

European demographic change and welfare challenges

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1. Introduction

The population structure directly or indirectly influences needs of society, resources, social policy attitudes, the labour market, pensions, the provision of health care, housing and social services, electoral behaviour, micro- and macroeconomics, tax policies and many other domains of life (Ainsaar 2012, Bloom & Canning, 2008; Calahorrano, 2013; Felix & Watkins, 2013; Kluge, 2013; Morgan, 2013). Social policy is in many ways influenced by the demographic situation, but it also shapes demographic structures itself. Three main population processes – fertility, mortality and migration – cause changes in the population age structure. Therefore recent demographic changes – low birth rates, changing family structures, an ageing population and growing immigration flows from outside the Europe– pose new challenges to European welfare states.

Although Europe is still gaining in population, the situation varies in different countries, and the population growth rate shows signs of decline (Coleman, 2006; Sardon 2006). Migration has become the main source of population increase, contributing around 60% of demographic growth in recent years (Marcu, 2011). This chapter provides an overview of how changes in population structure and demographic processes are linked to political views and rhetoric about social policy at the start of the 21st century in Europe. Population development is analysed alongside views of governments on population growth and population policies. The chapter analyses main population processes from three main angles: the situation using

official data from Eurostat; official views on the situation; and how European countries differ in their social policy reactions. For social policy reactions we use United Nations world population policies database.

The policy process is often influenced by past and future prospects, which is why both time scales are taken into account in the analyses. In the end of a chapter we take also a case of family policy, as the most popular population policy domain in Europe, and analyse whether attitudes and policy rhetoric is related to real fiscal contributions from the government.

The role of the state

There are numerous historical examples of active state intervention in population development: how birth rates which are too high force agencies to implement policy instruments in order to lower birth rates; how countries with low birth rates become interested in active pro-natalist approaches; and how ageing populations lead governments to adopt new pension policies and insurance schemes. However population policies have been seen as a public good, but with problematic issues regarding the role of the state in influencing individual behaviour in general interests (Demeny, 2011). Demeny argues that this diversity is partly influenced by state's trouble establishing a rational argument for intervention, especially when it comes to the conflict of individual and collective interests. The establishment of adequate politics has also been affected by people's limited awareness, the complexity and absence of clear means for solutions and the fundamental risks of failure of policies (Lassila & Valkonen 2008; Demeny, 2003). All this often leads to a situation where the demographic problems are kept off the political agenda and there is no political interest in taking a strong stand. Höhn (1999) complains that politicians are not reacting because there are a lot of aspects of population politics that are unappealing to politicians: a lack of specific

interest groups; the heterogeneity of the population; a lack of influence in the voting system; meagre knowledge; and the inconvenience of arguing about individual and societal interests. Additionally, it has to be taken into account that policy processes are influenced by many different factors. Morgan (2013) found that governments react differently to changing population situations. While some governments have chosen a new path by reforming their welfare regimes, for example enacting paid leave schemes, expanding the rights of part-time workers and making greater investments in child care to attract voter groups like women, other countries have taken smaller steps in reforming policies. Some countries develop more in the spirit of path dependency and others in path-shifting track. Reasons for choices are unclear, but it is known, that policies of the past affect the way in which people think about issues (Pierson, 1996), and changes are related to different economic and psychological costs compared with the preservation of the prevailing situation (Brooks and Manza, 2006).

