidency in that same year, the ESU had evolved into a pan-European federation with growing ties in Central and Eastern Europe. Despite limited resources and a volunteer-based structure, it had become a recognised partner within the EPP and a respected advocate for seniors across Europe—laying the foundations for its future. When Knafl stepped down in 2001, he was named the first honorary president and awarded the Helmut Kohl Gold Badge of Honour—an honour that would later become a symbol of lifelong dedication to the cause of seniors in Europe.[94]

A wider Europe: the Worms presidency and regional engagement (2001–13)

The early 2000s brought major institutional and political shifts across the EU, and as the largest wave of enlargement approached, the ESU entered a new phase of growth. Bernhard Worms, a founding supporter and leading figure in German Christian Democracy, succeeded Knafl, with the ESU secretariat relocating from Vienna to Berlin's Konrad Adenauer House—a symbolic and strategic shift in the organisation's development.

92 B. Worms (ed.), *Senior Citizens Working for Europe*, European Senior Citizens' Union (Monschau).

93 Author's interviews with members of the ESU, February–May 2025.

94 Ibid.

Under Worms's presidency, the ESU expanded its outreach and institutional presence, gaining greater political relevance. This was exemplified by the fifth congress in Bonn/Bad Godesberg (27–9 April 2004), which saw a 73% rise in delegate participation.[95] The resulting Bonn Declaration called for stronger recognition of seniors, intergenerational justice and a constitutional foundation for Europe grounded in ethical values.

This period also saw older citizens gain visibility in EU debates on demographic change, labour markets and welfare reforms. Drawing on its Christian Democratic roots and growing pan-European network, the ESU positioned itself as a key actor in these discussions.[96] Now based in Berlin, it significantly expanded its visibility and influence.

On 10 October 2005 the ESU celebrated its tenth anniversary in Madrid with the slogan 'Senior Citizens in Europe—Mainstays in a Changing World', thus reaffirming its core values: human dignity, solidarity, responsibility and lifelong learning. Subsequent congresses in Pulheim (2007) and Bad Honnef (2010) addressed ageing, social security, intergenerational cooperation, demographic shifts and eurozone stability, reinforcing the ESU's growing role in EU-wide policy debates.[97]

A defining achievement of this period was the adoption of the final version of the *Magna Charta* in 2006. It consolidated previous declarations (Vienna in 1996, Cologne in 1999 and Brussels in 2001) into a unified political vision. It reaffirmed the Christian understanding of human dignity and advocated for harmony between ethical, economic and social priorities. The document also set out clear goals: intergenerational learning, digital inclusion, education in old age and humane care reforms.[98]

Another key innovation was the introduction of regional conferences, launched in 2001 and first held in 2003. Designed to reflect the ESU's growing geographic

95 Teugels, 'Seniors, Party Politics and the European Union', 61–4.

96 Author's interviews with members of the ESU, February–May 2025.

97 Teugels, 'Seniors, Party Politics and the European Union', 61–4.

98 Worms, *Senior Citizens Working For Europe*, 40–1.

scope after enlargement, Europe was divided into five regions—North, South, East, South-East, and West—each hosting conferences that addressed local and pan-European priorities. Events such as the 2006 Athens Conference, which was attended by Greek Prime Minister Konstantinos Karamanlis, boosted the ESU's visibility and influence.[99] These conferences soon became mandatory under EPP funding rules and complemented regular board and executive committee meetings.[100]

Recognising the value of large-scale events, Worms launched the ESU summer academies in 2010—these were later formalised as central conferences, also called Summer Academy.[101] These annual gatherings combined political education, strategic reflection and intergenerational exchange. They addressed long-term European challenges: ageing, digital divides, populism and the future of the EU. Through workshops, panels and cultural activities, they strengthened member networks and nurtured a new generation of senior leaders committed to European integration.[102]

By the end of Worms's presidency in 2013, the ESU had transformed from a modest network into a structured pan-European actor. Its membership and influence had grown, its procedures matured and its role within the EPP was fully institutionalised.

