

Population & Societies

Population decline in the post-communist countries of the European Union

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In Central and Eastern Europe, the fall of communist regimes was followed by significant demographic changes. To illustrate these changes, Agnieszka Fihel and Marek Okólski examine population trends over the last three decades in the 11 Eastern European countries that have joined the European Union, and they compare them with the patterns observed in the 17 other EU countries.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of two events that radically changed Central and Eastern Europe: the Berlin Wall fell, dividing the two German states; and the first democratic elections were held, starting in Poland and followed by the other countries of the region. Fifteen years ago, in the wake of institutional, economic, and political reforms, several countries of the region joined the European Union (EU). Today, 11 post-communist countries are EU member states (EU-11): Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Since 1989, most of these countries have experienced population decline and accelerated ageing. Low levels of fertility and mass emigration of young people are primarily responsible for these adverse trends.

Depopulation in the EU-11 countries

In 2018, the EU-11 countries had 103 million inhabitants, representing 20% of the total population of the European Union (EU-28). Nearly 30 years earlier, in 1989, they counted 111 million inhabitants, i.e. 23% of the population of the 28 European countries (some of which were not yet EU members). Since 1989, the population of these countries has thus

fallen by 7%. Bulgaria, Latvia, and Lithuania have seen the sharpest declines, with a fall of more than 20%. The population has decreased in Estonia and Romania by 16%, in Croatia by 11%, in Hungary by 8%, and in Poland—the most populated country of the EU-11 group—by 3%. Conversely, three other countries, Czechia, Slovakia and Slovenia, have recorded a slight increase of around 2%–4% since 1989.

The depopulation in the EU-11 countries stands in stark contrast to the trends observed in the majority of other EU member states, where the population has increased by 13% overall despite a recent slight downturn in the Mediterranean countries (Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain).

Two demographic regimes in the EU

Both components of population change—natural change (difference between births and deaths) and net migration (difference between migrant entries and departures)—have contributed to the population decline in the EU-11 countries (Figure 1). Net migration is responsible for three-quarters of this decline (73%) and natural change for one-quarter (27%). But in Czechia, Hungary, and Slovenia, positive net migration has more than offset the surplus of deaths over births or has at least slowed the population decline. In the eight remaining EU-11 countries, the outflows in the

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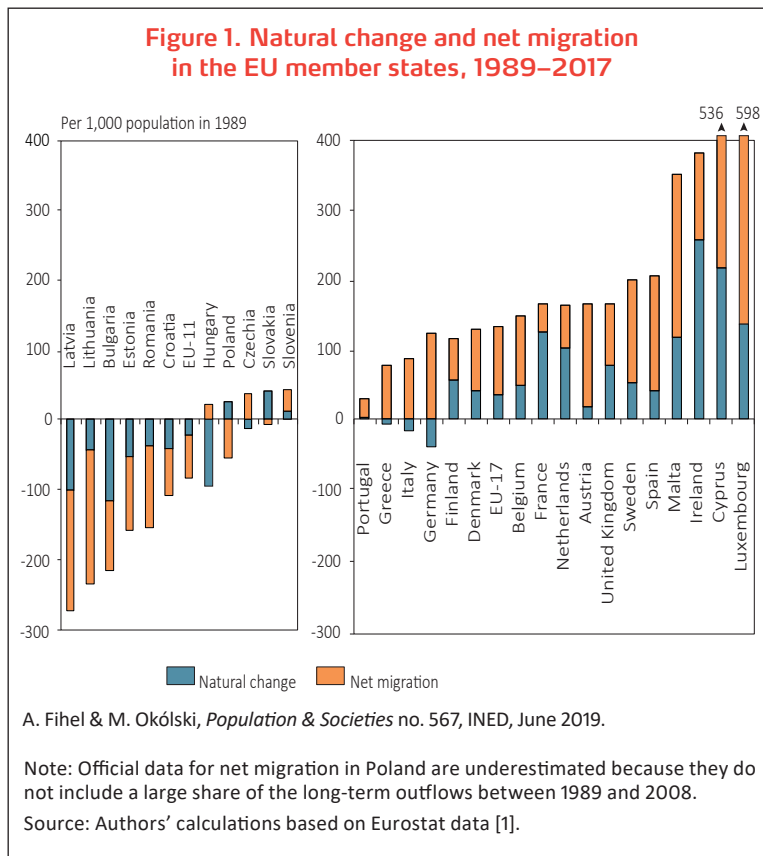
last three decades have exceeded inflows, due either to ethnically driven emigration immediately after the collapse of state communism (the case of the Baltic states, Bulgaria, and Romania) or to intensive labour emigration in the 1990s when the countries of Eastern Europe joined the EU. Only in Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia has natural change counteracted the process of depopulation due to out-migration. Whereas in Slovenia natural increase has fluctuated between positive and negative values from year to year, in Poland and Slovakia it remained positive only in the 1990s because of a relatively high number of births. Soon afterwards, however, natural change in Poland and Slovakia became negative, in line with the pattern observed almost throughout the period 1989–2018 in the other EU-11 countries.