The political process is also complicated due to a lack of clear and universal effects, which does not always allow us to be certain that the desired outcomes will be achieved. This happens because effective solutions are spread over several policy domains and need the cooperation of many sectors (Neyer & Andersson, 2008). Effects are also likely to differ between a situation in which policy development lags behind broader social change and one in which it acts rather as a forerunner in societal development. Take, for example, family policy and fertility. On the one hand, several theoretical and empirical papers confirm the interaction between family policy and fertility (McDonald 2006, Björklund 2006, Frejka et al. 2008, Rijken 2006, Kalwij 2010). On the other hand, also missing causal relationships between policy and demographic behaviour are often reported (Wennemo 1994, Hantrais 1997, Baird et al. 2010). Frequent conclusions include the following: even if there is a relationship between family policy and fertility, its nature is more indirect than direct, and

family policy has only a limited impact on birth rates – mostly on the timing of childbirth (Gauthier 2007, Frejka et al. 2008); or that family policy is a necessary but not a sufficient fertility factor (Rónsen 2004, Hoem 2008). Despite scientific uncertainty, many countries continue efforts to improve family policies (Daly 2011) – often also because of demographic concerns.

Seven European demography types

It is useful to grasp the demographic situation in a region in order to understand the needs and interests behind its political behaviour. We assume that countries with unfavourable population structures are more at risk of population decline and more motivated to implement action which supports population growth, e.g. family or immigration friendly policies.

European countries form different demographic regions partly due to their historical development. The decisive factor of future population trends is their current gender and age structure, which is the result of long-term demographic processes in past (Coleman, 2006).

For regional demographic analysis of Europe, we used the statistical data from Eurostat for 31 European countries concerning their current and future population structures and main demographic processes.

General analyses of the population data in 31 countries showed that countries with persistently low fertility rates also have a lower percentage of young people ($p < .01$) and a higher ratio of elderly people compared to the working age population ($p < 0.05$). Countries with low birth rates have also less immigration per person ($p < 0.05$). As such, their population growth problems exist for several reasons. The problem of the ageing population

troubles mostly countries where net migration is negative or and the total levels of immigration and emigration are relatively modest. Demographic processes have their own laws and therefore, for example countries with more young people are also those from where emigration is higher, although net migration is not necessarily negative. Emigration is also higher from those countries which have a higher level of immigration.

The demographic structure of the country determines to a great extent its population processes in subsequent decades. Thus we grouped countries in Europe based on their current and future population age structure and fertility. The migration data were left out from analyses because they are more volatile compared with fertility trends. We attained data from Eurostat and used three indicators for grouping of countries: (1) the proportion of people aged 24-60 in the total population from 2005-2020, (2) the proportions of people aged 61 and older in comparison to the proportion of those aged 24-60 from 2005-2020 and (3) the total fertility rate (TFR) from 2000-2012. For hierarchical cluster analyses we calculated the period means for all the parameters. The final number of clusters in hierarchical the analyses was determined on the grounds of the optimal distance to the next possible cluster combination. The analyses with these indicators showed that European countries can be divided into seven types (Figure 1). Future population developments are most critical in terms of sustainability in 19 of the 31 countries. A short description of the groups with a list of the challenges facing them is provided in the Table 1.