An Hermans' decade of leadership (2013–24)

When An Hermans assumed the presidency of the ESU in November 2013, she ushered in a new phase of strategic renewal. A former Member of the Belgian Federal Parliament and a Professor of Pedagogy at KU Leuven, Hermans brought both political experience and academic expertise to the role. Building on the achievements of her predecessor, she aimed to align the ESU's mission with Europe's evolving challenges—digitalisation, the demographic transition and the growing demand for intergenerational fairness. At the eighth ESU congress in Brussels, delegates adopted

99 Teugels, 'Seniors, Party Politics and the European Union', 64.

100 Author's interviews with members of the ESU, February–May 2025.

101 ESU, *Senior International*, Newsletter no. 163 (July 2018).

102 Author's interviews with members of the ESU, February–May 2025.

the 'Brussels Declaration: Together Towards an Age-Friendly Society',[103] marking a shift towards greater political ambition: combating age discrimination, promoting active ageing and strengthening the voice of seniors in European policymaking.

One of Hermans's first priorities was the modernisation of the ESU's organisational structure. She led a series of important reforms to better align the Union with its evolving role within the European political landscape. For instance, in 2014 the ESU revised its statutes and strategic goals for the first time in nearly a decade—placing greater emphasis on the coordination of member organisations at the European level and the promotion of political dialogue on ageing.[104] That same year the ESU secretariat was relocated to Brussels and reconstituted under Belgian law, a move that reinforced its institutional partnership with the EPP. These steps reflected Hermans's determination to transform the ESU from a consultative forum into a dynamic political stakeholder.

This decade of leadership was also shaped by the close and effective collaboration between Hermans and ESU Secretary General Guido Dumon. While Hermans provided strategic direction and political leadership, Dumon ensured operational continuity, coordination and the day-to-day implementation of ESU activities. As the organisation's institutional anchor, he played a vital role in maintaining relations with member organisations, supporting the development of key initiatives and translating political priorities into concrete actions. From the successful organisation of congresses and policy declarations to the rapid digital adaptation necessary due to the Covid-19 crisis, the Hermans–Dumon duo was key to the ESU's evolution into a more agile and influential actor on the European stage.

At the heart of Hermans's vision was the *principle of intergenerational solidarity*. Throughout her leadership, the ESU consistently promoted initiatives aimed at bringing older and younger generations together. The ninth congress in Leuven (in 2016)[105] and the tenth in Sandanski (in 2019) both emphasised the shared responsibility of

103 ESU, 'Conversation With An Hermans' (Strasbourg, 16 April 2025).

104 Author's interviews with members of the ESU, February–May 2025.

105 ESU, '9th ESU Congress: Together for a Safe and Social Europe' (5 November).

all generations for Europe's future.[106] The annual observance of the European Day of Solidarity Between Generations (29 April) became a cornerstone of ESU activity, with the holding of intergenerational dialogues. Hermans consistently highlighted that ageing is not a marginal issue, but one that affects all citizens—stressing that investing in older generations benefits society as a whole.[107]

The Covid-19 pandemic exposed significant shortcomings in long-term care systems across Europe. Hermans responded by positioning the ESU as a strong advocate for care reform. She spearheaded the drafting and adoption of the 2020 ESU roadmap, 'Building the Future of Fair and Resilient Societies', which set out clear demands for dignified, accessible and high-quality care for all seniors.[108] This document, endorsed by the EPP Political Assembly, urged European institutions to recognise access to quality care as a fundamental social right and called for investment in sustainable care infrastructures, support for family carers and the professionalisation of care work.

Hermans also ensured that the ESU actively contributed to the European debate on care policy. She welcomed the European Commission's European Care Strategy (2022) as a historic step. She elevated the issue of elderly care to the forefront of the European policy agenda, emphasising that fair and resilient care systems are essential for upholding human dignity and social cohesion in an ageing Europe.[109]

One of Hermans's most impactful contributions was her sustained commitment to digital inclusion. Rejecting stereotypes of seniors as digitally disengaged, she promoted media and digital literacy as tools of empowerment. Under her leadership, the ESU organised digital workshops, supported access to digital education and contributed to major policy documents, including the 2022 Council of Europe publication *The Digital Era? Also My Era!*,[110] authored by Hermans herself, which framed digital participation as a question of citizenship and rights.