The demographic regime of population decline driven by negative net migration that has characterized the EU-11 countries over the last three decades can be contrasted with the trends observed in other EU member states, where the population has increased due to both positive natural change and positive net migration. Only in three countries (Germany, Greece, and Italy) has natural change been negative, although only slightly so, over the 30-year period. Net migration has remained positive, thus favouring population increase. Incidentally, inflows to these countries have been fed partly by international migrants from the EU-11.

Negative net migration due to massive outflows

Prior to 1989, migration in the EU-11 countries was heavily controlled and ultimately limited by authoritarian regimes. The onset of political and economic transition restored the freedom to migrate, and entry to certain countries became possible without a visa. Consequently, international mobility increased and took various forms, from cross-border petty trading to settlement out-migration [2]. A part of the outflow, especially ethnically driven emigration, was absorbed by other EU-11 countries—e.g. Romanians settling in Hungary, or Slovaks in Czechia—or by other Eastern European countries, as in the case of Russian citizens leaving the Baltic states. Other European countries, such as Austria and Germany, also became destinations for thousands of EU-11 nationals searching for work opportunities. In this case, emigration was propelled by an interplay of economic factors, including the deterioration of

Figure 1. Natural change and net migration in the EU member states, 1989–2017



living standards, a precarious labour market, and high inflation in the early years of post-communist transition. Moreover, the people who migrated in the early 1990s to find work abroad gradually developed transnational communities that attracted subsequent emigrants from their countries of origin. These communities emerged notably in large cities of Western Europe, such as Berlin, Brussels, and Vienna, where EU-11 nationals worked on a regular or irregular basis in the construction sector and household services [3]. The major factor, however, was the granting of free access to the labour markets of all European Economic Area countries (and Switzerland) after eight of the EU-11 countries joined the European Union in 2004, followed by Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 and Croatia in 2013.

According to the most recent Eurostat estimates, the number of citizens from EU-11 countries living in other EU member states increased five-fold between 2004 and 2017 to reach approximately 8.2 million. The net increase is 6.5 million, which translates into half a million per year. The intensity of east-to-west flows varies substantially by country of origin. In absolute terms, the main sending countries are Poland and Romania: by 2017, around 2.5 million and 3.1 million citizens of those countries, respectively, were living in other EU member states. In relative terms, the strongest outflows have occurred in Romania—where