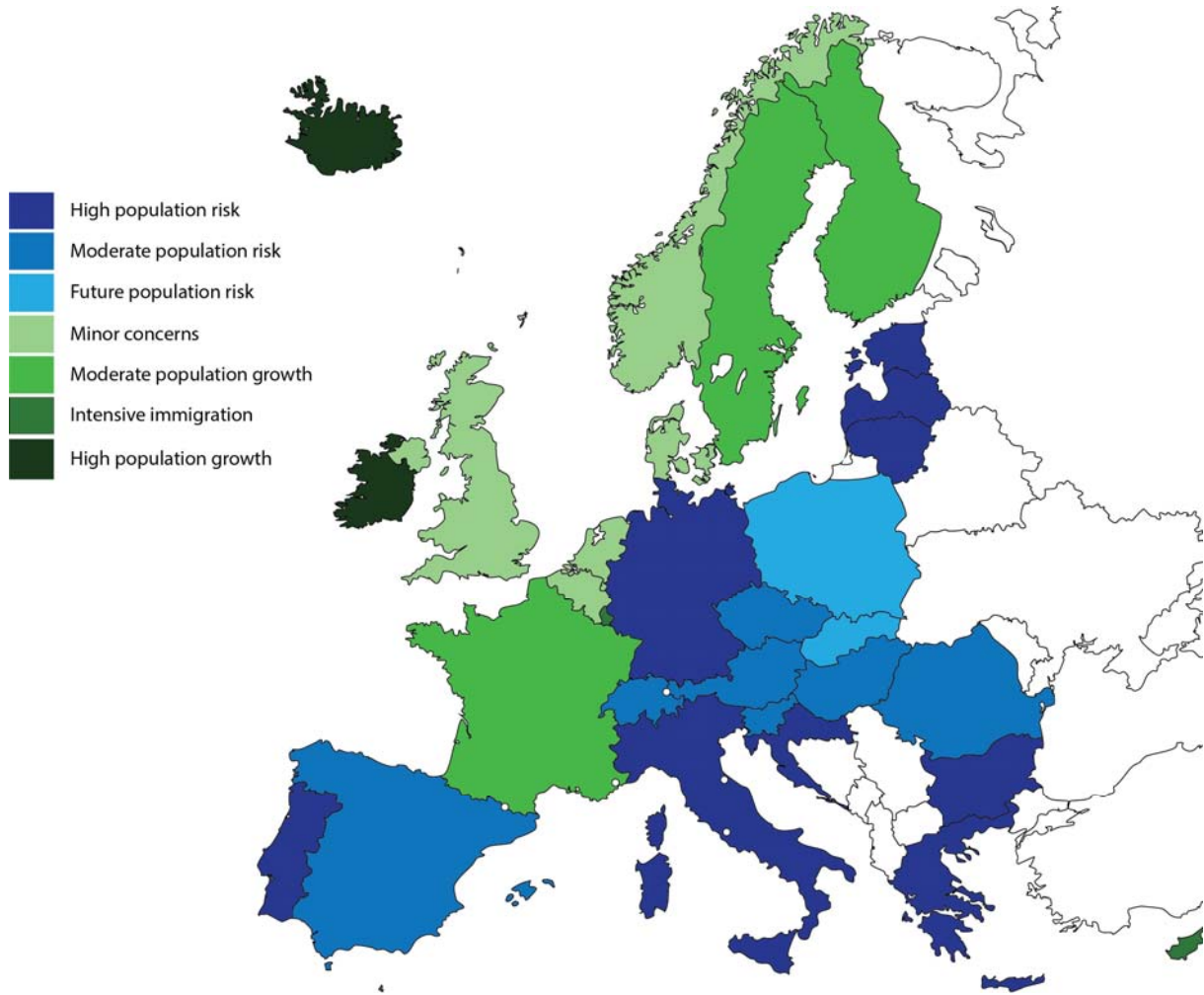


Figure 1. Seven types of countries according to population structure (green – growth countries, blue – population risk countries)

Table 1. Main demographic characteristics in seven country types.

	Population structure			Recent population processes				
	2005-2020			2000-2012				
	<24	24-60	> 60 / 24-60	TFR	TFR change	Net migrati on	Immigr ation	Emigra tion
	%					per 1000 inhabitant		
High population risk (BL, DE, EE, GR, HR, IT, LV, LT, MT, PT)	25.0	51.0	46.8	1.41	0.06	-0.97	4.9	5.8
Moderate population risk (CZ, ES, HU, AT, RO, SI, SW)	25.1	52.8	41.9	1.37	0.15	2.91	9.4	6.4
Future population risk (PL, SK)	27.2	54.0	34.7	1.3	-0.02	-0.30	1.7	1.6
Minor concern (BE, DK, NL, UK, NO)	28.7	49.7	43.3	1.79	0.07	3.62	9.6	6.2
Moderate population growth (FR, FI, SE)	28.4	48.3	48.4	1.85	0.19	2.80	6.1	3.6
Intensive immigration (CY, LX)	29.3	52.9	33.8	1.56	-0.22	12.70	27.7	15.7
High population growth (IR, IC)	33.4	50.1	33.1	2.02	0.04	4.35	19.3	14.4

High population risk countries are Bulgaria, Germany, Estonia, Greece, Croatia, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta and Portugal. Characteristic of this group are an average percentage of working-age population, a high rate of the old age dependency, a low fertility rate and a low proportion of the under-24 population. This means that the countries in this group have all the problems connected with the ageing population: a future labour shortage, concern for the sustainability of the population and a need to adjust to the ageing society.