106 ESU, '10th ESU Congress' (28 September 2019)

107 Author's interviews with members of the ESU, February–May 2025.

108 ESU, 'The EU's Care Strategy – Perspectives and Reflections of the ESU' (25 March 2023).

109 ESU, 'Conversation With An Hermans'.

110 A. Hermans, *The Digital Era? Also My Era! Media and Information Literacy: A Key to Ensure Seniors' Rights to Participate in the Digital Era*, Council of Europe (Strasbourg, 2022).

This digital readiness proved critical during the Covid-19 crisis. Hermans ensured a swift transition to digital platforms, enabling the ESU to host online conferences and board meetings, maintaining member engagement and visibility in public debate despite lockdowns. At the same time, the ESU remained politically active—advocating for vaccine equity, highlighting the risks of social isolation among seniors and stressing the need for fair digital access.[111]

Hermans also recognised the importance of consolidating the role of senior representatives within the EPP, not only at the EU level but also within its member parties. She paid particular attention to fostering links with senior organisations in Central and Eastern Europe, aiming to strengthen their voice in EPP structures and promote intergenerational dialogue across borders. During her presidency, a dedicated analytical report was prepared mapping the representation of seniors within the EPP member parties, with a focus on emerging democracies and the enlargement context.[112] These efforts reflected her conviction that older citizens, as carriers of experience and civic memory, should be fully integrated into the political future of Europe.

By the end of her presidency in 2024, the ESU had become more agile, connected and respected across Europe. Throughout these turbulent years, Hermans provided both moral clarity and political purpose, ensuring that the ESU responded to crises with resolve, dignity and renewed ambition.

111 Author's interviews with members of the ESU, February–May 2025.

112 T. Lavrelashvili, 'Seniors' Representation in EPP Partner Parties: An Analytical Assessment of Selected Parties in 10 Countries', KU Leuven, 2023.

Looking ahead: building on 30 years of leadership

The 2024 ESU election congress, held in Leuven from 8 to 10 April, brought together delegates from across Europe in a spirit of reflection and renewal. It offered a moment to assess the ESU's progress, reaffirm its values and look ahead. A key highlight was the election of new leadership: following presentations by all three candidates, Stefaan Vercamer, a former Member of the Belgian Federal Parliament, was elected president. With his long-standing engagement in social affairs, intergenerational policy and local governance, Vercamer brings both political experience and a deep commitment to inclusive policymaking. His appointment reflects the ESU's ongoing effort to combine institutional memory with renewed energy. Together with a newly appointed Presidium, he now leads the ESU into its next chapter—building on the work of his predecessors and the collective achievements of the ESU community. Supporting this transition is the newly appointed secretary general, Patrick Penninckx, whose long-standing experience in European cooperation and digital policy brings valuable continuity and fresh perspective to the ESU's mission. Formerly head of the Information Society Department at the Council of Europe, he has worked extensively on issues related to digital governance, human rights and societal resilience. His role will be key to ensuring the operational strength of the organisation and fostering close coordination with its members and institutions.

Now entering its fourth decade, the ESU is a respected and influential voice for older Europeans in EU political life. What began as a determined effort to give seniors a voice has become the largest political seniors' organisation in Europe. Its legacy is not only institutional, but also conceptual: helping to reframe ageing from being a policy burden to being a source of social capital, democratic vitality and intergenerational solidarity.

Throughout its history, the ESU has bridged the personal and the political, the local and the European. Through declarations, regional dialogues, digital literacy efforts and advocacy for dignified ageing, it has fostered a community grounded in continuity, participation and shared responsibility. It has also served as a platform

for civic engagement, enabling older citizens to remain active contributors to the European project.

The ESU's impact is visible in how it has brought key issues—age discrimination, long-term care and digital inclusion—into mainstream political debates. It has done so with a values-based approach rooted in dignity, fairness, solidarity and responsibility. Its charters and campaigns promote a positive vision of demographic change—not as a crisis, but as an opportunity to build more inclusive societies.

Yet challenges remain. The digital transition still risks leaving many behind. Intergenerational tensions require balanced policymaking. Seniors continue to be under-represented in political institutions, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. Social isolation, loneliness and the realities of urban ageing also demand innovative responses.

As one long-time member observed, the ESU must not become a nostalgic organisation. It must stay forward-looking—a space where older citizens do not just participate in, but help to shape Europe's future. This principle is more relevant than ever.