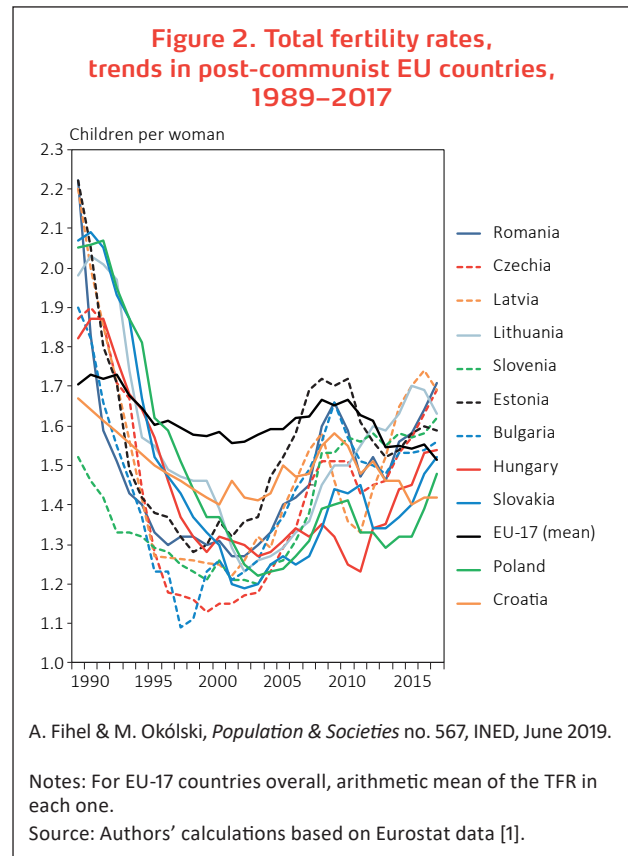
10.6% of the population registered in 2004 has settled in another EU member state—and in Bulgaria, Estonia, and Lithuania (around 5% of their 2004 populations). But the population losses are unevenly distributed across the different age groups, with young people having the highest propensity to emigrate. According to Eurostat, as many as 70% of those who have settled abroad were aged below 40 when they left. In several regions of Poland, for instance, more than 20% of adults aged 20–34 emigrated between 2004 and 2011 and stayed abroad for more than one year.

Czechia, Hungary, Slovenia and, most recently, Slovakia have experienced positive but relatively low net migration. The people entering these countries, attracted by a favourable economic situation, mostly comprise return emigrants and labour immigrants from non-EU countries. Nevertheless, the cumulative effect of immigration to EU-11 countries, even to those with positive net migration, remains limited. Excluding Estonia and Latvia, which are home to nationals from Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine who arrived when all these countries were still in the USSR, only two countries (Czechia and Slovenia) have a proportion of foreigners in their population that reaches 5%; in all others it ranges from 0.6% (Poland and Romania) to 1.5% (Hungary). However, the future impact of immigration on population change should not be neglected, and Poland—traditionally an emigration country—is a case in point. In 2017, it was the EU member state that issued the highest number of first residence permits for third-country nationals.

Negative natural change due to low fertility

In the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, mortality in the EU-11 countries remained at relatively high levels and life expectancy stagnated. At the onset of political and economic transition, however, life expectancy started to increase steadily, first in Czechia and later in Poland and Hungary. From the mid-1990s, this favourable tendency was also observed in all other EU-11 countries, with the annual number of deaths dropping from 1.26 million over the period 1991–1996 to a stable level of 1.2 million from 2000 onwards.