Moderate population risk countries Czech Republic, Spain, Hungary, Austria, Romania, Slovenia and Switzerland. This group of countries is characterised by a low fertility rate but positive net migration. The proportion of the working-age population in this group is somewhat higher than in Europe generally, and the proportion of the older population is high. Despite the unhappy situation at present, several countries in this group can count on immigration flows that do not make the demographic situation as critical as in the previous group.

Future population risk countries Poland and Slovakia. These countries have quite a good current population structure, but already exhibit negative demographic growth behaviour - very low fertility and negative net migration. Although they have a relatively high working-age population and low proportion of the older population, in the context of low fertility and future emigration the situation will become critical in the future.

Countries with little demographic concern Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, the UK and Norway. This group is characterised by a high percentage of the aged and a relatively low proportion of the working age population, which means a need for labour. The proportion of the younger population is on par with the European average and the situation with fertility is

not as critical as in many other countries. Population growth is also supported by positive net migration. Thus, although the situation with the current population structure is not ideal and the need for labour exists, these countries are relatively well-placed given that the current situation is not changing.

Moderate population growth countries France, Finland and Sweden. These countries have a relatively high fertility rate and positive net migration rates, a high proportion of young people and also a high rate of older-age persons compared to working age persons and low proportion of the working-age population. Although in terms of demographic processes these countries are sustainable, the need for labour exists because of the current population structure, this again may increase their motivation to address population issues.

Intensive immigration countries Cyprus and Luxembourg. These countries have a young population structure and no demographic problems in terms of sustainability. In addition to high immigration rates, the mean level of fertility, the high proportion of young and the low proportion of the older population are characteristic of these countries. Given their current population structure, these countries should be the least interested in supporting population growth policies.

High population growth countries Ireland & Iceland. These two countries can be the least concerned in terms of population. They are characterised by high fertility and a high proportion of young people. Also, they have a very low dependency ratio and continuing immigration.

Concerns about the demographic situation

We assume that the demographic situation of countries motivates them to act differently, but we must keep in mind, that the policies may have been influenced also by tradition, specific political factors and public attitudes about the population situation. In this sub-chapter, we analyse the needs and political rhetoric that are perceived by these 31 European states we had previously in analyses. We use the United Nations Population Policy Database (2014) in combination with demographic characteristics. United Nations Population Policy Database reflects governments' official views on demographic situations and political preferences from the point of view of population policy. The questions are about all main domains of population growth: fertility, mortality, immigration, emigration, population structure. The data from government officials are collected every second year. We formed two indexes according to data from 2001-2011: 'view' and 'policy'.

The '**view**' index sums up the attitudes of the state regarding general population growth, fertility level, immigration and emigration, the size of the working-age population and the ageing of the population. In this index we take into account attitudes about four processes that affect population size: general growth; fertility; immigration and emigration; and their outcome – the percentage of the working-age population and the elderly in the population. The higher the view index, the greater the state's concern.

The '**policy**' index summarizes the government's rhetorical attitudes about the relevant population policies - how great is the need is to implement policy on growth, policy to raise the fertility level, support immigration policy and avoid emigration. The higher the index, the greater the state's support for policies that facilitate population growth. We leave out of

analyses data related to life expectancy, because there is no country in Europe which does not want life expectancy to rise.