The ESU's activities demonstrate that the political voice of seniors is not secondary; it is a stabilising force and a pillar of democratic life. With new leadership, broad member engagement and a solid record of influence, the ESU moves forward with purpose: to ensure older citizens are seen not as a burden, but as partners and full participants in shaping a more inclusive, resilient and united Europe.

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Picture Gallery

The founding of the European Seniors' Union in 1995

Summer Academy 2015 in Vienna

ESU-RSI Regional Conference in 2016

ESU-APAN Conference on the Future of Europe in 2017

Former ESU President An Hermans (L) and former ESU Secretary General Guido Dumon (R)

Family Photo of ESU Members

Like many organisations, the ESU adapted to the new COVID-19 reality during the pandemic

An Hermans addresses the EPP Congress Plenary in 2022

An Hermans and Commissioner Dubravka Šuica on the sidelines of the ESU Congress in Leuven in 2024

ESU President Stefaan Vercamer and ESU Secretary General Patrick Penninckx speak during the ESU Spring Conference in 2025

Patrick Penninckx delivers opening remarks ahead of a panel during the ESU Spring Conference in 2025

An Hermans participates in a conference in the European Parliament with Maria Walsh MEP

Recommendations

Teona Lavrelashvili and Peter Hefele

European People's Party

1. *Mainstream demographic change across all policies*. Ensure ageing, declining birth rates and depopulation are central to EU economic, social, digital and regional strategies.

2. *Champion intergenerational solidarity*. Embed fairness between generations in values, laws and funding to foster cooperation and shared responsibility for ageing.

3. *Promote labour market inclusion for all ages*. Support inclusive policies for older workers, women and migrants to address skills gaps and demographic imbalances.

4. *Harness the 'silver economy'*. Encourage investment and innovation in goods and services for older people, turning demographic change into economic growth.

5. *Ensure age equality and combat ageism*. Advocate for a comprehensive EU strategy against age discrimination in employment, healthcare and the media.

European institutions

1. *Integrate demography into EU policy*. Ensure demographic resilience informs all EU actions—including economic planning, cohesion, digitalisation and territorial development.

2. *Address demographic change in enlargement and neighbourhood policy*. Tackle brain drain and ageing in candidate and neighbouring countries, promoting intergenerational fairness and civic engagement.

3. *Reform pension and social protection systems*. Support member states with modernising pensions to ensure sustainability, flexibility, and the inclusion of informal carers and non-linear careers.

4. *Develop inclusive long-term care systems*. Promote access to affordable, high-quality care while improving conditions for carers and family support.
5. *Support preventative and holistic health approaches*. Encourage healthcare systems to focus on prevention, healthy ageing and integrated care for seniors.
6. *Adopt a strategic EU approach to migration and demography*. Link migration policies to demographic renewal and workforce needs, while ensuring the inclusion of ageing migrants.
7. *Establish a European observatory for demography and generational policy*. Create an EU-level structure to track demographic trends, evaluate policy impacts across age groups and exchange best practices.

National authorities

1. *Invest in rural and depopulating areas*. Use EU and national funds to revitalise ageing regions through the provision of infrastructure and services and job creation.
2. *Advance lifelong learning and flexible work for older adults*. Enable seniors to remain active through education, digital training and adaptable employment options.
3. *Bridge the digital divide*. Ensure digital literacy, and the availability of accessible technologies and inclusive AI systems that support older citizens.
4. *Future-proof pensions and social protection*. Tailor reforms to local realities, ensuring financial security and the inclusion of non-standard career paths.

Seniors' organisations, including the European Seniors' Union

1. *Strengthen older citizens' political participation*. Establish advisory councils and mechanisms to involve seniors in EU policymaking and monitor their representation.
2. *Promote positive narratives of ageing*. Combat ageism by fostering realistic and empowering portrayals of older people in society and the media.
3. *Advocate for holistic health and care services*. Support integrated care models and preventative healthcare tailored to older adults' needs.
4. *Engage seniors in lifelong learning and the digital transition*. Promote digital skills training and lifelong learning as tools for inclusion and empowerment.

About the Authors

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Credits

The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies is the political foundation and think tank of the European People's Party, dedicated to the promotion of Christian Democrat, conservative and like-minded political values.

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