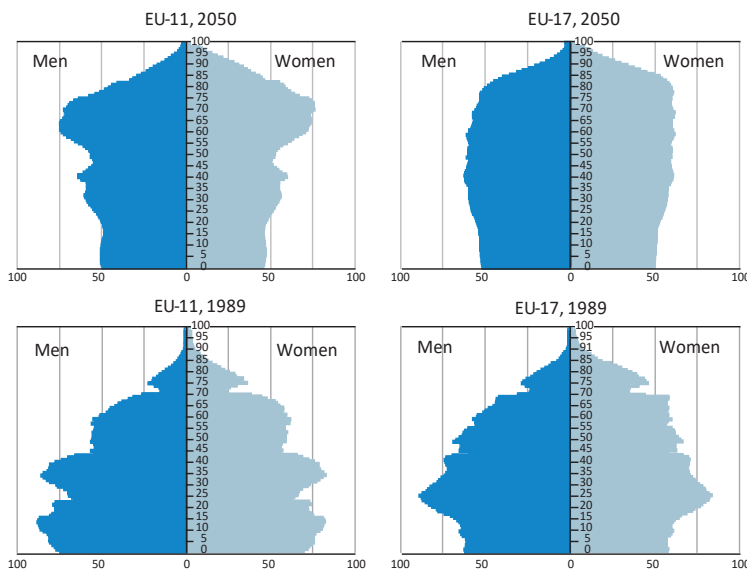
Thus, with the number of deaths remaining relatively constant in recent years, the main factor behind negative natural change in the EU-11 region has been a considerable drop in fertility. Around 1989, almost all EU-11 countries had relatively high total fertility rates (TFR) compared to other EU member states, ranging from 1.9 to 2.2 children per woman. In the 1990s, however, at a time when fertility was stabilizing in the 17 other EU member states (EU-17), the decline in EU-11 countries accelerated, with the TFR reaching



a historic low of 1.1 in Bulgaria (1997), Latvia (1998), and Czechia (1999). It began to recover from 2005, but the upturn was not homogeneous across the region (Figure 2). As a result, the annual number of births in the EU-11 countries declined by more than a third between 1989 and 2016, from almost 1.6 million to just 1 million.

Three major groups of factors have significantly affected fertility trends in the EU-11 [4, 5]. The first group is linked to the widespread adoption in society, especially among the younger generations, of postmodern values that give priority to personal freedom, self-realization, and individual achievement. The second group, specific to post-communist countries, is linked to the economic austerity brought about by the transition to a competitive, market-oriented economy, which led to differentiation of incomes, labour market deregulation, industrial restructuring, and high unemployment. A third group of factors concerns the paring down of state-funded social welfare policies: family allowances have shrunk due to monetary inflation, while other non-financial benefits, such as prolonged preschool childcare, have been withdrawn. It is the unusual fact of their simultaneous occurrence over the last three decades that explains the powerful negative impact of these factors, especially compared to the favourable conditions prevailing in other EU member states.

Figure 3. Population pyramids of EU-11 and EU-17 member states, 1989 and 2050



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Notes: Numbers per 10,000 population (the total surface area is the same from one pyramid to the next). In 1989, Croatia is not included in EU-11, nor are Cyprus and Malta in EU-17. Eurostat projections for 2050 [1].

Source: Authors' calculations based on Eurostat data [1].

Increased immigration and, in some countries of the EU-11 region, a fertility upturn may neutralize the process of depopulation in the future. But the simultaneous phenomena of extremely low fertility and a strong propensity to emigrate, observed in the EU-11 countries over the last three decades, will have irreversible consequences for their demographic structures.

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Three determinants of population ageing

On the eve of the post-communist transition, the EU-11 populations were significantly younger than those of the other EU countries (Figure 3). In the last three decades, however, the pace of ageing has accelerated in the EU-11, with a decrease in the proportion of children aged 0–14 and a proportion of older adults that, while still slightly lower, is catching up with that of the other EU countries. According to Eurostat projections, by around 2050 the EU member states with highest proportions of older adults will be the countries of the South (Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain), followed by six EU-11 countries: Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovenia.

In EU-17 countries, positive net migration produces population growth and reinforces, at least temporarily, the younger segments of the adult population. In those of the EU-11, on the other hand, mass emigration by young adults is contributing to population ageing and accelerating the decrease in births.

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Abstract

The European Union includes 11 post-communist countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia). The population of this group of countries has fallen by 7% since 1989, whereas that of the rest of the EU has risen by 13%. Before the fall of the Berlin Wall, these countries had younger populations than the rest of the EU, but they are now ageing due to low fertility and mass emigration of young people.

Keywords

Birth rate, fertility, migration, population decline, population ageing, fall of the Berlin Wall, post-communist countries, European Union