Comparison of changes in attitudes over time shows that general concern about population growth has risen during the 21st century (Figure 2) alongside readiness to support policies geared towards population growth. However, there are still huge differences between groups of countries and policy domains. Ageing of population and lack of workforce are the main recognised problems for majority all countries. Rise of fertility rate is the most common solution among population related measures.

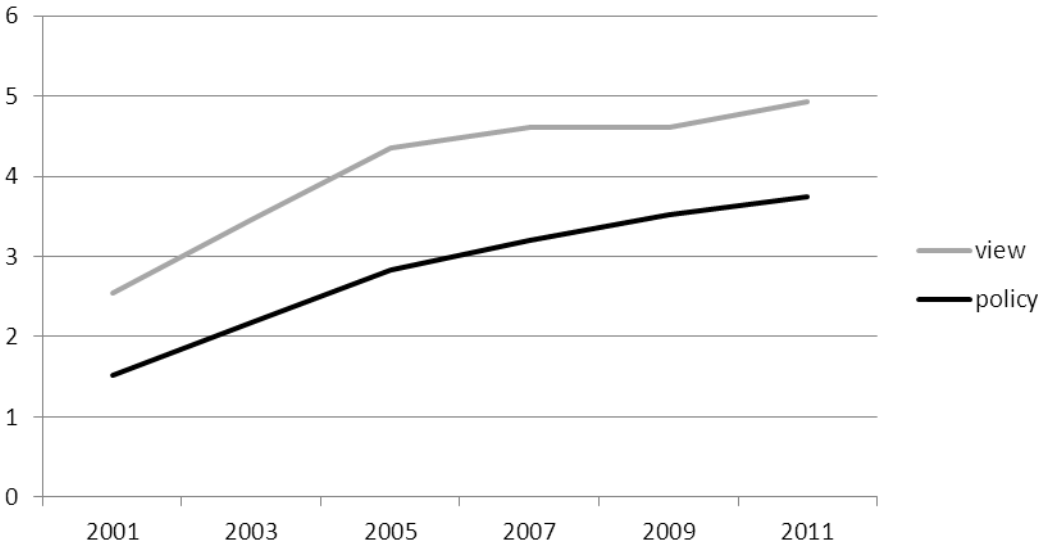


Figure 2. Concern about population growth and population policy as reported by governments (a higher index reflects greater concern about population growth and more acceptance of policy geared towards population growth, 31 countries’¹ average).

¹ Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom

Table 2. View of total population growth, migration and fertility issues, and concern about the ageing of population and share of working-age population in society, average of 31 countries.

	Views on growth (scale -1 to 1, -1= need to reduce and 1= need to increase population growth)				Concern (scale 0= no concern, 2 = high concern)	
	population growth	fertility	immigration	emigration	working-age population	ageing
2001	0.39	0.65	-0.32	0.13	0.68	1.03
2005	0.45	0.71	-0.16	0.09	1.52	1.74
2007	0.48	0.65	-0.09	0.06	1.61	1.90
2009	0.48	0.61	-0.03	0.13	1.48	1.94
2011	0.55	0.68	0	0.19	1.55	1.97

Looking at the importance of themes related to population over a period of ten years (Table 2), we can see two major changes. On the one hand, concern about population ageing has remarkably risen; and the countries have transformed from immigration-avoidant to being rather neutral towards immigration. Concern about population growth and structure has also increased. The notion of population ageing in Europe and the problems associated with it, including a shortage of working-age population, entered the consciousness of European countries in a particularly impressionable way between 2001 and 2005 and has remained there ever since. Most states see the birth rate as the main source of population growth among demographic processes and wish to increase it. In a situation where the majority of countries have under replacement level fertility they consider it generally to be too low. Emigration and immigration trends are generally considered to be at satisfactory levels.

Analysing connections between the demographic situations of countries and attitudes shows that general concern about the demographic situation is indeed related to the objective demographic situation. The clearest and most frightening objective demographic signs for

countries are a low birth rate ($p < .01$) and a low percentage of young people ($p < .01$), which force states to acknowledge population problems.

But also a small percentage of immigrants ($p < .01$) and a large proportion of elderly people in the population ($p < 0.01$) are clear features to policy makers and are associated with a countries' more substantial concern about its population. The fact that countries also take future population situation into account is illustrated by the notion that concern about population issues is also substantial among countries which at present have a relatively good ratio of working population to non-working-age population ($p < 0.01$).

Policy response to the demographic situation

As the general attitude and willingness to implement policies geared towards population growth varies, we analysed the specific population policy plans of different countries separately. The policy index measures the rhetoric of countries in regard to population growth in the case of different policies (overall growth, family policy, immigration and emigration) that affect the size of the population. Figure shows clearly that fertility growth policy is without question the most popular among European countries, although the total support for population growth policies had gained essential acceptance as well.

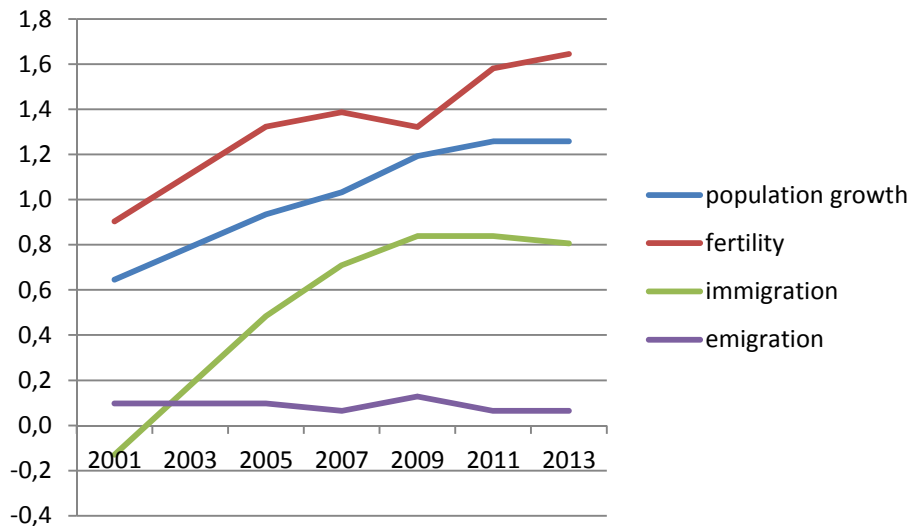


Figure 3. Views on population policy (-1 = lower population growth, 0 = no intervention, 1 = maintain population growth, 2 = raise population growth)

Of all the fields of population policy, only the attitude towards emigration policies has remained the same (neutral) throughout the decade (Figure 3). Willingness to deal with and accept immigration policy increased from 2001-2009. The economic crisis of 2009 and the rise in unemployment led to a relative halt in this development and stabilization. At the same time, desire to concentrate on fertility policies has grown even quicker since the economic crisis.

Table 3. Demographic groups of countries and support for various policies 2001-2013

(mean value per group to this policy domain; values: -1 = lower population growth, 0 = no intervention, 1 = maintain population growth, 2 = raise population growth; total policy index is the sum of sub-policy indexes, and higher value reflects higher wish to support population growth)

Country groups	Population growth policy	Fertility policy	Immigration policy	Emigration policy	Policy index
High population risk	9.1	9.8	3.9	1	24.4
Moderate population risk	8.4	10	4.7	0.9	24.0
Future population risk	8.5	10	7.5	0.5	27.5
Minor concern	-0.8	2.6	-0.2	0	2.0
Moderate population growth	1.7	7	4	-0.3	12.3
Intensive immigration	8	10.5	-1	0.5	18.0
High population growth	4.5	4.5	3.5	0	13.0

All of the countries that strongly support population growth can be described, above all, as countries that are oriented towards increased fertility, that are willing to contribute to immigration and, in moderation, to deal with emigration. In groups of countries with different demographic developments, the prevalent attitudes are relatively predictable considering the demographic situation of these countries (Table 3). The countries that are most highly motivated to contribute to population growth are also the countries that objectively have the most complicated demographic situation.

Analysis with indications of population structure and growth reveals that low birth rates and the percentage of young people in the population are most closely linked to the strength of political rhetoric towards population growth. Current analysis does not provide a clear explanation, but it can be assumed that low fertility and lack of younger generations are understandable to both policy-makers and ordinary people as sustainability frets that are convincing enough to become political agendas. The percentages of elderly and working-age people do not seem to affect national politics of countries as straightforwardly.

From country groups Poland and Slovakia, with low and decreasing fertility and negative net migration rates, express the most firm support towards population growth policies. They are willing, according to political rhetoric, to contribute to all population processes – fertility and immigration – and also to deal with emigration to a lesser extent. Also countries with a moderate or high population risk are active in their population policy attitudes and support population growth more forcefully. These countries have been constant supporters of higher birth rates in the 21st century and their positive attitude toward supporting immigration has grown rapidly as well. Malta and Germany are the most reserved in their population growth rhetoric among the group of moderate or high population risk countries, while Bulgaria is the most supportive.

Cyprus and Luxembourg, who form a separate group, are next in line on the basis of strength of population growth policies. Despite their relatively good demographic situation, these small states are comparatively strongly oriented towards population growth and supporting fertility. The majority of attitudes towards the intense immigration that currently characterizes states is unfavourable and there is a desire to decrease it.

Population growth countries – Ireland, Iceland, France, Finland and Sweden – are relatively weakly oriented towards additional population growth. However during the first decade of the 21st century, the policies of these countries have transformed from neutral to more straightforwardly pro-natalist in terms of fertility and more favourable towards immigration, but they are relatively weakly oriented towards total additional population growth.

The most reserved are the minor population concern countries, which have a relatively satisfactory demographic situation and the most passive population policies. They are not interested in further population growth, seek to maintain or reduce the current level of migration and are careful with regard to direct pro-natalist rhetoric. This is understandable when we consider their relatively high birth rates and positive immigration (in the context of European countries). Their political support for fertility policies has been on the rise since 2007, but in comparison with other European countries it has been relatively modest and attitudes towards immigration have been rather neutral for the 21st century.

Is rhetoric related to real policy? The case of family policy

There are various reasons why policy rhetoric does not always coincide with policy actions. These may be related to political compromises, lack of means or lack of public support for actions. The complexity of different policy activities sometimes makes it difficult to objectively evaluate all of the contributions that countries make in order to support different population policy domains. In order to study possible links between population policy rhetoric and policy actions we take one example of fertility and family policy and analyse the fiscal contribution of countries as a percentage of GDP to family policy during the first decade of the 21st century and its interaction with fertility-supporting policy attitudes.

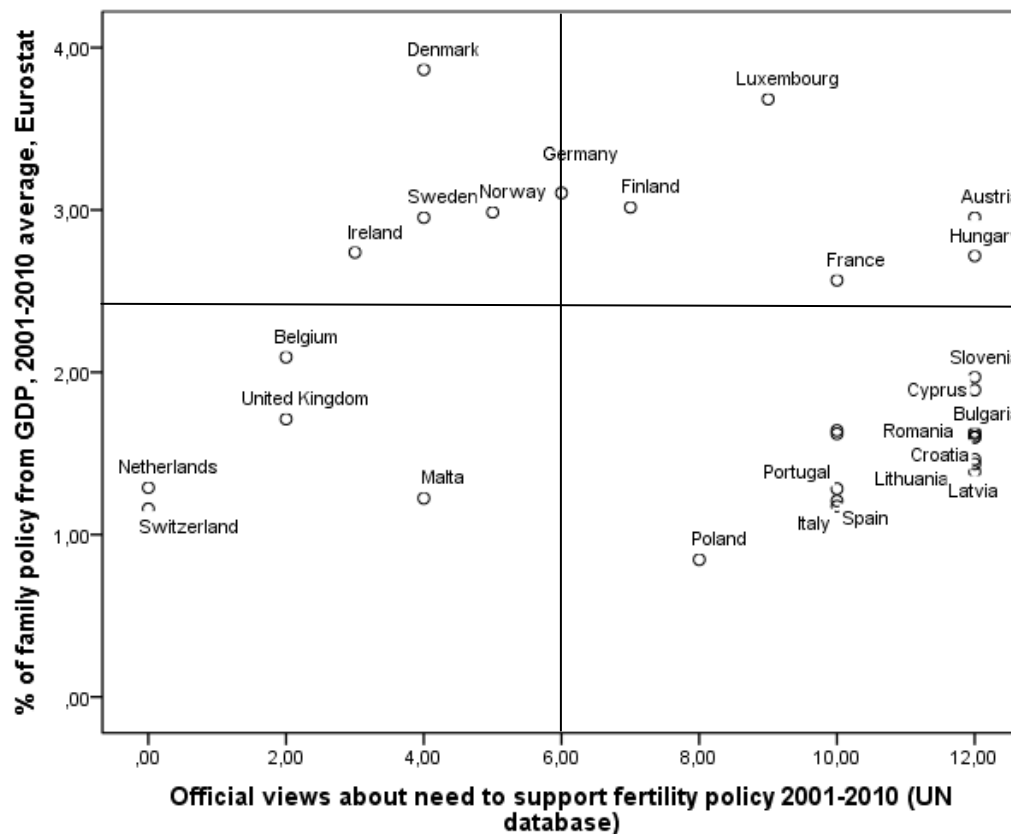


Figure 4. Fertility policy attitudes and real contributions as a share of family policy in GDP from 2001-2010

By using data from 2001-2010 regarding the resources for family policy from the GDP and official attitudes about the need for family policy (Figure 4) we see that an active political rhetoric is not always related to higher fiscal support to families with children. For example there are different groups of countries in terms of family policy rhetoric among those countries which allocate the most money to families with children. In this group Austria, Hungary, France, Luxembourg and Finland are also very firm in their official rhetoric while Denmark, Germany, Norway, Sweden and Ireland are good supporters of families, but had been more modest in their rhetoric. The other two groups with lower financial support are from one hand states where family policy has low priority (bottom left), but also these where it is an important political priority in the rhetorical sense (bottom right).

Conclusions

Despite certain doubts and pessimism in regard to politicians' decisiveness in solving issues related to population growth and structure, there is evidence that in the 21st century, demographic challenges are increasingly becoming part of the political agenda. There is no reason for concern about a lack of interest in demographic issues and related policies among European countries. The opposite might be true only in the case of a few groups of countries, with objectively better demographic situation. The most widespread is consensus on the need for family policy. The positive attitude towards immigration has also become more evident.

We divided the countries on the basis of their demographic structure and demographic situation into seven groups that produced also relatively good compatibility with their population growth attitudes and rhetoric. We found also clear evidence that attitudes towards population growth and population growth policies tend to concur with demographic situation. In the case of 19 countries out of 31, there is reason to be particularly concerned about future population issues and increase support to different social policy domains in order to secure population growth.

Concern about the population situation and willingness to support population growth policies have developed simultaneously and become stronger towards population growth in Europe. The most favourable field of population policy is fertility policy – probably because it is complex solution related to shooter ageing and the future workforce problems and it is understandable to people. However we also saw that political rhetoric is not always tied to actual higher spending on families with children.

Another alternative to improve the structure of the population and increase population growth would be to increase immigration. We demonstrated also significant liberalization of European political attitudes towards immigration from 2001-2011.

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